Forms of Perception in Late Modernist British Poetry, 1966-2020

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Abstract

This thesis examines the forms of perception explored in the work of four late modernist British poets writing between 1966 and 2020. By analysing the poetry of Peter Riley, R. F. Langley, Colin Simms and J. H. Prynne, it argues that British poetry in this period negotiates a fundamental tension between perceptual contact—the possibility of a direct, unmediated engagement with the world—and its mediation, the abstraction of perception through linguistic, epistemological and literary frameworks. While American modernists like Charles Olson and Ed Dorn celebrated the ethical, phenomenological valences of perception, their British successors grappled with how modernist perceptual forms conflicted with, or were refracted through, a nexus of British linguistic, prosodic and epistemological traditions. Drawing on hitherto-unstudied correspondence and archival sources, I demonstrate how my chosen poets exposed the paradoxes in the forms of perception celebrated by their modernist precursors, revealing how attempts to sustain an ethical perceptual mode risked either instrumentalising the external world or becoming totalising and assimilative. Building on existing accounts of British late modernism, such as Mellors (2005), Latter (2015), and Rowland (2022), I argue that British poets reconceptualised mediation as a force that either exposed the ethical constraints of perception or properly situated the perceiving subject within language, culture and history.

Chapter One traces Riley's work in *The English Intelligencer*, from an early embrace of Olsonian perceptual immediacy to a growing scepticism about its assimilative tendencies. Chapter Two examines Langley's negotiation of perception and knowledge, culminating in his later turn to English lyric and dramatic monologue as vehicles for intersubjectivity. Chapter Three explores Simms's engagement with landscapes and animals, revealing how they are always-already disclosed through ecological and colonial frameworks. Chapter Four considers J. H. Prynne's late poetry, where lyricism emerges as an intrinsically mediated process, embedded within historical and linguistic structures.

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Contents

If the world is matter, it is ~~un~~ impenetrable absolutely. The recognition of impenetrability houses the hope of intelligibility.

George Oppen, “Daybook II:IV”

Introduction

"Not Arrogant from Habit, but | Furious from Perception"

> The first essential is to take knowledge
> back to the springs, because despite
> everything and especially the recent
> events carried under that flag, there is
> specific power in the *idea* of it
>
> J. H. Prynne – "Die A Millionaire (pronounced 'diamonds in the air')" (1968)[1]

I – "We flop if we cannot maintain the awareness"

On 5 January 1961, J. H. Prynne, who had finished his undergraduate degree at Cambridge University the previous year and was studying at Harvard as a 1960-1961 Frank Knox Memorial Fellow, wrote a letter from Massachusetts in response to his college contemporary R. F. Langley. Langley had written to Prynne about some writing he was preparing on John Ruskin and education. Prynne responded with a wide-ranging discussion of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Charles Olson and gestaltism. The letter's central premise is that Ruskin was the progenitor of a lineage of twentieth century attempts to promote more direct forms of perception:

> it is quite clear that [Ruskin] was first and foremost an educator—of the sight and senses generally, of the mind and the sensibilities—and that […] this type of concern has vital consequences in almost every field. Pound merely paraphrases when he writes:
>
> > "We flop if we cannot maintain the awareness
> > Diuturna cogites
> > respect the awareness and
> > train the fit men." (Canto 85)
>
> And when in response to criticism Pound wrote, "[…] if I seek to 'do'

[1] J. H. Prynne, *Poems*, 3rd edition (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2015), p.13. Original emphasis.

> anything it is only to stimulate a certain awareness," he might have […] [epitomised] the whole of Ruskin's career; "not arrogant from habit, but | furious from perception," as Pound has it again (Canto 90). It seems […] a distinguishing feature of writers whom this may be held to describe, that they invariably hold strong opinions about economics, and that while the concern and fundamental approach are commendable, the detailed arguments are eccentric and generally perverse. Even Charles Olson has the same near-hysteria over the idea of a coinage, which in his mind as in Pound's (and, I suspect, Ruskin's), stands for the power of the virtual over the intrinsic, the token over the thing, mediation over contact. Fritz Heider, a perceptual psychologist, makes the distinction in conceptual terms: "A mediator is distinguished by the fact that its processes are conditioned from the outside: they cannot be explained without reference to something beyond the mediator […] A contrary role is played by the centres, the 'cores' of the environment […] These cores determine processes which are internally conditioned […] [T]hey are the objects of perception and contain the vitally relevant processes." (The Function of the Perceptual System [1930]).[2]

Despite being written a year before his first book of poetry—1962's *Force of Circumstance*, a volume he would later disown as naïve juvenilia—and seven years before his first mature collection, *Kitchen Poems*, Prynne's letter articulates a tension central to both his and his correspondent's poetics. This tension also became central to an entire generation of British poets who inherited a strain of modernist writing which began with Ezra Pound and extended through to Black Mountain figures like Charles Olson, Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley. This tension is between perceptual "contact" and "mediation", "intrinsic" and "virtual", "thing" and "token". It is a tension between the poet and the speaker's potential to perceive the world and the other in their own terms, in an act of experiential immersion which does not make recourse to any pre-conceived linguistic or conceptual schema, and the inevitable collapse of that immediacy as perception is abstracted through linguistic, cultural, ideological and epistemological filters. Reading Pound's self-presentation in *Canto* XC as "not arrogant from habit, but | furious from perception" as a valorisation of the vitality of direct perception over

[2] J. H. Prynne, letter to R. F. Langley, 5 January 1961, in R. F. Langley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144/7, Box 346. The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library. Hereafter JHPP.

the staidness of artistic and intellectual habit, Prynne emphasises the centrality of the antagonism between "contact" and "mediation" "in almost every field."

This emphasis leads to the letter's grandiose and eclectic sweep. Prynne's writing here is steeped in the "eccentric and generally perverse" tropes of sub-Poundian aesthetics and his own readings in contemporary phenomenology and psychoanalysis. He recruits Fritz Heider as a psychoanalytic authority on perception, and focusses on coinage as an example of how value is displaced from being an "intrinsic" or immediate property of things to being a "virtual" token of substance itself.[3] Despite these arcane and specialist references, Prynne's letter sketches an eccentric but convincing sightline across a tradition of writing stretching back through the late American modernism of Olson, through the arch-modernism of Pound and back to the ways of seeing that were central to Ruskin's art criticism.

There are two more noteworthy things about Prynne's letter to Langley. The first is the idealist note upon which it ends. Prynne writes,

> the genuine creative artist surely has direct access to the cores of his environment—physical and spiritual—and his achievement in its highest sense is an instance of nothing outside itself. The artist is a creator and not a mediator, and the sources of his humility do not lie in any direct prescriptions derived from other minds, let alone those with pretentions to rulership.[4]

At the moment of this letter's writing, Prynne is convinced that the perceiving and writing self can sustain "direct access to the cores of his [sic] environment" and become bracketed off from the mediating lenses which intervene between the self and the world, so that its "achievement in its highest sense is an instance of nothing outside itself." I will examine the literary and historical context of this claim imminently, but for now it is worth noting that Prynne is marshalling against any mind "with pretensions to rulership" interfering in his idealised image of perception. On the one hand, this is an attempt to recuperate the high modernist imperative to faithful perception from the totalising and fascistic clutches of Pound (again, more on this

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[3] In *Canto* XCVI, Pound calls out the bankers and goldsmiths of Byzantium who "[filed] coins | [or made] false ones" for the threat they posed to the moral and political health of the Holy Roman Empire. Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p.667.

[4] Prynne, letter to Langley, 5 January 1961. JHPP.

momentarily). On the other, there is a latent irony here: in freeing her perception from "direct prescriptions derived from other minds" and seeking an achievement that has "nothing outside itself", surely the poet has become the very totalising, assimilative consciousness she was attempting to evade? The second important detail is Prynne's attempt to extend the American modernist valorisation of "contact" over "mediation" back into Britain by positioning Ruskin as a foundational thinker on "this type of concern". This raises some crucial questions: what would happen to these American modernist principles once they were refracted back onto a country with its own ways of seeing, informed by its own cultural and sociological *Weltanschauung*, its own prosodic and philological traditions, and its own complex of literary-historical idiosyncrasies? What resistances would they encounter, and which authors and thinkers would they resonate against? Why was there a need to look for British antecedents to these perceptual concerns in the first place?

My subject in this thesis is how the tension between perceptual "contact" and "mediation" developed in the work of the British late modernist poets who responded to the New American poetic tradition exemplified by figures like Charles Olson. Through close examination of four poets who wrote between 1966 and 2020 (Peter Riley, R. F. Langley, Colin Simms and Prynne himself), I trace this tension, examining how the utopian model of subjectivity Prynne advocates for in the above letter was interrogated, expurgated and reconstituted over the course of this period. In the case of each poet discussed, I find that pretensions towards perceptual "contact" were enthusiastically pursued in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but, from the late 1970s to 2020, were reshaped by the growing recognition that systems of knowledge, language, and culture always mediate and intervene in any attempt at direct perceptual engagement. The precise forms that this reshaping took were multiple and varied, and my method throughout this thesis adapts to accommodate these differences. However, the two central themes derived from Prynne's letter broadly underpin my analysis. First, to what extent did efforts to "maintain the awareness" become self-defeating, either by producing a poetic consciousness that sought to dominate, instrumentalise and assimilate the particularity of both the world and the other through perception, or which became too totalising and centripetal to hold onto the vast array of perceptual details incorporated into the

poem? Second, how did Britain's linguistic, prosodic and literary historical past intervene in and collapse imperatives to direct perception, providing structures less imminently relevant to writers like Olson, Dorn, Creeley and Pound? In each case, the result of this reshaping was a resignation to the mediation of perception, or a celebration of mediation's generative potential.

This thesis finds that, in the work of these poets, both the epistemological frameworks of specialist knowledge and the formal resources of a nexus of varieties of English lyric not only mediate perception but also reveal its ethical constraints, showing that it is always conditioned by the intellectual, social, linguistic and cultural frameworks into which both reader and poet are accultured. As such, mediation highlights the anthropocentric valences of perception by foregrounding how our ways of seeing and understanding the world are shaped by inherited systems of meaning. At other times in these poets' work, these mediating frameworks act as generative structures which, when activated, enhance perception by allowing it to resonate within a diverse set of British literary, linguistic and epistemological traditions. Crucially, this thesis uncovers that multiple 'Englands' and 'Britains' emerge across the writing of these poets, with varying and shifting constructions across the timeframe in question. Britain is not a static or monolithic entity here but rather a complex of competing ideas, traditions and ways of writing, perceiving and being. Early poetry written by Riley and Prynne in the late 1960s sought to recuperate a pre-Anglo-Saxon, atavistic vision of Britain: at its earliest, Neolithic, and at its latest something closer to the Brythonic sense of Prydain. In so doing, their writing refracted Olson's mythopoetic principles back onto the British landmass to recover a way of being that was predicated on sensory and experiential immersion in the landscape, supposedly anterior to any legal fictions of statehood and the literary and cultural structures which attend them. Over time, this sentimental perceptual framework was tested by Riley, Prynne and R. F. Langley against a narrowly canonical English poetic tradition and the vision of Britain this tradition both produces and reflects, encompassing figures like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Browning and Cowper, among others.[5] In Colin Simms's work, a

[5] The potential of reading this grouping of poets as narrowly canonical is notwithstanding the efforts made by late modernist British poets (particularly in the 'Cambridge'/ex-*English Intelligencer* tradition) to recuperate them, posit their 'radicalness' and to connect them positively with the best aspects of modern American poetry. I will examine some of these efforts later in the introduction. For now, one example is Prynne's 1962 lecture for the

different conception of Britain emerges, largely informed by his Northumbrian identity. In his late poetry, the coastlines and land borders of Northern England expand into an archipelagic vision of the North which enfolds Greater Scandinavia and other areas of Northern Europe shaped by Teutonic languages and culture. In the prosodic texture of the poetry, this expanded sense of Northumbria connects with a renewed interest in oral forms of alliterative verse, which run formally and visually counter to the bookishness not only of Olson's research poetry but also of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (for example). Simms also loosely incorporates other formal *topoi* from Anglo-Saxon and medieval verse, such as kennings, further grounding his work in these traditions. For Simms's long-time mentor, correspondent and collaborator Eric Mottram, the recuperation of a more ancient form of English ultimately made Simms's poetry "happily free from nostalgia, the blight of the [W]ordsworthian".[6] He does not elaborate further, so we can only infer what he means. However, Mottram's appraisal might speak to a mode of Englishness in Simms's poetry not only outside of the Romantic self's instrumentalisation of the external world but also outside of the specific reception and privileging of a narrow canon of English poets—like Wordsworth and Coleridge—among figures like Prynne, Riley and Langley.

For Prynne in 1961, the prospect of preserving the perceiving self—both the poet and the poem's speaker—as a centre with unmediated access to "the 'cores' of the environment" (in Heider's terminology) was tenable because a refracted version of Poundian modernist poetry (written by Olson, Dorn and others) had demonstrated the possibility of enshrining the perceiving subject as a locus for phenomenological meaning. For a brief moment, it was possible for writers like Prynne to imagine the perceiving self as porous and interdependent with the world, a state activated through close attention to the other and to the sensuous

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BBC's Third Programme, "The World of Elegy", reprinted in 1963 as "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", which argues that Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" derives its sublime lyrical power from the fact that it avoids solipsism, ensuring that "observed details do stand as legitimate experiential antecedents, as the roots, however apparently slight, from which the subsequent reflection springs." In this way, Wordsworth's poem is found by Prynne to record the cogitating and perceiving subject's inextricable imbrication in the material world. J. H. Prynne, "The World of Elegy", broadcast on the BBC Third Programme, 15 December 1962; re-published as "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry" in *The Listener* (14 February 1963), pp.290-291 (p.290).

[6] Eric Mottram, "Essential Elements in the Calculation", no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5, Mottram Collection, King's College London. Hereafter MCKCL.

details of external reality. For Pound, with his crackpot, fascistic politics, failing to "maintain the awareness" would be to collapse into what he perceived to be a degenerate modern culture characterised by usury, the abnegation of 'good taste' (which for Pound meant strict adherence to an arbitrary, limited pool of mostly European painters, sculptors and writers) and the increasing complicity of the work of art with consumerism. Indeed, in *Thrones de los Cantares* XCVI-CIX, Pound describes another figure as "furious from perception": "Adolf".[7] However, for Olson, as for Prynne in 1961, "[maintaining] the awareness" had jettisoned its fascistic overtones (though not its totalising quality). It was more about entering into an ethically attentive relationship with the world, wherein the world could be perceived in its own terms and without recourse to a rationalist or positivist framework which would seek to explain away and collapse its particularity. This relationship was predicated on a sea-change in both leftist thought and philosophical conception in the wake of the atrocities of the Second World War: most notably, the Marxian cultural and historical criticism of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and the phenomenology of thinkers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, perception was specifically envisaged as a mutually interdependent act of the self's extension into the world and the world's extension into the self. Both Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* and Heidegger's *Being and Time* were first translated into English in 1962 (by Colin Smith and John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson respectively), and quickly became influential for the Anglophone intelligentsia and the nascent counterculture. To take examples immanent to this thesis, Prynne read Merleau-Ponty in the original French at least as early as 1961, as is evidenced by his recruitment of him in the 1961 essay "Resistance and Difficulty", Peter Riley read *The Phenomenology of Perception* on Prynne's recommendation in 1967, and R. F. Langley cited Merleau-Ponty as one of the authors he "read often" in an oft-cited 2011 bibliography.[8]

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[7] Pound, *The Cantos*, p.741.

[8] Prynne uses Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the body as our primary means of entering into and 'having' a world as a central argument in "Resistance and Difficulty": "Just as for […] Merleau-Ponty the existence of my body, as mine, bridges the gap between my consciousness and the world, so the substantial medium of the artist and the autonomy of his creation establish the priority of the world while at the same time making it accessible." J. H. Prynne, "Resistance and Difficulty" in *Prospect*, 5 (1961), pp.26-30 (p.30). Prynne specifically recommended Riley

The Phenomenology of Perception—which, along with *Being and Time*, will be drawn upon throughout this thesis, not as texts comprising a critical framework through which the poetry should be interpreted, but as historical sources contextualising the poetry in a new materialist framework—describes perception as a fundamental entanglement with the world, and the world as an intersubjective field or a *medium* for perceptual exchange:

> Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not 'inhabit' only 'the inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.[9]

For Merleau-Ponty, we are always-already dispersed in the world through our perceptual contact with it: "man [sic]" comes into being *through* a perceptual imbrication with the world *qua* "natural setting […] and field", a state ontologically prior to any "deliberate taking up of a position". This understanding challenges the idea of the world as an "object" which can be dominated or instrumentalised according to a rationalist or scientific account of perception. Developing this further, Merleau-Ponty argues that the world is first disclosed to us not via any conceptual or abstract schema but rather via the sensing and feeling body, which he describes as "our general medium for having a world."[10] Heidegger's appropriateness for an ethical account of perception is now compromised by our modern understanding of the extent of his Nazism. Nonetheless, he was a philosophical touchstone for poets in the 1960s.[11] *Being*

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read *Phenomenology of Perception* in April 1967. J. H. Prynne, letter to Peter Riley, 3 April 1967 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268, JHPP. For Langley's engagement with Merleau-Ponty, see Matías Serra Bradford, "The Long Question of Poetry: A Quiz for R. F. Langley" in *PN Review*, 37:5 (2011), pp.15-17 <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=8261> [accessed 6 June 2022].

[9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.xi-xii.

[10] *ibid*, p.169.

[11] One of Prynne's most Heideggerian poems, "Questions for the Time Being", appeared in 1969's *The White Stones*, two years after Paul Celan's 'confrontation' with Heidegger in the Black Forest hut. Though the title implies a scepticism about Heidegger's thinking—we might parse it as 'Questions for *Being and Time*'—the content of the poem nonetheless enacts a Heideggerian anxiety about the prospect of attaining authentic Being-in-the-world through language during a time in which "the historic [shifts]" are alienating us further from "[l]uminous | take-off" and "elegance", because "self-transcendence" has become a "corporate & prolonged action" under late, financialised, capitalism. Prynne, *Poems*, p.113. For Heidegger, discourse articulates "the

and Time posits *Dasein*'s condition of Being-in-the-world in very similar terms to Merleau-Ponty's account of perception. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is always-already entangled with the world via its very ontological nature, and it is through *Dasein* that the world is "disclosed" to us: "it has already been disclosed beforehand whenever what is ready-to hand within-the-world is accessible for circumspective concern. The world is therefore something 'wherein' *Dasein* as an entity already was, and if in any manner it explicitly comes away from anything, it can never do more than come back to the world."[12] For Heidegger, like Merleau-Ponty after him, we are always-already distributed in the world through the perceptual channels through which the world is disclosed to us: "Being […] thus stands in some ontological relationship towards the world and towards worldhood […] Whenever we encounter anything, the world has already been previously discovered".[13]

However, the idealised conditions of perceptual contact and immediacy that British and American poetry had absorbed from phenomenological thought were short-lived in

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intelligibility of Being-in-the-world" by signifying "the existential characteristics […] of Dasein's Being": there are forms of language which are concerned with "the making-known" or disclosure of the subject's putatively authentic Being. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Macquarrie & Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p.206. Compare Prynne's Heideggerian acceptance of the tenability of authentic Being through language in the above poem to his subversion in the 2008 essay "Huts" of Heidegger's maxim in the "Letter on 'Humanism'" that "[l]anguage is the house of being. In its home human beings dwell" (Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998], p.239): "The house of language is not innocent, and is no temple […] There is no protection or even temporary shelter from these forms of knowledge that is worth even a moment's considered preference, even for poets or philosophers with poetic missions." J. H. Prynne, "Huts" in *Textual Practice*, 22:4 (2008), pp.613-633 (pp.630-631).

For one of Riley's most explicitly anti-Heideggerian moments, see the following section from his 1983 sequence *Tracks and Mineshafts*:

> Nobody's writing The Phenomenology of Evil.
> Stay awake and keep talking, fill the space
> with substance, like an Irish brooch, draw out
> the ribbon, fold and wind it into the enclosure,
> which is the house, which means communication […]
> […] Nobody's writing
> The Phenomenology of Evil and a moment's history
> clears all the space we've got.

Riley's poem emphasises the absence of a comprehensive interrogation of evil as a lived, historical and experiential phenomenon, rather than as something abstract or idealised. This is an absence made especially glaring by Heidegger's failure to reckon with his personal complicity with Nazism. In recasting the 'house of being' as an "enclosure", Riley's poem emphasises its status as an exclusionary and bounded zone, prefiguring the argument of Prynne's "Huts". Peter Riley, *Collected Poems*, vol. i (Bristol: Shearsman, 2018), p.386.

[12] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp.106-107.

[13] *ibid*, p.114.

poetic practice. For several reasons, the model provided by the new American modernism and the social, philosophical and political basis with which it was coextensive began to falter almost as quickly as it had flourished. In the broadest terms, the prospect of looking to America as a source for postwar cultural renewal and political utopianism was undermined by the escalation of the Vietnam War in the latter half of the 1960s and the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. The disillusionment inherent in these moments for the New Left was echoed by events across the globe. As Fredric Jameson writes in *An American Utopia*, the "utopian" projects "of thinking and reimagining societies without power, particularly in the form of societies before power" in the 1960s were undermined by events ranging "from the failure of May '68 and the disillusionment with the old Communist Parties to the disillusionment with African decolonisation, not to speak of the sorry fate of Third Worldism and of the triumphant wars of national liberation, from Algeria to Vietnam."[14] Meanwhile, as Bruce Schulman writes, 1968 "struck many observers, then and now, as a revolutionary moment."[15] It signified simultaneously "an *annus mirabilis* and an *annus horribilus*", in which the international utopianism seeded by the (ultimately thwarted) May '68 protests and the Prague Spring devolved prematurely into "the long 1970s," an era marked by political fragmentation, economic stagnation and cultural disorientation.[16] But there were local, poetry-specific reasons for the faltering faith in the new American modernism as well. For writers who had been personally associated with Charles Olson, their rejection of the possibility of direct perceptual contact in part stemmed from increasing estrangement from Olson and disillusionment with his vatic, imprecise and mythopoetic pronouncements. These had begun to make him look, in the words of Peter Riley, like another "Big-Man-Poet at the centre, the only one capable of total assimilation": in a word, like another Pound.[17]

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[14] Fredric Jameson, "An American Utopia" in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. by Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2016), pp.1-96 (p.2).
[15] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in Culture, Society & Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), p.1.
[16] *ibid*, p.1, 4.
[17] Peter Riley, "A Review of Three Unspecified Books" in letter to Prynne, 19 May 1969 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, 273, JHPP.

Such is the case for Prynne and Riley, who met in the context of a short-lived 'worksheet' of experimental British writing closely adherent to the prosodic influence of Olson's "Projective Verse", *The English Intelligencer* (1966-1968). Riley began his tenure as the second editor of the *Intelligencer* championing a poetry predicated on perceptual immediacy and a primitivist mode of Being-in-the-world tied to his own interpretation of the British Neolithic. However, he grew increasingly preoccupied with how perception reveals itself as a process which produces false and mediated abstractions out of the sensuous details of reality. Riley realised that the poetic speaker aspiring toward direct perceptual contact often became an assimilative, totalising presence in the poem—like Olson's Maximus. Prynne, by contrast, was more sceptical from the outset of the mythopoetic claims Olson and others made about an originary basis for perception. In a series of polemical 'notes' and letters in the *Intelligencer* (including the "Note on Metal" and the "Pedantic Note in Two Parts"), he intervened in facile claims made by his peers that Neolithic or Palaeolithic forms of perception could be meaningfully transplanted into the present. From his first mature collections (1968's *Kitchen Poems* and 1969's *The White Stones*), Prynne's poetry has consistently emphasised that "we do not return" to an originary basis for the primacy of perception.[18] For Prynne, we are always-already mediated from the world because of the language we speak and the historical and literary cultures out of which we emerge. His later poetry has increasingly found ludic potential in an idiosyncratic lineage of English lyric (reaching back through Wordsworth to figures like Ben Jonson and John Dowland, as well as the very minor 17th-century poet Thomas Randolph), as well as the potential for poetic sound (its phonological and rhythmic qualities) to function as a medium for historical content. By weaving these elements into an investigation into the etymological depths of the English language, Prynne explores how these structures mediate perception and require active engagement from readers, emphasising the material, hermeneutic and historical contingency of perception itself.

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[18] This derives from Prynne's 1969 lyric, "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform". The full formulation is:

> I walk on up the hill, in the warm
> sun and we do not return, the place
> is entirely musical [...]

In Prynne, *Poems*, p.99.

Colin Simms, a Cleveland-born biogeographer and freelance naturalist, actively scrutinised and reinterpreted the claims made by Olson and Ed Dorn in the 1960s about the immanently legible character of the world and its landscapes, integrating his specialist geographic knowledge into poetic form. By emphasising the array of inscrutable processes subtending them, Simms reveals how landscapes ultimately complicate or resist the forms of perception which seek to make them conform to pre-existing conceptual schema. His later work turns to the animals which inhabit these landscapes: here, the encounter with the nonhuman is attended by what he calls "a poetry of observed relationship".[19] In these late poems, the perceiving subject draws on a nexus of linguistic and literary forms tied to the geography inhabited by the animal, as well as specific biogeographic knowledge, to stage an enquiry into the nature of observation itself. This process reveals the conceptual frameworks that the speaker brings to bear on her perception of the natural world, while simultaneously probing their limits. For R. F. Langley, a contemporary of Prynne and Riley, and a reader of (but never a contributor to) *The English Intelligencer*, the tension between perceptual immediacy and the 'book knowledge' which collapses or mediates it was a source of anxiety in his earlier poetry and journalling. Increasingly, through his re-discovery of forms of English lyric prosody which in his view could facilitate the perceptual extension imagined by figures like Olson and the *Intelligencer* poets, Langley began to re-conceive of his knowledge as productively structuring and enhancing his perception, by re-circulating his direct experience into a shared realm of linguistic and literary history.

What precisely *was* the nature of the American modernist inheritance that Prynne invokes in his letter to Langley from 1961, and how did it respond to and interact with a complex of postwar philosophical and intellectual currents, wherein phenomenology, critical theory and the emergent political projects of the New Left converged? An extended and self-contained analysis of the character of the 'New American Poetry'—and the material, cultural and philosophical conditions from which it emerged—is necessary to properly lay the ground for the British poetry which responded to it.

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[19] Colin Simms, "The Crags at Crookleth Beacon" in Harriet Tarlo (ed.), *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007), p.138.

II – "Ideas going into action": the 'New American Poetry' and its postwar foundations

> The primal gestures of language: ox foraging on the grassland, the archer pulling his bow with all his powers. And we had planned a rough target as our present emblem. And there is a hunter, the organon of movements and powers, the deliberate mind but the fingers curved. And at a certain point there is only rummaging around for rocks and roots to throw and feed on, the hunter scouring the ground. But deeper: not till the rock is pulled from the ground is its size or nature known, can it be used.
>
> It is the capture of the primal vigour of poetry, the visible substance of the mystery. A poet's passion roots itself to things, and it is, after all vision and all craft, his business to discover the substance and bearings of those roots which are the inescapable content of dream and discipline, which are deep images.[20]

So begins the polemical editorial announcement prefacing the second edition of George Economou, Joan Kelly and Robert Kelly's "Magazine of New American Poetry", *Trobar*.[21] Published in 1961, and gathering writing from figures like Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn and Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones), *Trobar* 2 presents itself as a publication at the forefront of American poetry, publishing work "of intensity and immediacy, apparitions of the native duende, articulate in power of word, dynamic in the space of music, made with all the powers of poetry, moving alive and passionate."[22] Crucially, however, it makes its claims for the uncompromising modernity of the poetry it contains not from a vantage of future-oriented accelerationism, but from a position of synthetic archaism. From the name of the publication (*trobar* is an ancient Occitan word meaning 'to find' or 'to hunt', and is the root of the word 'troubadour'), to the cover art depicting a band of hunters

[20] "EDITORIAL" in *Trobar* 2, ed. by George Economou, Joan Kelly & Robert Kelly (1961), p.2.
[21] "Magazine of New American Poetry" is the subtitle of *Trobar* 4, ed. by George Economou, Joan Kelly & Robert Kelly (1962), n.p. But, more famously, 'New American Poetry' was also part of the title of Donald Allen's very influential anthology, which in effect codified the groupings of 'Black Mountain', the 'New York School' and the 'San Francisco Renaissance'. Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960).
[22] "EDITORIAL", *Trobar* 2, p.2.

surrounded by oxen and a "rough target" in the style of the Palaeolithic cave art of Altamira, through to the rendering of the modern poet as a primitive hunter-gatherer, sensuously engaging with the rocks and roots beneath him, *Trobar* evokes the ancient past as a programme for a new model of perception. This programme encourages direct, mindful and haptic contact with the world, as well as close attention to the etymological layers of language in order to understand the basis of abstract concepts in concrete reality.

Modernism's preoccupation with the primitive has a long and complex history, reaching back through the twentieth-century via examples like Kenneth Noland's own "rough target", the colour field painting *Beginning* (1958), through to Gauguin's deeply racist and exoticised depictions of the islanders of Tahiti at the *fin de siècle*.[23] Likewise, *Trobar* is just one example of postwar American modernist poets embracing the Palaeolithic as a primitivist template for a perceptual regime that was allegedly "[intense] and [immediate], […] dynamic […] and passionate." In many ways, *Trobar*'s appeal to "[t]he primal gestures of language" and its presentation of the poet as "the hunter scouring the ground" are another manifestation of the same impulse towards 'the primitive' as any other modernist example we might reach for. It partakes in the same general utopian desire to imagine an alternative mode of being and aesthetic production outside of the constraints of Western capitalism, invoking what Elazar Barkan and Ron Bush call "the violence and energy of the barbaric" as a template for creation.[24] Indeed, the valorisation of the primitive extends right back to the Rousseauvian conception of the 'noble savage', who Rousseau argues we have "lost the power of knowing" through the "[accumulation] of new knowledge".[25] But at the time of *Trobar* 2's publication—

[23] Obviously, a full account of the relationship between primitivism and modernism is outside of the scope of this thesis. For a book-length account of this phenomenon, see, for example, *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. by Elazar Barkan and Ron Bush (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995). For more immediately relevant work on the relationship between the New American Poetry, American abstract expressionism (particularly the New York School) and the creation of a syncretic Neolithic identity, see, for example, Mark Byers, *Charles Olson and American Modernism: The Practice of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), especially "Introduction: Beginning Again", "The New Failure of Nerve", "From the Barricade to the Bedroom" and "Thrown Down Glyphs".

[24] Barkan and Bush, "Introduction" in *Prehistories of the Future*, pp.1-19 (p.2).

[25] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. by Susan Dunn (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002), p.81.

1961—a specific set of social, political, philosophical and material circumstances gave the Palaeolithic aspirations of its editors a new urgency and their own specific set of valences.

For many on the European and American left in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the travesties of the war—the Holocaust and the pogroms of other European fascist states, as well as the USA's deployment of the atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—constituted a turning point in their conception of the West's relationship with its philosophical, political, economic and scientific systems. As Theodor Adorno observed in a 1941 survey of contemporary perspectives on European Jews, for some commentators the anti-Semitism which undergirded the Holocaust was parsed as a perverse deviation from the 'natural' narrative of an advanced and civilised Western civilisation: it was "nothing more than a pitiable aberration, a relapse into the Dark Ages; […] it is on the whole viewed as an element foreign to the spirit of modern society."[26] Utterly de-historicised, such positivist accounts of atrocities risk framing them as anomalies, disconnected from modernity's intellectual and material bases. As Zygmunt Bauman wrote much later, when we fail to historicise them and situate them in their proper material context, events like the Holocaust are understood as little more than "[deviations] from an otherwise straight path of progress, […] cancerous [growths] on the otherwise healthy body of the civilised society".[27]

In contradistinction to these positivist perspectives, and pursuant to the dialectical materialism of Lukács and Marx, certain figures broke with the tenets of the Old Left to critique both the instrumental reason which had apparently led to the absolute domination of nature, individuals and societies during the 1940s, and the idealism which had failed to account for that domination's origins in the material, social and intellectual conditions of the West. For Max Horkheimer and Adorno, the atrocities of Nazism were not aberrations but in fact the endpoint of the scientific, rationalist worldview begun in the European Enlightenment. In 1947's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they argue that the hegemonic

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[26] Theodor W. Adorno, "Research Project on Anti-Semitism: Idea of the Project" in *The Stars Down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture*, ed. by Stephen Crook (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp.181-217 (p.181). Originally published in the Institute for Social Research's *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences*, IX (1941), pp.124-143.

[27] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989), p.7.

rationalism of the West began with the "scientific temper" of Francis Bacon, who envisaged humanity's "patriarchal" domination of nature:[28]

> the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanted nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters. Just as it serves all the purposes of the bourgeois economy both in factories and on the battlefield, it is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins. Kings control technology no more directly than do merchants: it is as democratic as the economic system with which it evolved. Technology is the essence of this knowledge. It aims to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labour of others, capital. The "many things" which, according to Bacon, knowledge still held in store are themselves mere instruments: the radio as a sublimated printing press, the dive bomber as a more effective form of artillery, remote control as a more reliable compass. What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts.[29]

The Enlightenment's relentless drive for technological, scientific and mercantile progress for its own sake produces the mathematisation of nature and human beings, the natural endpoint of which is the systematic and large-scale eradication of life at the kernel of travesties like European imperialism, the transatlantic slave trade, the Holocaust and the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this is the legacy of the "scientific temper" (or scientific perspective) inaugurated by Francis Bacon, to which Western society has become inextricably espoused. Where scientific, rationalist modernity emphasised 'barbarism' as a category it had outgrown (as in the de-historicised accounts of anti-Semitism which Adorno surveyed in 1941), Adorno and Horkheimer argue throughout *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that Enlightenment contains and repeatedly discloses its negation in 'barbarism'. If what we have "[sought] to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings", then we have also "[eradicated] utterly the hated but overwhelming

[28] Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), p.2.
[29] *ibid.*

temptation to lapse back into nature": "[this] is the cruelty which stems from failed civilisation; it is barbarism, the other side of culture."[30]

Dialectic of Enlightenment was not translated into English until John Cumming's translation in 1972, so its direct impact on Anglophone readerships during the formative years of the New Left in the 1960s was circumscribed. However, its critiques of Enlightenment rationality and instrumental reason were indirectly disseminated through the works of other Frankfurt School theorists (many of which, such as those of Herbert Marcuse, were written in English rather than German), translations of related texts and institutional channels which bridged the 'Continental' and Anglophone philosophical traditions: most obviously, the relocation of the Institute for Social Research from Frankfurt to Columbia University during the period from 1935-1953. These channels became especially important for the development of New Leftist thought in America, where the Frankfurt School's extended presence and direct ties to American academic and intellectual life provided a unique conduit for its ideas. Through these channels, the ideas contained within these texts were digested by an increasingly educated and receptive audience, gradually permeating the American public-political consciousness over the course of the 1950s and becoming embedded in the nascent counterculture in a sublimated form during the 1960s. David Caute describes this nascent New Left readership as a "Blakean, pastoral, ecological, media-conscious counterculture", drawn predominantly from middle-class university students who were "at war with a corporate technology enslaving human beings to the cycle of production and consumption: 'the system.'"[31] Meanwhile, Howard Prosser observes that, for this new class of educated American youth, Old Left critiques of worker exploitation were less immanently relevant. Instead, they were subordinated to critiques of "alienation" and analyses of how "current production and consumption modes stultified individual and, thus, social consciousness", which in turn allowed their "distaste for the ongoing bureaucratic rationalisation of society" to resonate retroactively with earlier Frankfurt School texts.[32]

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[30] *ibid*, pp.87-88.
[31] David Caute, *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades* (London: Paladin, 1988), p.22.
[32] Howard Prosser, *Dialectic of Enlightenment in the Anglosphere: Horkheimer & Adorno's Remnants of Freedom* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020), pp.50-51.

The texts which became most important for the American New Left to varying degrees applied Adorno and Horkheimer's approaches to the everyday dynamics of social, cultural and economic life in the USA during an era marked by conservative attempts to suppress the burgeoning civil rights movement and the increasing re-militarisation of American society amid escalating Cold War tensions. Martin Jay observes that the theoretical writing of the Frankfurt School during its exile in America was characterised by an "insistence that the social totality must be taken into account in any analysis of one of its aspects" and an emphasis on the "interrelatedness" of cultural, social and economic systems (in contradistinction to orthodox Marxism's "overemphasis on the economy").[33] In 1964's *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse (who remained in America after his Frankfurt School peers returned to Europe and became an icon in the counterculture) begins with an Adornian and Horkheimerian flourish, positing that capitalist society's "sweeping rationality, which propels efficiency and growth, is itself irrational", especially in light of the omnipresent potential for atomic doomsday.[34] However, in contrast to the grander historical materialism of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Marcuse extends his critique into daily reality by arguing that the 'one-dimensional society' of the West has barred sensuality from every aspect of our lives:

> [The] romantic pre-technical world was permeated with misery, toil, and filth, and these in turn were the background of all pleasure and joy. Still, there was a 'landscape,' a medium of libidinal experience which no longer exists.
>
> With its disappearance (itself a historical prerequisite of progress), a whole dimension of human activity and passivity has been de-eroticised. The environment from which the individual could obtain pleasure [...] has been rigidly reduced.[35]

The critique of the dominance of rationality and science emerged even among less emphatically socialist Continental thinkers. Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty—who, in 1947's *Humanism and Terror*, lamented the distortion of orthodox

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[33] Martin Jay, *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p.31.
[34] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), pp.xliii-xliv.
[35] *ibid*, p.76.

Marxist ideals in Communist regimes, where individuated subjectivities are elided and violence is used to "[crush]" the proletariat, rather than to advance class revolution—refers to "the second-order reflection of science", which, in attempting to clarify our understanding of the world, actually "obscures what we thought was clear" from experience.[36] These critiques reveal the emergence of a syncretic constellation of challenges to the philosophical, scientific and intellectual pillars of Western civilisation in the postwar decades. This constellation encompassed not only direct critiques of the material and economic circumstances that had enabled wartime atrocities but also illuminations of how the phenomenological, sensuous and everyday moments of experience were at risk of being compromised by the dominating forces of capital and instrumental rationality. From the ground up, these critiques emphasised how systems of reason and technocratic domination have shaped the trajectories of modernity, often at the expense of human freedom and ethical relationships between the self and other selves and between the self and the world.

Amid this constellation, *Trobar*'s aspirations to 'begin again' according to a Palaeolithic programme of being took shape. While it would be a fallacy to suggest that all participants in the 1960s counterculture had *One-Dimensional Man* or Adorno and Horkheimer's historical critique in their minds as they 'turned on, tuned in, dropped out' (*Trobar* 2's editors certainly did not, given its publication predated both texts' mainstream availability), the broad paradigm outlined here resonated with and often actively informed the counterculture's rejection of what Marcuse elsewhere described as the "repressive tolerance" of modern industrialised society.[37] This rejection was coupled with an embracing of subjective experience

[36] "[W]hat does the future of the Revolution matter if its present remains under the law of violence? Even if in the end it produces a society without violence, in respect of those whom it crushes today, each of whom is a world to himself, it is absolutely evil. Even if those who will inhabit the future can one day talk of success, those who live at present and are unable to make the transition have only a failure to record." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. by John O'Neill (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p.107. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp.11-12.

[37] Marcuse's 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance" argues that tolerance has been co-opted by late-stage capitalism as a tool for repression and complicity. Marcuse begins: "today tolerance appears again as what it was in its origins […]—a partisan goal, a subversive liberating notion and practice. Conversely, what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today […] [serves] the cause of oppression." Later, he affirms: "[t]olerance toward that which is radically evil now appears as good because it serves the cohesion of the whole on the road to affluence or more affluence. The toleration of the systematic moronisation of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda, […] the recruitment for and training of special forces […] are not distortions and aberrations, they

and alternative, de-commodified and synthetically primitivist ways of living in and relating to the world. In his 1969 analysis of the New Left's "Great Refusal" of Western consumer capitalism and paternalistic conservatism, Marcuse argues that the American counterculture became both a conduit for and an agent of political expression, within which New Leftist arguments were sedimented. He offers a compelling account of the artistic *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s:

> The political protest, assuming a total character, reaches into a dimension which, as aesthetic dimension, has been essentially apolitical. And the political protest activates in this dimension precisely the foundational, organic elements: the human sensibility which rebels against the dictates of repressive reason, and, in doing so, invokes the sensuous power of the imagination [...] Beyond the limits (and beyond the power) of repressive reason now appears the prospect for a new relationship between sensibility and reason, namely, the harmony between sensibility and a radical consciousness: rational faculties capable of projecting and defining the objective (material) conditions of freedom, its real limits and chances. But instead of being shaped and permeated by the rationality of domination, the sensibility would be guided by the imagination, mediating between the rational faculties and the sensuous needs.[38]

Marcuse's emphasis on the "sensuous" qualities of politically charged, countercultural postwar aesthetics is here instructive. The sensing and perceiving body becomes the locus of resistance to "repressive reason", providing the foundation for "imagination" to envision alternative programmes for political consciousness. This perspective retroactively illuminates *Trobar* 2's editorial focus on the poet-as-hunter-gatherer's haptic "rummaging around [among] rocks and roots".[39] The turn towards personal imagination and sensuousness in the 1960s was thus deeply entwined with matters of political expression. As George Cotkin writes, "[m]any [young Americans] balked at the paradox of living in a land of individualism where attempts at free expression, spontaneity and authenticity were denigrated as antisocial and procommunist [...] Hardly surprising, then, that a generation would find reasons, both personal and political,

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are the essence of a system which fosters tolerance as a means for perpetuating the struggle for existence and suppressing the alternatives." Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance" in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore Jr. & Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon, 1970), pp.81-123 (p.81, 83).

[38] Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p.30.

[39] "EDITORIAL", *Trobar* 2, p.2.

to rebel. *In a period when the personal increasingly became the political, the search for authenticity would have immense ramifications.*"[40] As we saw earlier, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger had emphasised the sensuous and personal qualities of perception as ontologically prior to all scientific and rational thought (the "background from which all acts stand out", for Merleau-Ponty): by the 1960s, perception had become fundamental to new aesthetic, ethical and political programmes.[41]

The desire to overcome the 'scientific perspective' and invent a new way of seeing increasingly became a vector for formal innovation in American poetry over the 1960s, as exemplified by the primitivist sensuality of *Trobar*. However, the call for a new mode of being, outside of the instrumentalising rationality of Enlightenment thought, had found an early and influential proponent in Charles Olson, whose poetry and criticism developed a participatory and phenomenological approach to perception. Olson constructed this approach syncretically over the course of his career, from the mid-1940s until his death in 1970, through an extensive body of poetry, essays, notes and correspondence which cross-pollinated one another. As a result, my analysis of his approach will be synoptic and comparative, elucidating different aspects of it as they emerged in different forms of writing over the postwar timescale this section has so far developed.

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[40] George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2003), p.240. My emphasis.
[41] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.xi.
Notwithstanding the extent to which "the personal became increasingly political" in 1960s America (as Cotkin writes), it is also worth emphasising the extent to which concrete historical events also shaped the political consciousness of those embedded in the counterculture. More explicitly materialist accounts of the 1960s are perhaps more helpful here. Fredric Jameson argues that specific events like "the independence of Ghana (1957), […] the independence of France's sub-Saharan colonies following the Gaullist referendum of 1959, finally the Algerian Revolution" (1954-1962), along with more domestic struggles for civil rights, all signified to the increasingly educated, politically conscious, sexually liberated and technologically-endowed middle-class of the West the possibility for the emergence of "new 'subjects' of history" and "new collective 'identities'". Beyond Jameson's excellent analysis, I would argue that the creation of these "new 'subjects'" also implied the possibility of overcoming the scientific, rationalist logic that, following Adorno and Horkheimer, had produced the racist typifications dehumanising these groups in the first place. Jameson identifies the 1960s as a watershed moment in the West's self-conception, where solidarity with newly liberated peoples suggested the potential for 'beginning again' through a new political, cultural and ethical programme. He writes: "For many of us, indeed, the crucial detonator—*a new Year I, the palpable demonstration that revolution was not merely a historical concept and a museum piece but real and achievable*—was furnished by a people whose imperialist subjugation had developed among North Americans a sympathy and a sense of fraternity we could never have for other third-world peoples […] except in an abstract and intellectual way." Fredric Jameson, "Periodising the 60s" in *Social Text*, 9/10 (1984), pp.178-209 (pp.180-181, 182). My emphasis.

As far back as a note from 1947, Olson had written in terms remarkably prescient of *Trobar*'s demands for a Palaeolithic or Neolithic form of perception, while also articulating a philosophical stance analogous to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the legacy of Baconian science as a programme for our relationship with nature and other beings:

> Creatively we are neolithic. The interest in the rudest form is the most significant sign of work today. It is not primitiveism [sic]. It only appears so to those who think civilisation can be measured. Or that the Renaissance is the measure of civilisation. Despite the fact that the mathematisation of man precedes [sic] directly from the Renaissance.
>
> We are off on another path, a path which we follow by way of the pieces of cloth of ourself. Ariadne's thread is our own.[42]

For Olson in 1947, "the interest in the rudest form […] is not primitiveism": it is neither an anachronism, nor nostalgic deference to the past or to a more archaic form of being. Instead, it is current: a "sign of work today", it enables the poet freely to transplant a repository of cultural and ethical values into the present moment of perception, and to challenge a Western scheme of perception which reduces both humans and nature to mere integers.

To Olson, 'measurement' is not only antithetical to human creative spirit but also to the phenomenological richness of nature and the other as they exist *qua* objects and forces in their own right. This is implicit in the note's reflexive use of "primitiveism" as a term for categorising aesthetic styles and temporal periods and, in the process, sapping them of their vitality. The reductive category-name is only visible "to those who think civilisation can be measured." Adorno and Horkheimer wrote similarly about modern mathematics and the new physics in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

> When in mathematics the unknown becomes the unknown quantity in an equation, it is made into something long familiar before any value has been assigned. Nature, before and after quantum theory, is what can be registered mathematically; even what cannot be assimilated, the insoluble and irrational, is fenced in by mathematical theorems. In the pre-emptive

[42] Charles Olson, "Creatively we are neolithic", I Box 29:1518, Prose No. 204, Charles Olson Research Collection. Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Centre, University of Connecticut Libraries. Quoted in Byers, *Charles Olson and American Modernism*, p.37.

> identification of the thoroughly mathematised world with truth,
> enlightenment believes itself safe from the return of the mythical.[43]

As the invocation of "Ariadne's thread" in his note suggests—itself one of the "rudest [forms]" to which he refers—Olson also recuperates "the mythical" as a perceptual framework which resists 'measurement' and "the mathematisation of man". In a much later (late 60s) poem from *Maximus*, "A Later Note on Letter #15", Olson remains preoccupied with how this conflict recapitulates throughout Western civilisation. The poem focusses on a distinction Olson draws between the differing conceptions of 'history' in the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides:

> In English the poetics became meubles—furniture—
> thereafter (after 1630
>
> & Descartes was the value
>
> until Whitehead, who cleared out the gunk
> by getting the universe in (as against man alone
>
> & <u>that</u> concept of history (not Herodotus's,
> which was a verb, to find out for yourself:
> 'istorin, which makes any one's acts a finding out for him or her
> self, in other words restores the traum: that we act somewhere
>
> at least by seizure, that the objective (example Thucidides, or
> the latest finest tape-recorder, or any form of record on the spot
>
> — live television or what — is a lie[44]

Olson's set of archetypal historical characters are different to the ones Adorno and Horkheimer drew upon in 1947. Descartes and Thucydides are the avatars of a measured and mathematical ("value"-oriented) form of knowledge and perception (rather than Francis Bacon), and Herodotus and Alfred North Whitehead are emblematic of a mode of thinking which is dynamic and mobile. Olson's point is to emphasise—through Herodotus's concept of *ἵστωρ*, or *istorin*, parsed further by Olson in *Muthologos* as entailing Herodotus's "[going] around and [finding] out everything he can find out, and then […] [telling] a story"—his

[43] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.18.
[44] Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (London: Cape Goliard, 1968), n.p.

idealised conception of perception and the knowledge it produces as a *process*, rather than as something fixed, monolithic and static.[45] Where Thucydides is unfavourably compared with "the latest fine tape-recorder" or "live television" (he is an impossibly inert transcriber of facts: the *ne plus ultra* of the theoretical ideal observer, or one of Adorno and Horkheimer's "mere instruments"), Herodotus's 'history' is participatory and entails a willing extension of the self into the world, which, coterminously, allows the world to extend into the self.[46] In a word, it is predicated on "a verb". In the original Greek, Herodotus's choice of terminology (*ἵστωρ*) has the precise nuance of witnessing first-hand, from which Olson extrapolates his sense of primary knowledge produced through direct, experiential and phenomenological immersion in and contact with the world ("[*finding*] *out for yourself*"). Olson emphasises the basis of all knowledge in the facticity of perception, in a manner redolent of Prynne's emphasis to Langley in 1961 that the tension between perceptual "contact" and "mediation" "has vital consequences in almost every field."[47]

For all that "A Later Note on Letter #15" adumbrates a theory of perception through the example of historical personalities (Descartes, Herodotus, Whitehead, and others), Olson was not always so reliant on the mediating presence of specific individuals with specific perceptual faculties. While Ezra Pound ascribed a superior form of perception to a range of 'factive personalities' in the *Cantos* and in his criticism, Olson presented "the EGO AS BEAK [as] bent and busted": he instead decentralised and universalised perception in his poetics, emphasising its capacity to dissolve the ego and the mediating interfaces between the citizens of his idealised *polis*.[48] Whether Olson ultimately escaped the trap of "the EGO" and avoided

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[45] Charles Olson, *Muthologos: The Collected Lectures & Interviews*, ed. by George F. Butterick, vol. I (Bolinas, California: Writing 35, 1978), p.3.

[46] Horkheimer & Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.2.

[47] Prynne, letter to Langley, 5 January 1961, JHPP.

[48] Pound's 'factive personalities' are a pantheon of totalising 'strongmen' who drive the action of *The Cantos* forward. This pantheon comprises figures like Sigismundo Malatesta, John Quincy Adams, Mussolini, Confucius and Sir Edward Coke, among others. In his own terms, Pound defines the "factive personality" with reference to the Malatesta *Cantos* (VIII-XI) in the *Guide to Kulchur*: "No one has claimed that the Malatesta cantos [sic] are obscure. They are openly volitionist, establishing, I think clearly, the effect of the factive personality, Sigismundo, an entire man. The founding of the Monte dei Paschi as the second episode has its importance. There we find the discovery, or at any rate the establishment, of the true basis of credit, to with the abundance of nature and the responsibility of the whole people." Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1952), p.194. For an example of how Pound demonstrates Malatesta's "openly volitionist", "factive personality" in the

becoming a 'factive personality' in his own right is a subject this thesis will explore, especially in Chapter One.

For now, I wish to explore some aspects of Olson's prosodic and linguistic model of perception, because many of these aspects will be invoked over the course of this thesis. As Olson argues in "A Later Note on Letter #15", the Cartesian legacy had prosodic consequences as well as intellectual ones. It reduced English poetics "after 1630" to ornamental "furniture": passive and inert, and stripped of the dynamic, participatory energy Olson valorises. Where, then, did he propose locating prosodic and linguistic modes capable of resisting this static positivism? Some of the answers lie in the *Mayan Letters*, a record of Olson's correspondence with Robert Creeley during six months of intensive research into Mayan archaeology and language in the Yucatán peninsula in 1951. The text is concerned with what Louis Goddard calls the "immediate apprehension of Mayan civilisation as a sort of pre-lapsarian state, to which modern society might return through an act of poetic will."[49] For Olson, this "act of poet will" entails the recuperation of the spatial and ideogrammic immediacy of Mayan glyphs as a template for a new model of perception in poetry. It is also closely entwined with an idiosyncratic view of history which emphasises direct, haptic contact with the materials of the past as a method of re-invigorating them for use in the present: Olson writes to Creeley of "putting [his] hands in to the dust and fragments and pieces of those Maya who used to live here" and, in so doing, grasping "the solidity of the sense of their lives".[50] Whereas Chinese pictographs offered Pound (via the Sinologist Ernest Fenollosa) a linguistic template for finding meaning within nature as predicated on the individual reader's aptitude for finding that meaning, Olson presents Mayan glyphs in the *Letters* as the linguistic corollary to the

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Cantos, see how he absolves Malatesta from plundering marble "for the beautifying | of the *tempio*" at Rimini in monadic, providential terms in *Canto* IX: "And Sigismundo got up a few arches, | And stole that marble in Classe, 'stole', that is, | *Casus est talus* [*the case is this*]". Malatesta is presented as possessing the will, strength, and vision to impose his own aesthetic and civil order and create significant change in the world. He acts decisively to shape Rimini's civic environment, in defiance of any conventional moral or legal standard the reader brings to bear on the text. Moreover, this is entwined with linguistic precision, condensation and decisiveness (hence Malatesta's curt self-exculpation above). In Pound, *The Cantos*, p.36. Charles Olson, *The Mayan Letters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p.28.

[49] Louis Goddard, "J. H. Prynne in Context, 1955-1975" (unpublished D.Phil dissertation, University of Sussex, 2016), p.77.

[50] Olson, *The Mayan Letters*, p.12.

immediate, phenomenological apprehension of and intersubjective communion with the world.[51] In this communion, the power to extend oneself into the world and 'find out for yourself' (in the manner of Herodotus's *istorin*) was distributed equally across Olson's idealised *polis*. Furthermore, it was not contingent on specialised aptitude or the intervention or mediation of a strong leader.

Beyond this, Mayan glyphs de-centre the human as the locus at the heart of this relationship with the world by offering an apparently accurate representation of the spatial and physical relations between things in nature:

> What continues to hold me, is, the tremendous levy on all objects as they present themselves to human sense, in this glyph-world. And the proportion, the distribution of weight given same parts of all, seems, exceptionally, distributed & accurate […]
>
> That is, the gate to the centre was, here, as accurate as what you & I [sic] have been (all along) talking about—viz., man as object in field of force declaring self as force because is force in exactly such relation & can accomplish expression of self as force by conjecture, & displacement in a context best, now, seen as space more than a time such;
>
> which, I take it, is precise contrary to, what we have had, as 'humanism', with, man with, man, out of all proportion of, relations, thus, so mis-centered, becomes, dependent on, only, a whole series of 'human' references which, so made, make only anthropomorphism, and thus, make mush of, any reality, conspicuously, his own, not to speak of, how all other forces (ticks, water-lilies, or snails) become only descriptive objects in what used to go with antimacassars, those, planetariums (ancestors of gold-fishbowls) etc.[52]

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[51] Pound's anti-academic worldview led him to privilege certain individuals who he believed had an innate grasp on certain forms of knowledge which were of tremendous importance to his aesthetics. This connects clearly with the valorisation of the 'factive personalities' described above. In a footnote to Fenollosa's "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", he gives the following anecdote: "[Vorticist sculptor Henri] Gaudier-Brzeska sat in my room before he went off to the war. He was able to read the Chinese radicals and many compound signs almost at pleasure […] He was amazed at the stupidity of lexicographers who could not, for all their learning, discern the pictorial values which were to him perfectly obvious and apparent." In Ezra Pound & Ernest Fenollosa, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" Poetry" in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose Contributions to Periodicals*, vol. III, ed. by Lea Baechler, A. Walton Litz and James Longenbach (New York & London: Garland, 1991) pp.326-364 (p.363). For an excellent summary of Pound's visual philology and criticism, see Rebecca Beasley, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007).

[52] Olson, *The Mayan Letters*, pp.66-68.

In *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing*, a text Olson repeatedly invokes in the *Letters*, J. Eric S. Thompson explains that "[t]he Maya concept of time was something which [...] in its philosophical aspect reflects a very different mentality. The Maya conceived of the divisions of time as burdens which were carried through all eternity by relays of bearers."[53] This reification of abstract concepts into concrete, perceivable aspects of reality was hugely important for Olson. The Mayan presentation of time as weight allowed him to conceive of each component of the compound glyph as—literally and metaphorically—load-bearing. The glyphs present themselves as microcosmic pictures or maps of things in the world and the relations between them, whether of distance, weight, or other physical measure. Meaning resides in these relations and can be immanently grasped due to the glyphs' spatial and presentational immediacy (and hence hermeneutic availability). In one example Olson cites, the duration of 400 years is depicted through the material effect of weight on the body: the glyph depicts "man 9 carrying baktun (a huge zopalote) on his back".[54] He uses this example to illustrate that Mayan glyphs can apparently be read by *anyone*, enacting a form of perception which precedes recourse to any linguistic template or gloss. They are, in essence, indices of the objects of the world, and they are indexical of the perceiving human who is as much an object of the world as anything she observes: an "object in field of force declaring self as force", though normally "mis-centred" in the "anthropomorphism" of European "'humanism'" and its attendant belt of languages. For Pound and Fenollosa, Chinese pictographs represented "the transference of force from agent to object", a unidirectional movement emphasising action and effect.[55] By contrast, Olson saw individual Mayan glyphs as encapsulating a universe of dynamic and reciprocal relations, freely available to any reader.

In another prose work from 1951, "Human Universe", Olson clarified that his interest in hieroglyphs was less concerned with linguistics and more about recovering a mode of Being-in-the-world activated through direct perceptual contact. This mode, he argued, countered the abstractions of Western positivism, which, since Socrates, had been defined by

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[53] J. Eric S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction* (Washington, D. C.: The Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1950), p.59.
[54] Olson, *The Mayan Letters*, p.65.
[55] Pound & Fenollosa, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry", p.331.

its "readiness to generalise, […] to make a 'universe' out of discourse instead of letting it rest in its most serviceable place".[56] Olson writes, "Several of us go to back to hieroglyphs or to ideograms to right the balance", asserting that the difference between graphic and phonetic writing is also a distinction "between language as the act of the instant and language as the act of thought about the instant", with the former "[hewing] to experience".[57]

This combined ethical and linguistic sensibility, developed across the *Mayan Letters* and "Human Universe", retroactively illuminates Olson's most famous statement of poetic intent, the 1950 essay "Projective Verse". In this essay, Olson proposes a practical method for a poetics of perceptual immediacy and process, developed through a method of 'composition by field' rooted in what he calls 'objectism':

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which *western* man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognise himself as such the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.[58]

The projective poem has an ethical valence ("an humilitas") activated by its levelling of all entities in the poem as objects *qua* objects. This approach opposes what Olson sees as the conventional lyric's mediation of a set of 'othered' objects by "the individual as ego" or "the 'subject'" (emphatically "*western*"), whose presence seems like a derivation from the Cartesian *ego cogito*. Olson's prosodic method mimetically enacts 'objectism' by treating each constituent component of the poem as an object itself and then examining the dynamic relations between them:

> It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used

[56] Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. by Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p.156.
[57] *ibid*, pp.156-157.
[58] *ibid*, p.247. My emphasis.

> […] every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality […][59]

By atomising the poem down into its perceptual elements and emphasising the materiality and relationality of the constituent prosodic particles of "syllable […] line […] image […] sound […] sense", Olson encourages the poet to engage with the world on its own terms, unmediated through the lyric subject or abstract thought. Projective form apparently directly reflects perceptual experience, radically reorienting both poetry and the poet's relation to the world. Olson seeks to embed perception into the very structure of the poem, with each syllable and line embodying the physical and experiential dynamics of perception itself. It is the task of the reader, "finding out for him or her | self", to activate that structure, and grasp the totality of Olson's "sense" as immanently as he allegedly grasped the meaning of the glyphs of Yucatán.[60]

III – "For the island and its language"

As I demonstrated in the previous section, the postwar decades in America were ultimately defined by a Marcusean sense of politically charged sensuousness and a programme of countercultural innovation (including new phenomenological modernist poetics). These developments emerged gradually, as the critiques of consumer capitalism and militarisation developed first by the Frankfurt School and then by the New Left were sublimated into the music, literature and visual art of the 1960s. This political and cultural flourishing was facilitated by a conducive set of intellectual, material and institutional conditions. In Britain, however, the postwar landscape was markedly bleaker. Britain emerged from the Second World War into serious economic and cultural decline, evidenced by the continuation of rationing until 1954, deindustrialisation in the North of England and in Wales and the loss of imperial influence through the ongoing processes of decolonisation. This decline was further compounded by a deep-seated resistance to social and cultural modernism, symbolised by the

[59] *ibid*, p.243.
[60] Olson, *Maximus IV, V, VI*, n.p.

persistence of an entrenched class system and antiquated institutions. While the end of the war spurred the creation of the welfare state—evidenced most clearly by the establishment of the NHS in 1948—it failed to generate the radical economic or cultural renewal that the USA experienced.

As Perry Anderson puts it in 1964's "Origins of the Present Crisis",

> the final good fortune of British capitalism, its victory in Two World Wars, was also the immediate precipitate of its decline. It was never forced by the mass physical destruction of its plant, radically to reconvert and renew itself. On the contrary, bloated and immobilised by its successive survivals, it fell dramatically behind the dynamic, modernised economies of Germany, France, Italy and Japan.[61]

Unlike other nations, Anderson argues, Britain was never forced "radically to reconvert or renew itself", either through the total disintegration of the means of production and the social base that would normally be precipitated by defeat in war or by being colonised, or (in the case of America) the dialectical processes of constitutional self-determination that had dominated the 18th and 19th centuries. Consequently, as Anderson also argues (projecting 'England' and 'Englishness' as the hegemonic identity of Britain), "'traditionalism'" and "'empiricism'" ("[t]he two great chemical elements of this blanketing English fog") were allowed to dominate British society until well into the 20th century.[62] This produced a hegemonic 'traditionalist' position entailing "veneration for the monarchy, the Church, the Peerage, the City", on the one hand, and an inert "empiricism" without revolutionary zeal on the other, which "did not have to overthrow a feudal state in the 19th century".[63] Anderson concludes: "A comprehensive, coagulated conservatism is the result, covering the whole of society with a thick pall of simultaneous philistinism (towards ideas) [...], for which England has justly won an international reputation."[64]

This "comprehensive, coagulated conservatism" and its attendant "philistinism" had serious repercussions for British cultural life in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1968's "Components of

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[61] Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis" in *New Left Review*, 1/23 (1964), pp.26-53 (p.51).
[62] *ibid*, p.40.
[63] *ibid.*
[64] *ibid.*

the National Culture", Anderson examines the cultural fallout of Britain's economic and political situation more directly, especially as it related to the absence of "a coherent and militant student movement" capable of promulgating New Leftist arguments: British educational, political and cultural institutions remained espoused to "atemporal" analytic philosophy and "disembodied political theory" throughout the twentieth century, which resisted both the development of a domestic sociology and the importing of the Continental thought that had proven so inspiring to American students and intellectuals.[65] The impact of this cultural malaise was felt in poetry, too. Peter Riley invoked remarkably similar imagery to Anderson's sense of cultural "[coagulation]" in an assessment of British poetry in a letter and essay he sent to J. H. Prynne on 19 April 1967. Comparing and "[contrasting] 'British' & 'American' modes of especially poetry", Riley writes of,

> The British lack of concern, the British porridge where everything is mixed together and stirred, the British home-from-home dealings with Judaism & Christianity, the strong reliance on given and vaguely comprehended patterns & modes of significance – especially value by passing reference (especially concealed), the contempt for taking sides and seeing straight.[66]

"British [poetic] porridge", like Anderson's "coagulate conservativism", is a homogeneous, uncritical mixing of inherited religious, cultural, and literary forms, wherein traditional structures of signification, symbolism and language are thoughtlessly reproduced, polemical and revolutionary positions are balked at and "seeing straight" (according to a faithful and ethical mode of perception) is impossible.[67] For Riley (and the other poets this thesis examines), the absence of formal and conceptual innovation in mainstream postwar British poetry suggested the literary establishment's disavowal of modernism—or, more accurately, their pretence that there had not been a literary modernism in the first place. As Prynne wrote to Riley in a letter from 23 June 1967, the mainstream popularity of (for example) John

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[65] Perry Anderson, "Components of the National Culture" in *New Left Review*, 1/50 (1968), pp.3-57 (p.3, 25, 7-8).
[66] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Notes 2 – Migration and circle", 19 April 1967, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 214, 269. JHPP.
[67] Throughout "Origins of the Present Crisis", Anderson invokes *topoi* of stagnation to describe the cultural, political and sociological character of Britishness/'Englishness'. E.g., "[t]he hegemony of the dominant bloc in England is not articulated in any systematic major ideology, but is rather diffused in a miasma of commonplace prejudices and taboos" (p.40).

Betjeman and Philip Larkin's verse—and its retreat from the larger epistemological, civic and metaphysical structures in which the subject is embedded—implicitly signalled the erasure of high modernism: "It's as if, for example, Wyndham Lewis had never written a line, as if *BLAST* now has to be done all over again".[68] As Alex Latter writes, citing a 1962 letter from Prynne to Ed Dorn, "[t]he failings of ['Betjeman's England'] lies fundamentally in its renunciation of the intelligence and capacity for response that was inherent in modernist practice and its advocacy of a greatly circumscribed understanding of the potential scope of poetry that shunned 'the total ebb and flow of language' in favour of 'politeness and discussion.'"[69]

As Prynne's affirmation that "*BLAST* now *has* to be done all over again" (my emphasis) suggests, the stagnation of British poetry was, for some poets, a catalyst and an imperative for prosodic renewal. This context saw the emergence of magazines of experimental sub-Olsonian verse like *The English Intelligencer*, Andrew Crozier's *The Wivenhoe Park Review* (1965-1968) and John James's *Resuscitator* (1963-1969), as well as the full development of the British Poetry Revival. In his first editorial announcement for the *Intelligencer*, Crozier declared it as emphatically "for the island and its language," positioning it as an act of prosodic, linguistic and (therefore) civic service.[70] Transatlantic contact with figures like Olson and Dorn was an essential feature of this work: Crozier studied under Olson at SUNY Buffalo between 1964 and 1965 and Prynne initiated a correspondence with Olson in November 1961 that would last for the remainder of the decade.[71]

Despite their criticism of the staidness of "the British porridge", and what at first glance appears to be an uncritical deference to Olson, British late modernist poets were not always so scathing about the entirety of English poetry. One aspect that has been overlooked in existing accounts of British late modernism inspired by the New American Poetry is the extent to

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[68] J. H. Prynne, letter to Peter Riley, 23 June 1967, in J. H. Prynne, 1966-2002, MS Add. 10013/2/34, 1. Peter Riley Papers, Cambridge University Library. Hereafter PRP.

[69] Alex Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp.21-22

[70] Andrew Crozier, "Editorial" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, ed. by Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison and Luke Roberts (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012), p.3.

[71] For an excellent summary of Olson's contact with British poets, see Gavin Selerie, "From Weymouth back: Olson's British contacts, travel and legacy" in *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2015), pp.113-126.

which it productively engaged with the historical depths of Britain's literary and linguistic past. Prynne's 1961 letter to Langley, by extending questions of perceptual contact back to Ruskin's art criticism and examining the "vital consequences" these have "in almost every field", is one example of this.[72] Riley's April 1967 letter to Prynne is even more elucidating, however. After his critique of "the British porridge", he goes on to enumerate,

> the advantages we can bring to that one-eyed American thrust. That is, music: in the meditative strength that has long flourished here (meditation: narration?) a strength born in stasis, and dangerous for that, but which can take in the full force of movement, given but the chance. (In continual straight movement itself nothing is achieved – reset, pause, is physiologically essential, and that's where the creating takes place.)
>
> (the exhibits – Sonnets – certain c. 17 divines – ?Bunyan – the fiction and excursion in c18 – Prelude – Keatsodes [sic] –?Browning – Dover Beach but also that which has strengthened the English lyric throughout its course: the pause for comprehension, penetration, which informs Herrick.[73]

Riley's letter rehearses a few tired clichés about American culture: most obviously, that it lacks self-consciousness and reflective depth. In so doing, it betrays a degree of condescension. Yet, buried within that cliché lies an attitude that this thesis will find to be paradigmatic of British late modernist poetry. Riley's impulse here is to interrogate and amplify the mediating role of the perceiving subject, examining its connection to a specific and idiosyncratic English poetic tradition in order to explore how the forms of perception he had inherited from American modernism might be restructured by that tradition. The letter offers a programme of English writers whose "meditative strength" and "music" apparently add something valuable to the "one-eyed American thrust" of poets like Olson. For Riley, Olson's American modernism—with its objectism, its open field, and its glyphic preoccupations—is pure outwardness and "movement". In so being, however, it implicitly lacks the counterweight of a mediating, "[meditating]" and internalising subjectivity, whose "pause for comprehension, penetration" produces the synthesis of interiority and exteriority which is "where the creating takes place".

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[72] Prynne, letter to Langley, 5 January 1961. JHPP.

[73] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Notes 2 – Migration and circle", 19 April 1967. JHPP.

The most faithful presentation of perception in poetry must include a balance between the outward movement of observation and the inward pause for mediation, where the subjectivities of the poet and the speaker productively interact with the external world.

Likewise, in a 1971 lecture on Olson's *Maximus* at Simon Fraser University, Prynne favourably compared *Maximus* to the best writing of Milton and Wordsworth: all three produce a poetics that can "transmute itself beyond" what he calls "the mere lyric particular".[74] For Prynne, these poets allow "the cosmos" and "myth" to modulate and structure individual perception and expression, producing "a circular curve" from individual to universal and back again.[75] From the outset, some British poets saw this new "American thrust" as something which could be folded back into certain strains of English lyricism, integrating a Romantic or pre-Romantic reflective pause and meditative depth with Olson's "cosmic" and 'mythic' scope for perception.

If Prynne and Riley were happy to recuperate a specific English lyric tradition (reaching back through Browning and Wordsworth to Milton and Herrick) as a supplement, extension and cognate to new American templates for perceptual contact in poetry, then it is fair to say that the same willingness was not always reciprocated by their transatlantic *confrères*. As Olson pithily put it to Prynne on 18 January 1967:

> Dear Jeremy: I abhor [Ernest] de Selincourt of course (+ all the sticky feeling of + bet. DW [Dorothy Wordsworth] (shit) etc + STC [Samuel Taylor Coleridge] (germ)[76]

In a cognate (but more critically elucidating) move, the American *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poet and critic Charles Bernstein wrote 27 years later in the journal *Sulfur* that certain camps of British poets display "a tenacious commitment to an unobtainable lyric, a sort of sprung voice that takes on a religious quality at times."[77] Where, for Riley, the old "music" of Herrick, Browning, Wordsworth, Arnold and Keats was the necessary counterweight to the

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[74] J. H. Prynne, "On *Maximus* IV, V, VI", lecture at Simon Fraser University, July 27, 1971, transcribed by Tom McGauley, *Iron*, 2 (1971), n.p.
[75] *ibid.*
[76] Charles Olson, letter to J. H. Prynne, 18 January 1967 in *The Collected Letters of Charles Olson and J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Ryan Dobran (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017), p.217.
[77] Charles Bernstein, "Leaking Truth: British Poetry in the 90s" in *Sulfur*, 14 (1994), pp.204-212 (p.206).

'outwardness' of Olson and his Black Mountain peers, for Bernstein, this position is merely "clinging to the vestiges of the old music as if it were the only music, the old truths as if they were the only truths".[78]

Reverting to familiar prosodic templates—particularly those derived from the lineages sketched by Riley and Prynne—might have suggested to American poets the return of what Perry Anderson would call the "coagulated conservatism" of Englishness by reinforcing a sense of cultural stasis.[79] However, for British poets, the erosion of faith in the utopian models of perception espoused by Olson—exacerbated by personal disillusionment and, more broadly, a faltering belief in the viability of American cultural paradigms in the wake of events like the Vietnam War—prompted a turn toward the English literary and philological past as a productive structure of signification. This turn unfolded against the backdrop of successive waves of financialisaton and neoliberalism, which fragmented the political and cultural bases for renewal in Britain throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Stuart Hall describes Thatcherism's ideological project as undermining "the very principle and essence of collective social welfare", supplanting the Keynesian consensus with the "possessive individualist and free-market nostrums of Hayek and Friedman."[80] He emphasises how this ideological shift, disseminated through the popular press and couched in a populist idiom, cultivated a new reactionary common sense that came to be embodied by the British public: it "began to be 'lived' in its terms."[81] Likewise, as Nancy Fraser writes, financialised capitalism's obsession with deficit and austerity has led increasingly to the "[cannibalisation of] labour, [...] [transferral of] wealth from periphery to core, and [the sucking of] value from households, families, communities and nature," eroding the social capacities needed for collective renewal.[82] In these circumstances, the meditative and introspective qualities of lyric became increasingly vital in examining the position of the subject amid the mediating effects of the prevailing social and economic conditions.

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[78] *ibid*, p.210.
[79] Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis", p.40.
[80] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism & the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), p.47.
[81] *ibid*, p.48.
[82] Nancy Fraser, "Contradictions of Capital and Care" in *New Left Review*, 100 (2016), pp.99-107 (pp.112-113).

The engagement with traditional forms in Britain can thus be understood not as a conservative retreat but as a nuanced adaptation to the perceptual exigencies of contemporary life and a motivated attempt to properly position the perceiving and speaking subject against a common poetic framework, eschewing the "possessive individualist" tendencies of neoliberalism. This poetic framework, while always-already mediated from reality, reveals the limits of perception by showing how it draws from a shared pool of experience. In an archival typescript of a 1999 interview with Emilio Araúxo, Riley describes form as an integral part of a poetic history which "will always prod you in the back and remind you that you are not alone", while also emphasising that form needs to be properly understood as a "made [thing]", "restricted, […] mostly human-centred in a social, emotive, interpersonal and oligarchic way."[83] As Bernstein's 1994 critique of British late modernist lyric implies, this position contrasts sharply with the poetics of certain American writers. Robert Grenier's 1971 essay "ON SPEECH" crystallises a distinct reaction to both Olson's bardic outwardness and the putative authenticity of a perceiving and speaking lyric subject. With its emphatic, polemical crescendo—"I HATE SPEECH"—Grenier dismisses poetry's mimicry of spoken language as a distraction from its true material.[84] For Grenier, "spoken noises and written letters are signs of the reality of words in the head."[85] What matters is not the linguistic medium (spoken or written), but rather the "word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the 'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world all the time."[86] As Will Montgomery notes, Grenier's poetics and the *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* nexus it inspired were also reactions to Olson's "mythopoeic interests" and "attitudes towards the page as a record of the embodied utterance": crucially, however, they were reactions which disavowed conventional poetic form's "[reminders that] you are not alone", even when those reminders insist on their own material and potentially "oligarchic" orientations.[87]

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[83] Peter Riley, "Postal interview, E. Araúxo, December 1999", MS Add.10013/1/3. PRP.
[84] Robert Grenier, "ON SPEECH" in *This*, 1 (1971), n.p.
[85] *ibid*, n.p.
[86] *ibid*, n.p.
[87] Will Montgomery, *Short Form American Poetry: The Modernist Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2020), p.160. In the introduction to 1986's *In the American Tree*, an anthology of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* poetry, Ron Silliman affirmed that Grenier's "ON SPEECH" "announced a breach—and a new moment in American writing."

In some cases, the celebration of an older "music", "meditative strength" and "stasis" by British poets lapsed into what was essentially an anti-modernist position. In a 1974 archival draft of a review of Anthony Rudolf's edited collection *Modern Poetry in Translation* 16, Riley couches a recuperation of contemporary English lyric poetry in a critique of the anti-bardic, "[sensationalist]" qualities of more fragmented and avant-garde poetics:

> Meanwhile England is culturally famished, on the page, only to those who insist on seeing it such. And they will be forced to inhabit the desert of thin words, for sensationalism feeds on its own authors like pure ascetic acid.[88]

Colin Simms offers a counter to Riley, Langley and Prynne's engagement with Romantic and early modern lyric as a template for late modernist poetic practice. His later poetry (often focussed on otters, goshawks and gyrfalcons) recruits Anglo-Saxon alliterative and oral verse structures, allusions to Old Icelandic and Old Norse literature and Old English formal *topoi* like kennings. These formal templates weave the particularity and alterity of his animal subjects more resolutely into an ancient understanding of the Northern English landscape. His writing projects an entirely different vision of Britain to that projected to different degrees by Riley, Prynne and Langley, one which is attuned to the particularity of its Northern landscapes and which also uncovers them as part of a geological and cultural continuum encompassing other places shaped by Teutonic peoples and languages (including Frisia, Sweden and Iceland). The vision of this continuum is mediated through animals like otters and gyrfalcons which cut across modern human-made borders and the transformations in the landscape which have unfolded in deeper geophysical time (the retreat of glacial ice and the submersion of Doggerland, for example) to make a home in comparable climates and territories across Northern Europe.

Ron Silliman, "Language, Realism, Poetry" in *In the American Tree*, ed. by Ron Silliman (Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 2002), pp.xvii-xxiii (p.xvii).

[88] Peter Riley, "Four Reviews [1974?]" in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 274. JHPP

IV – Forms of perception to come

This thesis comprises four chapters and a coda. Chapter One focusses on Peter Riley, examining his writing during a formative moment in the history of late modernist British poetry and its engagement with direct perception: the run and dissolution of *The English Intelligencer* (1966-1968), a 'worksheet' of experimental British writing closely espoused to Olson's projective verse. As the *Intelligencer*'s second editor and an early adherent of its poetics, Riley initially embraced an Olsonian model of Neolithic or Palaeolithic perception. However, through his poetry and prose contributions to the worksheet and his first major post-*Intelligencer* sequence, *The Linear Journal* (1973), he came to reject these ideas, ultimately recognising that perception is always-already abstracted from reality. Drawing on Riley's poetry, public prose, personal research and private correspondence with J. H. Prynne, this chapter situates his trajectory within the *Intelligencer*'s shifting interpersonal and institutional dynamics, shedding new light on Olson's British reception and establishing paradigms on modernist subjectivism that resonate throughout the thesis.

My second chapter turns to R. F. Langley, a former *Intelligencer* reader. Langley's poetry and journalling from the 1970s to the 1990s grapple with how his deep knowledge of etymology, art history and natural history mediates and disrupts perception. I begin by examining how his early work—1978's *Hem* and its attendant journal entries—registers a deep anxiety that etymology and research can diminish phenomenological immediacy. Langley's allusive recruitment of the dramatic monologues and conversation poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge and William Cowper in "Juan Fernandez" (1979), as well as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, provides the impetus for my analysis of Langley's recuperation of specific earlier forms of English lyric prosody and literary history as models for a more intersubjective form of perception. I examine how both "Juan Fernandez" and "Jack's Pigeon" (1997) (alongside Langley's other 'Jack' poems) use the historicity of their poetic form and language not as something which mediates or collapses the perceptual claims contained therein, but rather as something which deepens and extends them, by allowing individual perception to authenticate itself against a range of historically situated perspectives. I argue that this later

understanding of the historicity of particular poetic forms and of language leads Langley to a reappraisal of his own book knowledge as something which dynamically and productively structures his perception of the world.

The question of landscape undergirds Chapters One and Two. Both Riley and Langley use landscape as a site for investigating how perception extends us into the world and allows the world to extend back into us, in an act of reciprocal exchange. In Chapter Three, landscapes, and the animals that inhabit them, become a central focus. I examine the career of Colin Simms, a biogeographer and poet who spent most of his life conducting fieldwork in geographies as diverse as North America, Afghanistan and the North East of England. I begin by focussing on Simms's 'American' project, a loose collection of sequences which are 'American' insofar as they take the landscapes, people and animals of the North American continent as their primary focus, while also drawing on the projective, open field prosody of Olson and Dorn to directly address the landscape as a subject. Reading *Bear Skull* (1972) and *No North Western Passage* (1976), I demonstrate how Simms's geographic poetry moves towards a recognition that an immanent relationship with the landscape is untenable. Placing these sequences into dialogue with Simms's geographic sources, I show how Simms emphasises that landscapes are always mediated through maps and the forms of text which shape and produce geographic knowledge, and which fix our understanding of the world. The chapter concludes by examining *Otters and Martens* (2004), a collection in which Simms turns to Northern English landscapes and mustelids, particularly otters. Departing from the grander geographic framing of his American sequences, Simms focusses on the immediate, relational dynamics of the encounter with the animal in this collection, emphasising the nonhuman's resistance to human perceptual and linguistic frameworks. I examine how Simms integrates Northern dialects, Old English prosody and fragments of other Northern European Teutonic languages to situate the otter within a historical, geological and cultural continuum, while simultaneously preserving its irreducible alterity. Throughout the chapter, I draw on Simms's extensive correspondence with Eric Mottram, contextualising his evolving poetics within the transatlantic networks of *Poetry Review* under Mottram's editorship.

As might be apparent from my close analysis of his letter to Langley at the beginning of this introduction, Prynne is a figure of central importance to this thesis. Both Chapters One and Two emphasise, to varying degrees, his influence on the thinking and prosody of Riley and Langley respectively. Chapter Four turns to Prynne directly, and examines his '(very) late' poetry. Where the other poets examined in this thesis maintain (to varying degrees) the lyric speaking voice as a subjective structure of signification, and use it to examine tensions between perceptual contact and its mediation, Prynne is broadly understood in the critical consensus to have abandoned the lyric speaking subject altogether, retaining depersonalised fragments of lyric only so that they can be ironised or mediated by the huge array of conventionally 'unpoetic' material his poetry deploys. This chapter instead argues that Prynne recuperates lyric as a historical and material process that cannot be collapsed by its surrounding context. The reader must actively engage with and activate its presence within the poem. Through close readings of *Red D Gypsum* (1997) and *Orchard* (2020), I argue that Prynne's late work emphasises the historicity of our perception as a new form of ecstatic contact with the world, in which subjectivity is understood as inextricably embedded within a complex network of human and nonhuman material conditions which shape and recalibrate our being. The thesis ends with a Coda that reflects on the assumed primacy of both the English language and 'Englishness' as a cultural, political and civic force in the field of British late modernist poetry.

Taken together, these chapters make a claim for coherence, by demonstrating the fate of a synthetic complex of perceptual positions in Britain—whether these were rooted in the phenomenological attentions of Merleau-Ponty or Heidegger, Pound's ideogrammic method, Olson's 'objectism', or an Adornian call to reject the positivist worldview that had produced the "thoroughly mathematised world" of prewar Europe and America.[89] While Anthony Mellors' *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (2005) examines (late) modernism's engagement with "the mythic method not as metaphor but as fact", and emphasises how "mythic and esoteric thought" informed its politics and its framing of subjectivity, this thesis finds that British late modernist poets consciously challenged the association between

[89] Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.18.

modernist practice and arcane and monolithic frameworks.[90] Instead, they refracted their practice into increasingly localised and everyday contexts—encounters with animals, commodities and specific landscapes, for example—in order to compress within these smaller-scale structures broader questions of mediation, materiality and perception. By examining how my chosen poets rework poetic tradition, this thesis also aligns closely with Antony Rowland's *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* (2022) in demonstrating how modernism's formal and ideological legacies persist in late 20th and 21st century British poetry. Like Rowland, I show how British poets expurgated or reoriented high modernist forms, sustaining a dialectical engagement with their predecessors while maintaining "'a refractory relation between [their work] and dominant aesthetic values', and 'between [their work] and mass culture, between [their work] and society in general'."[91] However, where *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* traces how experimental and mainstream British poets alike "responded to [and reworked] […] writers as diverse as Pound, Eliot, H. D., Woolf and Artaud with […] lyrical recalcitrance", my thesis places greater emphasis on how British late modernists turned to pre-modernist, canonical English forms, locating within older lyric and prosodic traditions a radical energy suited to their progressive, intersubjective, ecological and materialist orientations.[92] Ultimately, this thesis will demonstrate that its four chosen poets are united by their shared turn towards mediation as a generative complication of facile claims of unmediated perceptual contact: through this, their work reveals how British late modernism insisted on a conception of subjectivity as always-already constructed and shaped by external forces, be these epistemological, sociological, linguistic or prosodic.

[90] Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005), p.2. This thesis also substantially broadens the limited scope of British late modernist poets in Mellors' book. Mellors only covers Prynne and only examines his earliest collections—1968's *Kitchen Poems* and 1969's *The White Stones*—in any detail.

[91] Antony Rowland, *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2022), p.6. Embedded within Rowland's argument is a quotation from Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (eds.), *Bad Modernisms* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2006), p.3.

[92] Rowland, *Metamodernism and Contemporary British Poetry*, p.6.

Chapter One

Peter Riley's Perception in *The English Intelligencer* & its Aftermath

Introduction

In 1988, the poet D. S. Marriott wrote to Peter Riley requesting a list of the texts that had influenced Riley and J. H. Prynne's early work. Riley's reply goes beyond a mere bibliography, and offers an account of the waxing and waning influence of the New American Poetry on the writing he and the coterie he belonged to had produced during the late 1960s:

> It was a search, with Olson behind ones [sic] back, for a textuality which comprehended geophysical and historical realities without becoming either impersonal or dramatic. At its most sentimental it was a matter of 'recapturing mythic cohesion' or (more critically) of tracing spiritual institutional error back to collective guilt in structures of appropriation, death, succession, apportionment, etc. Etymology was pursued in the search for the Word comprehending all words, in horror of abstraction. Shamanism, of course, was the central image and I'm sure you know all about that through Jeremy [Prynne]'s studies and references. Shamanism can be traced in many archaeological records, including those of Britain, without exactly needing to be.
>
> It failed of course, (though certain poems survived it quite wonderfully) as Olson failed (ditto), because it was assumptive about the self/writing function and occupied a false and unkind relationship towards the reader. (Olson now strikes me as close to Auden in both of these respects).[1]

Riley's letter is a *précis* of the theoretical and poetic practices of *The English Intelligencer* (1966-1968), a magazine (or, to use its own terminology, a 'worksheet') of experimental British writing adherent to the formal and philosophical precedents of American poets like Charles Olson, Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley, and whose lines of inheritance ultimately ran back to the high modernism of Pound and Williams. This inheritance is patent in Riley's

[1] Peter Riley, letter to D. S. Marriott, 5 July 1988 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, 277. JHPP.

reference to a "textuality which comprehended geophysical and historical realities" whose author had "Olson behind [his] back". It also underlies his emphasis on the importance of etymological clarity over "abstraction" as a way of anchoring the poem in sensuous "realities". This conception of language draws from a sub-Poundian and sub-Fenollosan philology, via the glyphic preoccupations of Charles Olson and the 'objectism' of his "Projective Verse", where meaning was understood as immanent and self-revealed in the constituent particles of the poem. Riley's account strongly suggests that, during the late 60s moment of *The English Intelligencer*, he and his fellow contributors emphatically prioritised perceptual contact over mediation.

However, the letter also foregrounds the fact that these practices "failed", because they ultimately produced writing which "was assumptive about the self/writing function and occupied a false and unkind relationship towards the reader". Riley highlights the tension between a writing style seeking perceptual immediacy and authenticity—attuned to the material world and the substance of history—and its inevitable lapse into rhetorical mediation, unkindness and falsehood ("it failed *of course*" [my emphasis]). In so doing, his account aligns with Neil Pattison's reading of *The English Intelligencer*'s 1968 dissolution not as "a defeat," but as the "alarming fulfilment" of its aims, with the project "[achieving] its purpose in self-sabotage."[2]

Reading Riley's poetry from the *Intelligencer* era against these later reflections illuminates a particular perspective on the exhaustion of Olson's poetics by a cluster of poets commonly understood as his primary inheritors in Britain. This chapter attends to the specifics of that exhaustion by focussing on the writing produced by Riley, the *Intelligencer*'s second editor, during the worksheet's run and immediately after its dissolution. I demonstrate that Riley's poetry during the *Intelligencer*'s run increasingly recognises the untenability of the forms of perception that the worksheet initially aspired to. He moves from an idealised conception of perceptual contact with the world towards a presentation of perception as inherently mediated and removed from the sensuous details of reality. A full examination of *The English Intelligencer*'s poetic and bibliographic history is outside of the scope of this

[2] Neil Pattison, "Introduction: 'All Flags Left Outside'" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, p.x.

discussion: indeed, studies such as Alex Latter's *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer and Joseph Pizza's "Continental Drift: Charles Olson and *The English Intelligencer*" have already undertaken such work.[3] Nonetheless, some of the bibliographic, institutional and prosodic contexts of the worksheet will need to be established, as Riley's writing was deeply intertwined with its trajectory. Alex Latter observes that, in the *Intelligencer*, "meaning […] inhered […] in the recognition of the special resonances of certain load-bearing words or tropes."[4] Riley's early poetry reflects this: often, meaning inheres in an individual poem's capacity to 'take the temperature' of the intellectual climate of the worksheet and the surrounding community at the time of its writing. In order to trace the shift that occurs in this early body of work—from "a textuality which comprehended geophysical and historical realities" and "'[recaptured] mythic cohesion'" towards a jaded poetics emphasising abstraction, the untenability of an 'originary position' and the collapse of projective prosody—this chapter will place Riley's poetry into dialogue with his own prose contributions to the *Intelligencer*, his public and private correspondence with J. H. Prynne and other *Intelligencer* contributors and a number of key literary-historical events that contributed to the worksheet's dissolution in 1968.

Riley was a member of the *Intelligencer* community from the worksheet's inception, contributing several prose pieces and poems to its first run (edited by Andrew Crozier), before taking over as editor for the second series. David H. W. Grubb writes that the *Intelligencer* sought to develop "interactive positions through sustained critical debate […], through a sense of continuity and fraternal/sororal endeavour".[5] Its circulation was deliberately restricted, facilitating its self-presentation as a closed system in which meaning accrued iteratively across poems, as well as through essays, commentaries and open letters, which were presented alongside verse so as to challenge conventional distinctions between poetry and critical and exegetical prose. Pattison summarises the project as follows:

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[3] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer. Joseph Pizza, "Continental Drift: Charles Olson and *The English Intelligencer*" in *Contemporary Literature*, 59:3 (2018), pp.277-307.
[4] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.161.
[5] David H. W. Grubb, "At the Edge of Everyday Reality" in *Contemporary Views on the Little Magazine Scene*, ed. Wolfgang Görtschacher (Salzburg: Poetry Salzburg, 2000), pp.558–588 (p.573).

> the *Intelligencer* made a virtue of speed and disposability, conceiving of itself not as a print magazine, but as another kind of cultural domain, one more accommodating of error, deviation and internal dispute, than was usual in a traditionally curated poetry journal […]
>
> It was not enough to be a poet, or to want to be thought of as a poet […] to be admitted into [the *Intelligencer*'s] circle. Nor was it enough simply to demonstrate aptitude in a house style or allegiance to a clearly announced set of aesthetic or political doctrines. Their loyalties, if they can be so called, were to possibilities lying in promise just beyond the reach of their present vantage […] [T]he *Intelligencer* group worked to establish a radically critical discourse internally, and exploratory curiosity externally. Their conversation was disputational and controversial; and if at times rebarbative, it should be remembered that much was at stake for these poets in that process. Collective action, rather than individual pioneering, was for them the only conceivable means of advance, and questions not only of the nature of that collective action, but of the nature of the constitution of that collective, became consequentially paramount.[6]

Riley's inaugural editorial "Announcement" affirmed his ambition to continue the "exploratory curiosity" initiated by Crozier. It also establishes the terms to which his early poetry aspired, and which were subverted as interventions in the *Intelligencer*'s critical debate further shaped its "collective action" and "the constitution of [its] collective" began to change. Riley states his intention to produce and solicit work to rival "what we've seen achieved in America recently […] — the poem: Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range".[7] This deference to Olson's projective verse—with its stress on the facticity of the body as the primary locus for attending to and experiencing the world—underscored the *Intelligencer*'s aesthetic priorities at this early moment. To elucidate the extent of this deference, this chapter will place Riley's formulation of "Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range" into dialogue with prose and poems by Olson and Ed Dorn, illuminating how Riley's earliest attempts to encode perception into poetry emphasise phenomenological meaning as the product of the sensuous engagement of the body with the environing world.

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[6] Pattison, "Introduction: 'All Flags Left Outside'", pp.i-iii.

[7] Peter Riley, "Announcement" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.95-97 (p.95). Original emphasis.

Riley goes on to state that the ideal *Intelligencer* poem would "[avoid] […] given English/symbolic/closed modes of significance", and be "anti-rhetorical, rhythmically alive, literal, objective".[8] It would also "search for/towards an original (?primary) condition", echoing Olson's claim in his 1965 seminar "The Archaeology of Morning" that "the First, the originary, is always the most advanced".[9] Riley, inspired by Olson's synthetic and idiosyncratic interpretations of history, posited that Palaeolithic and Neolithic man apparently co-existed in mutual interdependence with the human and the nonhuman world. As he puts it in the "Announcement", "you do not exist in complete privacy", and "the body is no longer [to be] seen as an isolated entity but as sharing in a community of flesh", with "valleys mountains trees not wholly interior or ex-[terior]" to it.[10] Riley's utopian mode of perception envisions the other not as someone or something whose existence is contingent on the perceiver's ability to perceive them, but as an object co-existing with the self in the same intersubjective field, united through the common locus of "Physiological Presence". Crucially, however, the other is always disclosed to the perceiver *through* perception.

As the critical debate which shaped the *Intelligencer*'s work developed, the claims Riley made in the "Announcement" for this model of perception—and a prosody which could sustain it—were tested. Part I of this chapter examines Riley's "The Antiquary", an early contribution to the worksheet that initiated a career-long private correspondence with Prynne. I begin by reading the poem on Riley's own terms, as a counter-example or "failed attempt" of the poetic model he argued for in the "Announcement", and thus a confirmation of the thesis contained therein.[11] I go on to demonstrate that the poem ultimately subverts the idealised form of perception it purports to encode. The poem insists that phenomenological perception of its subject (a statuette) cannot escape being abstracted into knowledge which is structured and foreclosed by the historical and institutional contexts of the poem's speaker, an antiquary writing up his research findings. Riley also renders the distinction between direct perception

[8] *ibid*.
[9] *ibid*, p.96. Jack Clarke, "The Archaeology of Morning: Causal and Applied", lecture ("Mythology Seminar") by Charles Olson (SUNY Buffalo, 1965), n.p.
[10] Riley, "Announcement", p.96.
[11] Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 2nd September 1966, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268. JHPP.

and mediated knowledge prosodically. He never allows the poem to become fully "anti-rhetorical, rhythmically alive, literal, objective", instead letting it revert to the "given English/symbolic/closed modes of significance" which keep "The Antiquary" tethered to the same prosodic tradition that the *Intelligencer* elsewhere argued it sought to evade.[12]

Part II develops the account of Riley's pursuit of an 'originary' basis for perception, by reading the 1967 poems "Introitus" and "From Romney Marsh" against his major prose contribution to the *Intelligencer*, the "Working Notes on British Prehistory or Archaeological Guesswork One", as well as his hitherto unstudied research into Neolithic British culture. Riley's idiosyncratic archaeological work aimed to confirm a model of perception where the self extends into the world and the world extends into the self. This model presents the body as existing in an intersubjective field, "sharing in a community of flesh", with "valleys mountains trees not wholly interior or ex-[terior]" to it. I place Riley's claims that this model of perception could be recaptured through a sub-Olsonian prosody into dialogue with Prynne's responses to them: most notably, the "Note on Metal", which argues that abstraction away from an 'originary condition' is inevitable and may not even be the catastrophic process Riley's sentimentalising and appropriative account frames it to be. In Part III, I trace a shift in Riley's attitude towards Olson's mythopoetic pronouncements in his correspondence with Prynne after the publication of "Note on Metal", from the easy acceptance which characterised the "Working Notes" and their attendant poems, to a thoroughgoing scepticism about recuperating the innocent and "advanced" perceptual faculties of prehistoric man.[13] I read this progression against a number of pressure points in the *Intelligencer*'s later social, bibliographic and intellectual history: namely, Olson's disastrous tour of Britain in late 1966 and the collapse of his friendship with Prynne, the Sparty Lea Poetry Festival of 1967—the only formal meeting of the *Intelligencer* cohort—and the perceived decline in Riley's editorial standards which led to his ousting by Prynne, Andrew Crozier and John James in 1967, as well as the worksheet's collapse the following year.

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[12] *ibid*.

[13] Clarke, "The Archaeology of Morning", n.p.

Part IV examines *The Linear Journal* (1973), Riley's first long sequence after the *Intelligencer*'s dissolution. Latter observes that "poetry written after the *Intelligencer* [...] is shaped by the fault line that the *Intelligencer*'s dissolution had exposed in Olsonian late modernism" and that "the longer poetic sequences that were written in the wake of the *Intelligencer*'s dissolution were obliged to do without [the] substrate [of special load-bearing words or tropes]".[14] In this light, I read *The Linear Journal* as Riley's first reflection on the fate of the project, paying particular attention to its reflections on the impossibility of the forms of perception extolled by its author in the *Intelligencer*. The sequence actively subverts the archaeological tropes once used by Olson, Dorn and Riley himself to explore the potential for phenomenological engagement with the world, as activated through the remnants of the Neolithic and Palaeolithic past. It also pastiches the sub-Poundian poet as a consciousness only capable of assimilating perceptual material according to a predetermined paradigm: as such, I argue that *The Linear Journal* circles back to the 'negative' presentation of the perceiving subject given in "The Antiquary", this time more strongly emphasising that this condition is inevitable. Riley's later poetic speakers are unable to sustain the forms of perceptual extension imagined in the *Intelligencer*. Instead, they accept that the world resists the extraction of 'meaning' altogether.

Overall, the chapter traces Riley's poetic development during the *Intelligencer*'s run and in the years after its cessation to illustrate the exhaustion of a specific way of reading and idolising Olson among British poets. Though the poets who read and contributed to the *Intelligencer* have a shared history, insofar as they were all shaped by the collapse of the worksheet and the dissolution of the community which coalesced around it, I do not treat Riley's development as a synecdoche for the development of a diverse group of poets with varied styles and interests. Riley is my focus here because his pursuit of an Olsonian ideal, and subsequent disillusionment with it, is especially stark among the *Intelligencer* cohort. Moreover, the specific terms of the fallout he experienced remain hitherto unstudied (unlike,

[14] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.161. The argument that sequences written by former *Intelligencer* contributors continually reflected on the breakdown of the worksheet and its community is also central to Simon Perril, "Trappings of the Hart: *Reader* and the Ballad of *The English Intelligencer*" in Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Poetry of Peter Riley, The Gig* 4/5 (November 1999/March 2000), pp.196-218.

for example, Prynne's rejection of Olson, which is a central theme of chapter three of Latter's *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, and, more recently, John Wilkinson's "J. H. Prynne's Twist on Charles Olson").[15] Bringing close readings of Riley's poetry into dialogue with the contours of the social, intellectual and bibliographic history of the *Intelligencer*, as well as the shifting relations between the worksheet's cohort and their American precedents, the chapter establishes the terms for an intellectual disavowal of Olson's methodology, on the basis of its perceived tendency to assimilate perceptual, historical and cultural materials according to a totalising and essentialising worldview. Riley's rejoinder to Olson's sentimental pronouncements—his insistence that there can be no such originary basis for perception, because we are always-already displaced from the world we are perceiving—establishes key terms that the thesis will draw upon in subsequent chapters. Riley's particular twist on the New American Poetry emerges as paradigmatic for other poets of his generation.

I – "The Antiquary"'s 'counter-example'

If Riley's "Announcement" affirmed that his early poetry would situate the perceiving subject among "valleys mountains trees", in an intersubjective field shaped by the kinaesthetic movement of both the body and the prosody attending it, it is peculiar that his first major contribution to the *Intelligencer* focusses on insular sedentariness.[16] The poem's sedentariness is in part bodily, but also involves a narrowing of the phenomenological potential of perception (as it was received from Olson) and a refusal to fully commit to the formal extensions of projective verse. "The Antiquary" stages the abstraction of the embodied, emplaced perception prized by the *Intelligencer* community into knowledge dictated by historical and material conditions: in this case, the conditions of the twentieth-century British university, or the independent scholar preparing a research paper. As Daniel Eltringham puts it in a recent summary, Riley's poem "[parodies] the researcher-poet" by introducing a speaker

[15] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, pp.85-122. John Wilkinson, "J. H. Prynne's Twist on Charles Olson" in *Evaluations of US Poetry since 1950*, vol. i, ed. by Robert Faggen and Robert van Hallberg (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2021), pp.129-156.
[16] Riley, "Announcement", p.96.

"too buried in a purely intellectual knowledge of the terrain to look up from the map and pay attention to the environment and the relations that environ the walking body."[17] From the outset, the poem's torque between book-learning and active, sensuous engagement with the world betrays a centuries-old preoccupation which reaches back at least to English Romanticism: we might think of Wordsworth's "The Tables Turned", with its admonition for Matthew to "quit [his] books" and "[l]et Nature be [his] teacher."[18] Riley's first significant contribution to the *Intelligencer*, by being so closely tied to established English lyric tropes, signals a Wordsworthian inheritance which collapses any straightforward sense of the poem as an Olsonian pastiche.

First appearing in the initial run of *The English Intelligencer* (1966), and reprinted in the second run of Andrew Crozier's *The Wivenhoe Park Review* (1967), Riley's poem refracts this Wordsworthian torque into a sub-Olsonian domain by contrasting two forms of archaeological research: one predicated on hunting among stones in the open field, and another focussed on converting excavated material into book-learning, to be encountered in the library. Through a reading of "The Antiquary", this section establishes this tension as foundational to the arc of Riley's poetry during and after *Intelligencer*'s lifespan. Specifically, I examine the poem's tacit acknowledgement that the historicity of the speaker's existence continually mediates his perception of and encounter with the environing world, particularly the remnants of the Palaeolithic world allegedly immanently available to Olson and Ed Dorn. I focus on Riley's decision to leave the poem prosodically 'unresolved', caught between the projective mode he inherited from Olson and a mode he characterised in contemporary correspondence as 'English' (of which the Wordsworthian torque which animates it is a significant part).

The aforementioned tension between archaeological methods is manifest from the poem's opening:

> One word
> on a piece
> of white paper, very

[17] Daniel Eltringham, *Poetry & Commons: Postwar and Romantic Lyric in Times of Enclosure* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), p.83.
[18] William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford UP, 1969), p.377.

carefully, Antiquary, with
little ornamental diddles on the capital
A
and curling the stroke of y.
I begin to forget my subject. She came
from Iberia and before that
somewhere in the Near East. I stood
before her two great eyes trying to think
(had heartburn something terrible) …
This wooden library chair
hurts my limbs. The staff know me –
I sit always
in the same place.
I wish to present a report, so,
quickly, to be rid of it, for all …[19]

As Eltringham observes, "[t]he library here is a cerebral displacement from the excavation of the earth that marks the distance between the landscape poet and the working landscape."[20] To this I would add that it is a space defined through stagnation and routine: the antiquary sits "always | in the same place" among the bookshelves, while the sensations of the field research he has forgone (catalogued later in the poem as "the SMELL of the wind tearing | [his] rags […] | […] the hiss in the | turf, the murmur of | water […] | the distances moving round [him]") are bathetically undercut by the pains of sedentary deskwork in a claustrophobic space, such as discomfort from the too-small "wooden library chair" and "heartburn something terrible". The antiquary's hunt for his subject, a statuette of a "goddess worshipped once | in Malta, Sicily, the coloured places | then France, and everywhere in | different shapes", subordinates the primary encounter with the material traces of the past to secondary research conducted "in books". This is motivated by a desire "to present a report, so, | quickly, to be rid of it".

The antiquarian's quest for academic kudos forecloses the possibility of phenomenological engagement with the statuette, whose sensuous details are "[forgotten]" in the rush to process it and make it conform to a predetermined hypothesis or paradigm:

[19] Peter Riley, "The Antiquary" in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268. JHPP.
[20] Eltringham, *Poetry & Commons*, p.77.

I read each night, studied
her shape in Corsica
with the makers of the
great round towers. I felt obliged
to force some relevance out of this
assemblage of museum
pieces so I made (already thus
forsaking my vocation)
a fancy out of my studies.
I saw it this way: […][21]

His enquiry is founded on intellectual solipsism: he starts by making the available evidence cohere to how he "[sees] it", and he "[forces] some relevance" from the resources he has to hand. "The Antiquary" is significant because its publication in *The English Intelligencer* precipitated a correspondence with J. H. Prynne which outlasted the course of the worksheet's publication, and which continually crossed from 'public' exchange in the *Intelligencer*'s sheets to private communication between the two poets. In Riley's first letter to Prynne (a response to the latter's compliments and criticisms of "The Antiquary"), he explains that he sees,

> The Antiquary as a demonstration. Not just the theories themselves as of value, but making the attempt, the struggle to catch a glimpse of how the land arrived at what it is. And you don't do this by reading books about British prehistory, though this can help, but mainly by refusing the specialisation pressed upon us by the Socialist/Scientific egocentric set-up, and instead ranging over the whole field from the domestic outwards, sending out feelers […]
>
> In The Antiquary I tried this by a reverse process—by showing a failed attempt. The man thought he could justify himself and his position by working within one field only, and trying to bring that to the now by an applied myth-making on scanty evidence […]
>
> By aiming at no centre by any indirect route I was thinking of this business of specialisation, the aggrandisement of self by glory within constriction. The centre is a mistake if it is envisaged from the start, the indirectness comes from the constriction. I don't mean we shouldn't think in terms of a centre at all, we can do, but one doesn't aim oneself—nothing so conscious.[22]

[21] Riley, "The Antiquary". JHPP.

[22] Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 2nd September 1966, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268. JHPP.

By focussing on the dangers of "specialisation, the aggrandisement of self by glory within constriction", "The Antiquary" presents a counter-example or "failed attempt" which works against an intellectual, ethical and prosodic scheme that Riley deems essential to understanding "how the land arrived at what it is". In his editorial "Announcement", Riley had stated that the objective of the worksheet was to solicit and publish work that was "not only archaeological" but "anthropological, etymological, economic, medical [...]; geological, astronomical, musical", because "with the degrees of specialisation we're now faced with, one man's achieved knowledge is barely enough to work on".[23] Riley's aspirations towards the possible reintegration of science and art, fact and song, clearly echo Olson's attempted reintegration of *muthos* (myth) and *logos* (history) in *Maximus*.[24] This approach forms the basis of the *Intelligencer*'s intellectual and poetic endeavour: collapsing distinctions between prose essay and poetry, expanding the scope of what kind of material was deemed 'poetic' and encouraging critical and exegetical dialogue through the exchange of open letters. In the context of "The Antiquary", Riley writes to Prynne that neither the titular subject's intellectual enquiry, nor the details of his "physical life", are "complete in itself" (sic): in Riley's scheme, the details of the antiquary's ego and his mundane, day-to-day experience must be collapsed to

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[23] Riley, "Announcement", p.96.

[24] Olson laments the separating out of *muthos* and *logos* in Hellenic thought throughout *Maximus*. A key example comes from "Letter 23":

> *muthologos* has lost such ground since Pindar
>
> The odish man sd: 'Poesy
> steals away men's judgement
> by her *muthoi* (taking this crack
> at Homer's sweet-versing)
>
> ... Plato
>
> allowed this divisive
> thought to stand, agreeing
>
> that *muthos*
> is false. *Logos*
> isn't—was facts.

Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. by George F. Butterick (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp.104-105.

produce combined poetic and phenomenological perception, wherein thinking occurs as much in the body as it does in the mind.

In this way, "The Antiquary" can be read as a response to a specific approach to archaeology derived from the Black Mountain poets. Early in *The Mayan Letters*, a text Riley and Prynne repeatedly invoke in their correspondence, Olson writes to Robert Creeley that his study of the Yucatán landscape and its interrelation with Mayan cultural forms is predicated on physical contact with his subjects and supposedly unmediated access to them:

> I have been in the field, away from people, working around stones in the sun, putting my hands in to the dust and fragments and pieces of those Maya who used to live here down and along this road.
>
> And the joy is, the whole area within the easiest walking distance is covered with their leavings: I already have in front of me as I write to you the upper half of an owl idol's (?) head, which I picked up on a farm five minutes from the house! […]
>
> The big thing, tho, is the solidity of the sense of their lives one can get right here in the fields and on the hill which rises quite steeply from the shore.[25]

Olson's archaeological method emphasises haptic contact with the concrete remains of a past culture as a means of enriching his understanding of it. This is a clear manifestation of Olson's reading of Herodotus's concept of *istorin* as direct, experiential immersion in the world and contact with it ("a finding out for him or her | self"), examined in this thesis's Introduction.[26] Further on in the above letter, Olson derides conventional academic archaeology for "intellectual carelessness", "missing the job" and for "playing some state & low professional game"—precisely the behaviours embodied by Riley's antiquary. In contrast to the compressed limbs of Riley's deskbound speaker, note the insistence on movement and physical ease in the passage quoted above: Olson finds interest "within the easiest walking distance", "five minutes from the house". In the actual, embodied moment of his writing to Creeley, we imagine he has only to cock his head a little to describe the idol's head "in front of [him]".

Olson's claim that this archaeological mode (and the form of perception underscoring it) gives a greater sense of "the solidity of […] [life]" is further developed by Ed Dorn, who, in

[25] Olson, *The Mayan Letters*, pp.13-14.
[26] Olson, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*, n.p.

"The Song" from 1961's *The Newly Fallen*, connects a Neolithic statuette with a feminised holism—one that, according to Dorn's problematic logic, is inherently procreative:

> […] Concerning love
> the first trace that slips to the ground
> leaving all space above, into which one can enter
> was mother? Lespuge [sic] is a figure
> of dreamed wholeness, the form
> is born of that desire
> the whole swelling difficulty.[27]

Here, the Venus of Lespugue (discovered in the Pyrénées in 1922) is read as simultaneously "whole" and "swelling", a description which suggests sensual contact with the figurine while also, as Reitha Pattison argues in her commentary on the poem, "[disclosing] the desire for boundedness and completion", implying, by way of the maternal imagery, "a body (within a body) in a state of growth".[28] Dorn's poem, by leaning heavily into the connections it draws between the fertility goddess, its pregnancy, "difficulty" and "wholeness", links the statuette with a phenomenological meaning that is generated by and self-revealed in the worked surface of the ivory.

The potential meaning embedded in the encounter with archaeological material in Riley and Dorn's poems and Olson's letters recalls Heidegger's distinction between a form of perception which takes objects as ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*) and one which takes them as present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*). Heidegger articulates this distinction in *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, using the example of a lectern:

> Coming into the lecture-room, I see the lectern […] What do "I" see? Brown surfaces, at right angles to one another? No, I see something else. A largish box, with another smaller one set upon it? Not at all. I see the lectern at which I am to speak. You see the lectern, from which you are to be addressed, and from which I have spoken to you previously […] there is no "founding" interconnection, as if I first of all see intersecting brown surfaces, which then reveal themselves to me as a box, then as a desk, then as an academic lecturing desk, a lectern, so that I attach lecternhood to the box like a label. All that is simply bad and misguided interpretation, diversion from a pure seeing into the

[27] Ed Dorn, *The Newly Fallen* (New York: Totem, 1961), p.11.
[28] Reitha Pattison, "'A Different Object': Space and Place in the Early Poetry of Edward Dorn, 1961-65" in *English*, 59:226 (2010), pp.244-263 (p.246).

> experience […] the meaningful is primary and immediately given to
> me without any mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension.[29]

Although Olson and Dorn do not have the same everyday experiential contact with the statuettes and idols they write on as Heidegger's students have with the lectern (the statuettes and idols do not constitute part of what Heidegger would call their *average everyday* experience), they still emphasise a mode of attention that sees these objects as ready-to-hand: primarily "meaningful" and "immediately given […] without any mental detours". In this framework, an object's meaning is apprehended *before* its ontic characteristics (in the case of the lectern, these ontic characteristics would be its "intersecting brown surfaces" and box-like qualities). This allows Olson to (apparently) grasp the "solidity" of Mayan culture from an "owl idol's […] head", and Dorn to read the Venus of Lespugue as "a figure | of dreamed wholeness". Conversely, Riley's antiquary, confined by his "specialisation", perceives his figurine, and the landscape it is connected to, as present-at-hand, breaking them down into fragmentary ontic details to which meaning is subjugated:

> They had no language, the first settlers
> on this island, no
> written language. How could I speak
> to, what learn [sic] from
> a past deaf and dumb?
> Their stones told me nothing. They patterned stones
> all over the moors in great
> circles and alignments, why I neither
> know nor care, except I suppose
> it was for her sake […][30]

Rather than finding meaning immanent and self-revealed in the "damp cave" housing the statuette, the antiquary finds only disjointed, illegible details: "a zig-zag, | rows of lines and dots, | spirals, | various unfamiliar shapes, | cavities, and her eyes".[31] Riley's truncated lines

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[29] Martin Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. by Ted Sadler (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), pp.59-61.
[30] Riley, "The Antiquary". JHPP.
[31] *ibid.*

hold each of the perceptual details apart, refusing to let them cohere into the "dreamed wholeness" Dorn's poem celebrates. Where Dorn's "The Song" and Olson's *Mayan Letters* promote a form of perception that sees historical material as freely available for use, "The Antiquary"—by focussing on the mediation of archaeological material through a researcher whose engagement with the past is thwarted by his own historicity—stages Heidegger's claim in *Being and Time* that "our going back to 'the past' does not first get its start from the acquisition, sifting and securing of such material; these activities […] presuppose the historicality of the historian's existence".[32]

Riley comments on an important prosodic aspect of "The Antiquary" in a letter to Prynne:

> The Antiquary, you see, began life a number of years ago as a Browning/Prufrock anti-heroic monologue or something like that. Since then I've been trying thru a number of revision to make it into something else, something more relevant. Hence it is fluid—it stands between two modes, establishing its figures in one way but undermining them in another […]
>
> For me this is only a first faltering attempt to explore the possibilities of England as a subject. I hadn't before seen myself as part of the country, or formed by it. There are so many possible approaches to this, what you'd call the shaping of the here and now […] I'm working at present, you know, on T. F. Powys, and I find the way he points back from his corner of Dorset through Bunyan & the Bible to the Mediaeval Moralities and beyond, vaguely, to the pagan, by no means irrelevant […][33]

Riley sees "The Antiquary" as, in part, "a first faltering attempt" at exploring how the self emerges from and is "formed by" the nation: not civically, nor according to some restricted legal fiction of statehood, but prosodically. As the invocation of Powys illustrates, Riley is motivated by the ways in which his attention to "the here and now" is modulated by a distinctly British literary and cultural past, and how this comes to bear on a form of writing still so deferential to the New American Poetry. This concern is central to the work Riley produced after the dissolution of *The English Intelligencer*. It is also central to this thesis's

[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.446.

[33] Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 2nd September 1966. JHPP.

discussion of both R. F. Langley and J. H. Prynne. For now, however, it is worth examining "The Antiquary" in light of the compositional history sketched by Riley to Prynne.

Alex Latter counts "The Antiquary" alongside Prynne's "Aristeas, in Seven Years" as a "[poem] [...] printed in the *Intelligencer* [that] explored the possibilities of the longer form in an Olsonian manner", but which does not "[assume] the full extension of the open-ended work as it was realised in works such as *Maximus*."[34] He does not, however, specify *how* Riley's poem resists the "full extension" of its open field precedents. Reading "The Antiquary" back into Riley and Prynne's correspondence illuminates that the poem emerged from an *ur*-text which Riley could not fully excise from the final version: "a Browning/Prufrock anti-heroic monologue or something like that." By retaining elements of this *ur*-text, which is formally at odds with a sub-Olsonian mode predicated on "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego", Riley allows "The Antiquary" to "[undermine]" itself continually.[35] This technique implies the impossibility of fully eradicating the ego or the lyric subjectivity in the poetic act of perception.

Dorn's "The Song" completely dissolves the lyric 'I' when the Venus of Lespugue is explicitly named at line 31, though it gestures to that dissolution much earlier, in the third stanza, where the "[s]he" and "I" which open the poem dilate into the shared subjectivity implied by "[o]ur".[36] "The Antiquary", by contrast, repeatedly undercuts its pretensions to an Olsonian "objectism" which conceptualises the self as an object in a non-hierarchical, intersubjective field, through Riley's Browning- or Prufrock-esque bathos:

> I was as a
> child a
> fraid
> of the dark
> but huddled under
> the sheets had an el
> ectric torch and
> snug there
> read or
> played with my

[34] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.160.
[35] Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.156.
[36] Dorn, *The Newly Fallen*, p.11.

sex
whichever
till I
slept.[37]

Such non-sequiturs repeatedly interrupt the speaker's meditation on the statuette. By emphasising a form of bodily facticity couched in the first-person singular—be this in the form of the antiquary's onanistic reminiscences, or the physical pains brought on by his deskwork—and situating this facticity in truncated lines which are denied the expanse of projective verse, Riley uses bathos to insist on the distracting presence of a diminished and parochial ego. This ego cheapens and interferes with the encounter with the subject, rather than enriching it through the sensual, Heideggerian perception of Olson and Dorn. Riley's bathos here enacts the "mental detours across thing-oriented apprehension" that Heidegger argues block a stance towards the world which takes it as ready-to-hand.[38] Any sublime wonder or fear implicit in the antiquary's childhood "[fear] | of the dark" is also abruptly undercut.

As the accompanying letter to Prynne makes clear, Riley located this prosodic template for the ego's disruption of an object-oriented attention to the world in earlier forms of modernist personae (like Eliot's Prufrock or Pound's Cino, for example) and in English dramatic monologue. These poetic templates intrinsically facilitate the subject's betrayal of the desires, beliefs and biases which inflect and modulate their perception through their speech. In Robert Browning's 1842 monologue "My Last Duchess", the Duke of Ferrara's address to the reader discloses both his diminished ego and distorted sense of possession over his (painted) wife. Unveiling the portrait to the reader/viewer, he speaks of,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they [other viewers] turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

[37] Riley, "The Antiquary". JHPP.
[38] Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, p.61.

> Frà Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
> "Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
> "Must never hope to reproduce the faint
> "Half-flush that dies along her throat;" such stuff
> Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
> For calling up that spot of joy.[39]

The extrinsic, formal qualities of the dead Duchess's portrait—Frà Pandolf's choice to paint her with a "spot | [o]f joy" on her cheek—are read by the insecure and controlling Duke as signs of her receptiveness to being flirted with by other men. Like Riley's antiquary, who "[feels] obliged | to force some relevance out of this | assemblage of museum | pieces", he projects a scheme of solipsistic meaning onto the art object. Both Riley and Browning's speakers, through the disclosure inherent in the dramatic monologue form, cannot avoid revealing to the reader the subjective biases and preoccupations which structure their perceptions.

Riley ascribes the failure of Olsonian objectism in "The Antiquary" to his own conscious refusal to integrate the parts of the poem which adumbrate the antiquary's research into the statuette with the parts containing the Browningesque "anti-heroic monologue". In his first letter to Prynne, he writes that he "didn't intend any correspondence—either causal or metaphoric—between these fragments of [the antiquary's] physical life and his work."[40] The result is a poem divided against itself, separating out the potential for direct perception and the antiquary's perceptual failures prosodically (through the lack of integration between the poem's projective verse and its bathetic dramatic monologue) as well as epistemologically. Riley is here resisting the same phenomenological potentials for poetry he made claims for in the "Announcement", instead tacitly signalling that this writing may not be able to escape the "given English/symbolic/closed modes of significance" which would apparently mediate its authentic relationship to perception and experience.[41] Or, perhaps more properly, "The Antiquary" shows Riley demonstrating what he described in 1967—with reference to

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[39] Robert Browning, *Selected Poems*, ed. by John Woolford, Danny Karlin & Joseph Phelan (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), pp.198-199.
[40] Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 2nd September 1966. JHPP.
[41] Riley, "Announcement", p.95.

Browning (among others)—as "the advantages we can bring to that one-eyed American thrust [...] music: [...] the meditative strength that has long flourished here [...], a strength born in stasis, and dangerous for that, but which can take in the full force of movement".[42] "The Antiquary" reveals, at a very early stage in his career, Riley's interest in revealing how the internalising and mediating subjectivity of a dramatic monologue-like speaker can be an essential component of the processes of perception. Riley's growing resignation to poetry's mediated relationship with the world, as shaped by the *Intelligencer*'s bibliographic and intellectual history, is precisely what will be explored across the remainder of this chapter.

II – "The flesh is full | of what there is | there/then": Riley's phenomenological and Neolithic attentions

In its interrogation of "the historicality of the historian's existence" and the potential for historically and materially situated knowledge to intervene in and mediate the moment of perception, "The Antiquary" offers a more sophisticated revision of Olson's poetics than much of Riley's other writing from the 1960s, including many of his other contributions to the *Intelligencer*.[43] By situating Riley's early writing in relation to its philosophical and archaeological sources, this section develops a picture of that writing's dominant character, beginning with the sentimental and utopian claims for an intersubjective mode of perception predicated on an idiosyncratic reading of ancient history in the poems "Introitus" and "From Romney Marsh" and his prose essay, "Working Notes on British Prehistory" (all 1967), through to the more nuanced presentation exemplified by "The Antiquary". Given the importance of J. H. Prynne's interventions to Riley's thinking on this matter, the section will close with an extended reading of Prynne's responses to Riley's "Working Notes"—namely, his letter of 14 February 1967 and the "Note on Metal"—in order to demonstrate the extent to which these interventions shaped Riley's own rejoinders to Olson's poetics discussed in Part III.

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[42] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Notes 2 – Migration and circle", 19 April 1967. JHPP.
[43] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.446.

"Introitus", a poem which did not appear in the *Intelligencer*, but which Riley sent to Prynne on 13 April 1967, posits an engagement with the Hastings coastline in which meaning is self-revealed and intuitively accessible to the poetic subject:

> How it begins:
> it begins with me
> walking along the shore at Hastings
> just short of the surf line, on shingle.
>
> To walk effectively on shingle you have to
> lean forwards so you'd fall if you didn't push
> your feet back from a firm step down and
> back sharp forcing the separate ground
> to consolidate underneath you, with a marked
> flip as you lift each foot, scattering
> stones behind, gaining momentum [...]
>
> That action, lifting the head,
> the skin of the throat unfolding,
> air reaching the upper chest
> gazing out in no particular direction—
> position of receptiveness:
> each sense prepared to act, the body
> hearkens—the mind is alerted [...]
>
> The flesh is full
> of what there is
> there / then,
> has that, offers
> back self, is one
> of all that.
>
> I lean again and
> press the stones, bend
> homeward, for the door
> into what comes
> to bring it further.[44]

[44] Riley, *Collected Poems*, vol. i, pp.45-46. Also, Riley, "Introitus" (letter to Prynne, 13 April 1967) in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268. JHPP.

In the letter to Prynne accompanying the draft of "Introitus", Riley writes that he had "attacked U[niversity] of Sussex library" the preceding week, with Prynne's reading recommendations in hand, "and managed to get several relevant things—Eliade's Myth of Eternal Return [sic], Mirleau-Ponty [sic], some Whitehead, Jung (for […] dream poems) etc".[45] Prynne had specifically recommended Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return* and Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* to Riley on 3 April 1967, and, though it is impossible to say if these texts influenced the composition of "Introitus", the poem's emphasis on the speaker's phenomenological emplacement in the landscape—and the way in which the landscape is disclosed to the speaker in sensuous detail—recalls many of Merleau-Ponty's formulations in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Describing perception as a form of reciprocity, wherein the perceiver and the perceived meet in a moment of mutual exchange, Merleau-Ponty writes that,

> [t]he sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky I am not set over against it as an acosmic subject; I do not possess it in thought, or spread out towards it some idea of blue such as might reveal the secret of it, I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me', I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.[46]

By framing the speaker's body in a "position of receptiveness", "each sense prepared to act", "Introitus" suggests a porosity between self and world cognate with Merleau-Ponty's text. Riley's assertion that, on the Hastings coast, "[t]he flesh is full | of what there is | there / then", is redolent of Merleau-Ponty's argument that, in the act of perception, we "surrender a part of [the] body, even [the] whole body, to [a] particular manner of vibrating and filling space", or that, when we perceive an object, that object "'thinks itself within [us]'" and we "become [the object] itself".[47] Indeed, "flesh" is a keyword in Merleau-Ponty's thought, signifying our haptic

[45] Riley, letter to Prynne, 13 April 1967. JHPP.
[46] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.249.
[47] *ibid*, p.246.

interface with the world, the meeting point between the internal and the external.[48] For Riley, following Merleau-Ponty, the self is constituted through its sensuous, physiological interaction with the environing world, which is also mutually constituted by and "[consolidated] underneath" the perceiving subject. Moreover, as Riley's qualification that "[t]he flesh is full | of what there is | […] *then*" (my emphasis) suggests, the contingency of the self is as much temporal as it is spatial. Where "The Antiquary" framed sensation as a distraction from meaningful engagement with the poem's object, "Introitus" positions it as foundational to such engagement. Through its expository tone and second-person address ("[t]o walk effectively on shingle you have to | lean forwards so you'd | fall if you didn't push | your feet back"), the poem deconstructs the solipsism of "The Antiquary", gesturing outwards to an intersubjective field in which the "self, is one | of all that": "all that" here is not only the "you" appealed to in the poem, but the whole landscape in which the speaker is emplaced, where sea, rocks, self and gulls are all mutually interdependent.

With its emphasis on openings and "how it begins"—temporal, spatial and anatomical ('introitus' can mean prelude, but its Latin root also means entrance, door or the opening of an organ, like the speaker's "throat unfolding")—the poem reflects a concern central to the sub-Olsonian poetics of *The English Intelligencer*. Riley's exploration of beginnings, and his movement "homeward", are best understood in the context of his most significant prose contribution to the *Intelligencer*, his "Working Notes on British Prehistory or Archaeological Guesswork One". As Rupsa Banerjee argues, Riley's "Working Notes" "[try] to anchor communal history to a specific landmass" by tracing a continuum from the Mesolithic cultures of the British Isles to the moment of its writing, with the intent of recuperating an originary condition in which there was a direct continuity between the self and the world:[49]

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[48] See Merleau-Ponty on what he terms "the flesh of the world": "It is that the thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication … The thickness of the body, far from rivalling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and my making them flesh." In Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968), p.135.

[49] Rupsa Banerjee, "Locating the World in the Prose Poems of Peter Riley" in *Rethinking Place through Literary Form*, ed. by Rupsa Banerjee and Nathaniel Cadle (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp.251-275 (p.262).

> I feel all Neolithic properties to be bound in a sense of community which wasn't at all artificial or merely adequate to the technological needs, but was felt and informs every manifestation of the presence of these men. What, statistically, the Neolithic community was I don't know, or whether I should call it Tribe (by ancestry, election or whatever), but it was THERE. That the distinction between one man and the group was by no means a simple matter. So that the group could act as one man, and the things it left behind bear about them the features of having come from the human body.[50]

According to Riley, the fact that "[t]he Mesolithic is the ground we stand on" allows for a communality predicated on bodily facticity, wherein "the human flesh [is not] a personal and singular private possession, but something in its nature shared."[51] Riley's idiosyncratic history locates the collapse of this form of "community" in the advent of "Possession" and "property" at an unspecified point during the Neolithic Revolution ("about 1500 BC").[52] As Alex Latter writes, summarising the thrust of Riley's essay, "[t]he crux of this shift is the transition away from a collective, semi-nomadic existence in which the community extended itself into the landscape, to an individualised and acquisitive community."[53]

The shift from the individual-as-collective to the individual as an acquisitive and self-enclosed entity traced in the "Working Notes" is, according to Riley, intertwined with the displacement of value from being inherent in material forms to being arbitrarily determined through trade and mercantilism. Crucially, this abstraction is as much a perceptual and ethical shift as it is an economic one: it entails a tendency to instrumentalise what the other, rather than treating the other as coextensive with the self, as the Britons apparently did prior to the Neolithic Revolution. Using the example of communal burial in British Neolithic longhouses, Riley argues that "what's lived as entity is buried as entity, together as a feature of the landscape which itself shared in this communion. Making a continuity of this flesh over the past."[54]

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[50] Peter Riley, "Working Notes on British Prehistory or Archaeological Guesswork One" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.47-73 (p.51). Original emphasis.
[51] *ibid*, p.48, p.57. Original emphasis.
[52] *ibid*, p.51.
[53] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.72.
[54] Riley, "Working Notes on British Prehistory", p.57.

"Introitus" implicitly posits that the primary condition described in the "Working Notes" can be recovered through a prosody predicated on emplacement and embodiment: just as the self was apparently coextensive with the landscape in the Mesolithic, so too can Riley's speaker become "one | of all that" by becoming porous with the world through careful attention and a "position of receptiveness".[55] In another poem from 1967, "From Romney Marsh", Riley realises his claim that "[t]he Mesolithic is the ground we stand on" in concrete terms, situating his speaker on a "curve" which arcs across landmasses and which traces the alleged migratory pattern of the Celts from the Iberian Peninsula to the British Isles:

> I can't stop—that curve, where's its
> other end, it goes further back, where?
> to Ireland, beyond? Did I pull my own tail
> in Spain on a school trip in 1956?[56]

Though the curve from Spain "to Ireland, beyond" is infinitely recursive ("it goes further back, where?"), Riley preserves it as a historical movement of peoples which remains legible and ready-to-hand. Riley's speaker compresses the migratory patterns of the ancient Britons into the course of a single life, correlating Celtiberian origins "in Spain" with a childhood "school trip in 1956". In "From Romney Marsh" (as in the "Working Notes"), Riley is attempting to recapture a form of Britishness that is Brythonic or earlier, anterior to or entirely outside of the Wordsworthian and Browningesque tensions and lyrical structures which animated "The Antiquary". An essay entitled "Migration" sent to Prynne in March 1967 develops this process of recapturing the past further: "the objects exist and occur against each other and any kind of repetition is possible but no kind of repetition is absolute. The circle is year, wheel, round of seasons, but they do not return; they recurr [sic] as novelty each year. The position is never the same".[57] The past is recuperable because it exists in a dialectical relationship with the present, and an apparently prehistoric mode of perception must be reinvigorated to 'make it new' in the Poundian sense.

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[55] Riley, *Collected Poems*, vol. i, pp.45-46.
[56] Peter Riley, *Romney Marsh* (Cambridge: Ferry Press, 1967), n.p.
[57] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Migration", 28 March 1967, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 269. JHPP.

Riley expanded the theoretical basis for the prehistoric body's extension into landscape through further research into Neolithic British culture, mediated primarily by Alexander Thom's 1967 study *Megalithic Sites in Britain*. Thom's book surveys British Megalithic sites and argues that Neolithic Britons had been skilled astronomers and surveyors, showing that their henges and stone circles were constructed according to Thom's hypothetical unit of embodied measurement, the megalithic yard. "It is remarkable," writes Thom, "that 1000 years before the earliest mathematicians of classical Greece, people in these islands not only had a practical knowledge of geometry and were capable of setting out elaborate geometrical designs but could also set out ellipses based on Pythagorean triangles."[58] Crucially, Thom argues that these structures had an astronomical (time-keeping and calendrical) function, which was inextricably entwined with the positioning of the perceiving human body in the landscape. At Castlerigg, Keswick, for instance, Thom observes "four azimuths": "looking along [one of these] shows a declination very close to that of the upper limb of the midsummer sun."[59] The Megalithic calendar was apparently "a highly developed arrangement involving an exact knowledge of the length of the year", and Megalithic Britons "had set up many stations for observing the eighteen-year cycle of the revolution of the lunar nodes."[60] Riley was deeply influenced by *Megalithic Sites in Britain*, to the extent that he wrote a review of it which he sent to Ed Dorn. In that review, he outlines the cosmic significance of Thom's reckoning that the Megalithic Briton "takes his bearings from the distance-machine he has made, his song too, which is itself extension (or intention) from landscape & sky": "His movements are directed by the gods which are the Names of the Perceived Objects of Nature".[61] The prosodic implications of "song" illuminates Riley's conception of the poem or lyric utterance as something forged in the moment of perception, at the point at which the self extends into the world, and the world extends into the self.

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[58] Alexander Thom, *Megalithic Sites in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p.3.
[59] *ibid*, pp.145-146.
[60] *ibid*, p.3.
[61] Riley, "Book Review: A. Thom's *Megalithic Sites in Britain* Oxford University Press", sent to Ed Dorn, 1967, Correspondence with American poets, MS Add. 10013/2/54. PRP.

As Grubb observes, the *Intelligencer* sought to facilitate the development of "interactive positions through sustained critical debate (rather than short reviews), through a sense of continuity and fraternal/sororal endeavour".[62] Given this model of critical exchange and iterative development, it is unsurprising that Riley's naïve interpretations of the Neolithic British *Weltanschauung* elicited several responses. The most sustained interrogation of Riley's claims came from Prynne, whose responses included, as Latter enumerates, "one extended letter, an additional note, the essay 'A Note on Metal' and a poem, 'First Notes on Daylight'."[63] Prynne's responses to Riley—particularly the extended letter of 14 February 1967 and the "Note on Metal"—instigated a marked shift in both Riley's correspondence and his poetry, leading him to recognise the inevitable abstraction from direct perception, the untenability of an 'originary position', and the collapse of the projective prosodic foundations of his earlier writing.

In the letter of 14 February 1967, Prynne explicitly advocates against seeing the material and social conditions of the past as transplantable into the present without complications:

> I can't answer your argument about the damage done by Neolithic settlement, and even more by the metal-using cultures after this, since the changes seem to me not at all on the same scale. The nomadic was thin, and very pure, as you would expect of a hunting economy [...] But tillage is perhaps simply another pattern of persistence, the condition accruing by other means. Only the overbalance of technology is clearly the genetic breakdown, the specialisation of function leading to the economies of exchange. What went on before that I prize beyond measure, but I could not want it back or any version of cultural nostalgia. We <u>are</u> the prize of our own landscape condition, and our quality, now, is exactly that. Or at least, I think so, at the present time.[64]

As Latter writes, for Prynne, "[i]t is not that these prehistoric conditions represent an ontologically different conception of the world; rather, it is from these conditions—at countless removes—that modernity and the division of labour has arisen, and it is the proper

[62] Grubb, "At the Edge of Everyday Reality", p.573.
[63] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.72.
[64] J. H. Prynne, "14 February 1967" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.74-78 (pp.77-78).

work of the poet to pay attention to that."[65] Prynne tacitly emphasises the indivisibility of an individual *Weltanschauung* from the material, economic and social base from which it arises throughout the letter, in the connection he draws between nomadism's "[thinness]" and "[purity]" and its "hunting economy", and through the reflexive turn he takes at the end, in his acknowledgement that his argument is contingent on how he thinks "at the present time." He also gestures to the impossibility of a stable recreation of the Neolithic culture Riley is describing, since any adumbration of the past is always-already mediated by a historian who cannot step outside of her own historicity ("the changes seem *to me* not at all on the same scale" [my emphasis]).

In the "Note on Metal", Prynne offers his own idiosyncratic, materialist history of the abstraction of value from being inherent in 'substance' (chiefly, stone, whose "weight was the most specific carrier for the inherence of power") to its tokenisation in metallurgical forms: first, "copper, tin", which offered practical improvements over stone for their "brightness, hardness, ductility and general ease of working", and later, with the advent of Sumerian civilisation, the alloys which were "the basis for a politics of <u>wealth</u>: the concentration of theoretic power by the iconic displacement of substance."[66] Though Prynne nominally frames his poem-essay as a piece of economic history, like Riley's "Working Notes" it primarily critiques a perceptual regime which instrumentalises and abstracts the other for political or economic gain. As Prynne puts it, "the history of substance (stone) shifts with complex social implication into the theory of power (metal)."[67] Like Prynne's letter to Riley of 14 February 1967, the "Note on Metal" couches its argument in a conscious refusal of specificity, signalled by Prynne's opening assertion that "[t]he early Bronze Age would, *I suppose*, locate the beginnings of Western alchemy, the theory of quality as <u>essential</u>".[68] Prynne's text offers a speculative approach to the past based on supposition, self-consciously mimicking and deconstructing the assimilative and appropriative historical methods of Pound, Olson and, most recently, Riley. He imagines "an exilic (left-wing) theory of substance" through prose that

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[65] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.74.
[66] J. H. Prynne, "A Note on Metal" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.104-109 (p.104, 105, 106).
[67] *ibid*, p.105.
[68] *ibid*, p.104. Italicised emphasis mine, underscored emphasis original.

Ryan Dobran argues "fails to explicate or consistently group the various concepts it discusses" and "is patchy and meandering."[69]

The most important aporia in Prynne's text occurs immediately after his speculations on an "exilic […] theory" where substance (in Prynne's logic, stone) has neither been tokenised nor will be. Prynne writes:

> the shifts are offset and multiple, and in the earlier stages are accompanied by extensions of awareness newly sharpened by exactly that risk. The literal is not magic, for the most part, and it's how the power of displacement side-slipped into some entirely other interest which is difficult, not a simple decision that any one movement is towards ruin. Stone is already the abstraction of standing, of balance; and dying is still the end of a man's self-enrichment, the 'reason' why he does it […] The whole shift and turn is not direct (as [V. Gordon] Childe, too insistently, would have us believe), but rather the increasing speed of displacement which culminates only later in critical overbalance of intent.[70]

In the concluding turn of his argument, Prynne posits that the history of abstraction is *not* the tidy, resolutely materialist teleology he has spent the entire essay tracing, but rather something that develops unevenly, through "shifts" that are "offset and multiple". Moreover, the historical accounts he is rebutting (namely V. Gordon Childe's 1958 text, *The Prehistory of European Society*) are framed by Prynne as totalising or essentialist in their assumption of a singular, linear model of development, implicitly centred on Europe. Prynne gives the example that "[t]he North American Indians developed no real metallurgy at all, at any stage of their history."[71] He reframes the terms of his argument even more completely when he claims that stone, the material that has been the very definition of 'substance' from the text's outset, is always-already "the abstraction of standing, of balance". This reframing implies that the body's proprioception is invariably displaced onto objects exterior to the self. This idea is already implicit in Riley's phenomenologically informed perception in "Introitus", with its insistence

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[69] *ibid*, p.108. Ryan Dobran, "J. H. Prynne's 'Aristeas, in Seven Years' and *The English Intelligencer*" in *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 5:2 (2013), pp.20–42 (p.39, n.15).
[70] Prynne, "A Note on Metal", p.108. Original emphasis.
[71] *ibid.*

that the environing world within which the self is immersed both constitutes the self and is itself constituted through the act of perception.

While Riley's "Working Notes" imply that abstraction is always and inherently deleterious, Prynne argues otherwise. For him, abstraction is inevitable, and it "is rather the increasing speed of displacement which culminates only later in critical overbalance of intent": "intent", in the logic of the "Note", is the ends to which 'substance' is instrumentalised, be that the "movement of bluestones from Pembrokeshire to Wessex" (presumably religious, astronomical or 'magical'), or the "Sumerian acquisition of tin from Cornwall or Bohemia" (mercantile or ornamental).[72] According to Prynne, abstraction away from direct contact with substance need not "[culminate] […] in critical overbalance of intent": rather, abstraction in moderation leads to the "extensions of awareness newly sharpened by exactly that risk". This "risk" is the kind Riley had previously (unwittingly) celebrated, where prosodic and perceptual 'extension' facilitate the self's heightened awareness to and porosity with the world. It is instead "the increasing speed of displacement" that has led to our current condition, in which we are so abstracted from the world that the kind of "intent" subtending the "Sumerian acquisition of tin" (i.e., purely mercantile) dominates our perceptual regime. We have transitioned, as C. D. Blanton writes in his *précis* of Prynne's argument, "from a world of stone to a regime of metal".[73]

Prynne's more nuanced theory of abstraction and the history of value significantly influenced Riley's own thinking on the matter. In turn, it shaped his approach to what he was beginning to regard as the more appropriative and sentimentalising aspects of Olson's poetic and perceptual method. As we will see in Part III, Prynne's interventions, coupled with tensions in the *Intelligencer*'s social and bibliographic history, radically reoriented Riley's attitudes. This reorientation affected not just his view of the community, its writing and the principles of transatlantic fraternity upon which it was founded, but also toward his conception of the relationship between the self and the world in the act of perception.

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[72] *ibid*, p.105.

[73] C. D. Blanton, "Nominal Devolutions: Poetic Substance and the Critique of Political Economy" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13:1 (2000), pp.129-151 (p.129).

III – After Olson; after Sparty Lea

Riley's correspondence with Prynne following the publication of the "Note on Metal" and the letter of 14 February 1967 in the *Intelligencer* demonstrates that he had internalised Prynne's criticisms of the "Working Notes". In an undated letter to Prynne (its position in the archive suggests it is from May 1967), Riley provides his own critical exegesis of Olson's 1965 "Mythology Seminar" delivered at SUNY Buffalo, "The Archaeology of Morning: Causal and Applied". In the letter, he criticises Olson for treating the past as a repository of primordial values that can be uncomplicatedly recuperated in the conditions of a late capitalist present—the same approach he himself had adopted a few months previously. Responding to Olson's claim that "[w]e must return to our origins, to the originary condition, the causal condition", because "[t]he originary 'hits' create you", Riley writes:[74]

> there is no no [sic] primal condition that we can choose as the nexus of quality. The first tools we have are precisely designed to meet a pre-conceived need, and were used to fashion other tools. Already that displacement from simple extension. Already abstraction.[75]

He further critiques Olson's "Chronology of Indo-European Mythology" (a section of the lecture), especially its essentialist appeal to "[t]he original place: south Russia, north of the Caucasus".[76] Riley clarifies that Olson means "[t]he original *Indo-European* place," and laments "the harm of restriction to the Indo-European complex".[77] He affirms, in the somewhat pedantic and sardonic tone that became characteristic of his poetic voice in the 1970s and 1980s, "[w]hat would be interesting is if someone could tell us exactly HOW that Eden or any other began".[78] Querying Olson's claim that "towards the end of the last inter-glacial a new kind of man emerged better suited to the hardships of the climate", Riley asks "[w]hat's in that word EMERGED—from what egg?"[79]

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[74] Clarke, "The Archaeology of Morning", n.p.
[75] Riley, "Concerning Olson's ARCHAEOLOGY OF MORNING" (undated [1967]) in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 269. JHPP.
[76] Clarke, "The Archaeology of Morning", n.p.
[77] Riley, "Concerning Olson's ARCHAEOLOGY OF MORNING". JHPP. My emphasis.
[78] *ibid.*
[79] *ibid.*

This disillusionment with Olson's mythopoetic and vatic processes seemed to coincide with Prynne's interventions in the archaeological debate initiated by Riley. This section examines Riley's growing disillusionment with his poetic inheritance, which extended beyond his quasi-archaeological search for an 'originary position' to a critique of projective verse as a totalising and assimilative practice, one that forces perceptual details to conform to a predetermined cognitive scheme. As Riley puts it in his commentary, echoing the materialist framework of the "Note on Metal", "[f]or the poet to return to the position of priest-king is so distant as to be laughable [...] you can't just 'be a shaman' [...] You can only know the shamanistic".[80] The broader disillusionment with Olson among the *Intelligencer* poets was amplified by personal frictions which emerged during his visit to Britain in late 1966. Tom Clark's biography of Olson details the poet's alienating physical and mental state when he arrived at Dorn's lodgings in Essex:

> Sleep-lack and overuse of liquor and stimulants were now beginning to catch up with the speeding traveller; assailed by a violent migraine in the Colchester railway station, he was forced to lie down for some minutes on the platform [...] He had trouble regaining his breath and 'was in bad shape, wandering around at a loss' by the time he made it to the Dorns' front door. Still he refused to stop forcing the moment, continuing to abuse his health throughout the next few days. 'All the drinking and the pills were torture for his system, and he was in sweats a lot,' recalls Dorn, 'yet he could still whale a Camel in about two drags.'[81]

As Alex Latter notes, Prynne's correspondence with Olson from 1967 onwards (i.e., after his tour of Britain) evinces a marked shift from their fruitful exchanges earlier in the decade: drawing on a letter Prynne sent to Riley on 12 October 1968, Latter writes that "Prynne refers to Olson as 'Tithonus of Gloucester [who] never, for all his touch of Pericles, had the wit to go home, shut up, & listen for the other music' [...] [and] expands on his sense that the new American poetry was 'in ruins', writing that 'we are come to a fault in the world seam' and the 'old Americans are sealed off in what is now inescapably perpetual youth.'"[82]

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[80] *ibid*. Original emphasis.
[81] Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991), p.333.
[82] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.104.

Riley's own perspective on Olson's waning influence on his poetic milieu is harder to glean from the available archival material. Returning to the letter Riley wrote to D. S. Marriott in 1988, Riley's comment that the collapse of a prosody predicated on an Olsonian "false and unkind relationship towards the reader" was inevitable is instructive here.[83] In the same letter, Riley states that, as of 1988, he no longer wanted to produce poetry that "would [...] [expect] the reader to read the books I have read [...], which seems indeed to have been part of Olson's insistence, his wish to be a one-man university; as if it were not enough for one major poet (EP) to have been destroyed by that idea in this century."[84] Part of the reason Riley gives for his turn away from Olson is his mounting realisation that the intersection of phenomenology with archaeological and historiographical research was turning the poets involved in the *Intelligencer* project into Poundian figures with totalising and essentialising methodologies and focusses, leading the writing towards what the letter to Marriott elsewhere refers to as a "sentimental ... 'recapturing [of] mythic cohesion'".[85]

In a 1969 book review (Riley chose to withhold the title of the book), written in the wake of the *Intelligencer*'s dissolution and submitted to Andrew Crozier's *The Park* (and subsequently rejected), Riley expands on the same critiques he conveyed to Marriott in 1988:

> where exactly <u>does</u> the poet stand, in the cultural life of the world or better still in the total social structure? What <u>is</u> his trade? Is he to be the Big-Man-Poet at the centre, the only one capable of total assimilation? Is information to be fed into him from various mindless sources, perhaps via disciples, and it comes out at the end of the poem machine digested, fragmented & reassembled, processed: a suitable product for distribution to an élite market, is that it? Out of the specialisations of the many, the poet (Big Man) produces the cosmic-conscious synthesis, compendium of essential knowledge on all planes, total guide to the present tense? It won't wash.[86]

[83] Riley, letter to Marriott, 5 July 1988. JHPP.
[84] *ibid.*
[85] *ibid.*
[86] Riley, "A Review of Three Unspecified Books" in letter to Prynne, 19 May 1969 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, 273, The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library.

Here, Riley argues against an egocentric model of the poet, redolent of Olson's 'tumescent I': "the Big-Man-Poet at the centre, the only one capable of total assimilation", who arranges perceptual and epistemic data according to his own egocentric schema. In a perverse twist on the paradigm Riley had advocated for early in the *Intelligencer*'s run, where open field prosody facilitated the "Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range" which enabled porosity with the world and careful and purposeful perception, here the open field poet is made analogous to Riley's myopic antiquary, "obliged to force some relevance out of" the "compendium of essential knowledge on all planes" and "[produce] the cosmic-conscious synthesis".[87] In the final stages of the *Intelligencer*'s lifespan and in the wake of its dissolution, Riley uncovers a crisis in the model of poetic subjectivity the worksheet had inherited from the New American Poetry: the centripetal subjectivity the poetry had developed could no longer faithfully attend to the disparate materials compiled in the poem, without committing Pound's cardinal sin of "total assimilation". Crucially, Riley uncovers this internal contradiction through Prynne's endorsement of a new way of seeing the materials of the past: not as resources which are directly recuperable without complication, but as a sedimented ground upon which the present is founded, and which exists in a dialectical relationship with the present.

This crisis in poetic subjectivity had a real world, institutional aspect, too, linked to the collapse of *The English Intelligencer* and the straining of the personal and writerly relationships which undergirded it. In late 1967, Riley was ousted from his role as editor of the worksheet, in a coup engineered by Prynne, John James and Andrew Crozier. Prynne had noted a steady decline in Riley's editorial judgement, writing to Crozier in November 1967 that the worksheet had become "shockingly pedestrian & worthless" and now consisted of "pernicious" exchange.[88] As Latter writes, Prynne envisioned the *Intelligencer* as a venue determined by fraternal trust and the risk inherent therein: "[t]he trust in such a community would allow risks to be taken, in which work that strove to 'make it new' could be written, since such a

[87] Riley, "Announcement" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.95-97 (p.95). Riley, "The Antiquary" in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268, The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library.

[88] Prynne, letter to Andrew Crozier, 26 November 1967, *The English Intelligencer* Archive, 12/A/1 (26). Quoted in Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.110.

community could support the possibility of failure that is inherent in taking risks."[89] These risks are of a piece with the "risk" which Prynne claims "[sharpens]" our "extensions of awareness" in the "Note on Metal": it is through poetic risk that our contact with the world is deepened and enriched, and "pedestrian & worthless" poetry only further alienates us from the world.[90]

The cracks in the community, however, predated the fracas which led to Riley's deposition. Interpersonal tensions emerged during the Sparty Lea Festival, the first—and only—*Intelligencer* meeting, organised by Barry MacSweeney (who emphatically stated in the advert that the event was "not an English Intelligencer [sic] do" despite it becoming so in practice) and held in March 1967 at his grandparents' cottages in Northumberland. In a notorious interview with Eric Mottram from 1973, MacSweeney characterised the festival as a drunken, violent affair, where class antagonisms erupted into violent altercations:

> There was a lot of hostility because John James was not a friend of Jeremy Prynne then, neither were Pete Armstrong and Nick Waite; they were yer actual working class lads from Somerset and Wales, who thought that Jeremy Prynne, Andrew Crozier, Peter Riley and John Temple were just a set of effete shits. There were numerous punch-ups—I had at least 3 punch-ups—I mean very physical punch-ups, with bottles and chairs. Nick Waite duffed up Andrew Crozier. There was a fight between Tim Longville and Jeremy Prynne, as far as I remember. Tom Pickard drove his land-rover up Jeremy Prynne's boot.[91]

As Luke Roberts notes, there is no evidence that the more extreme physical fights recollected by MacSweeney took place at Sparty Lea, though the incident with Tom Pickard and Prynne's car is likely to have occurred.[92] Riley's own recollections of the festival are less dramatic, though they are tinged with melancholy. In a response to a letter from Prynne and Crozier

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[89] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.102.
[90] Prynne, "A Note on Metal", p.108.
[91] Eric Mottram, "MacSweeney/Pickard/Smith: Poets from North East England interviewed by Eric Mottram" in *Poetry Information*, 18 (Winter/Spring 1977-78), pp.21-39 (p.29).
[92] Luke Roberts, *Barry MacSweeney and the Politics of Post-War British Poetry: Seditious Things* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p.26.

proposing a collaborative piece of occasional writing celebrating the event, Riley made clear that he wanted to put Sparty Lea behind him:

> What sort of world, any road up, did we want to construct there? We were isolated; our separation from the inhabitants of that place hurt sometimes, and no amount of backslapping could remedy it. Not that I'm suggesting any alternative was possible—just that we couldn't, could we, extend ourselves far out of those huts except onto the permanence of tape and by occasional faltering movements over the hills, secure in our sense of imminent return.
>
> Enough?
>
> […] [Y]our words could act on so many different levels that I'm at a loss to know what kind of excavation you're after. If it's (as I trust it isn't) a matter of the unspoken antagonisms, impossible situations, offended sensibilities or whatever then I have nothing to say: that's not the kind of world I went there to live in and so far as I become involved in such futile interpersonal networks I am happy to brush my tracks behind me—to cancel. For any other kind of opening, well, what I hold from that occasion remains […], and I never was one to attempt to exhaust the contents of a situation.[93]

Beyond implicitly confirming some of the less volatile frictions MacSweeney describes in his account ("unspoken antagonisms, impossible situations, offended sensibilities"), Riley laments that the *Intelligencer* community had not been able to practise the "[extension]" into landscape that was so crucial to the prosodic, phenomenological and archaeological mode of the worksheet, precisely because they were *ipso facto* outsiders in the space they found themselves in. They were "isolated" by the material and social barriers which alienated them from a landscape Riley expected to find *Zuhanden*. Meaningful immersion in the landscape is reduced to a sequence of "occasional faltering movements", while the only "[permanent]" mark the *Intelligencer* poets made was on "tape", rather than the inscriptions upon the landscape celebrated by Riley in his studies of the British Neolithic.[94]

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[93] Riley, letter to Crozier & Prynne, "April Fools Day nineteensixtyseven" in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 214, 269. JHPP.

[94] In Riley's idealised inscriptions, the self "takes his [sic] bearings from the distance-machine he [sic] has made", and finds a direct continuity between the body, the structures it has built in the world, and the cosmos. Riley, "Book Review: A. Thom's *Megalithic Sites in Britain* Oxford University Press", sent to Dorn, 1967. PRP. Riley later

Though he did not contribute to Prynne and Crozier's collaborative project celebrating Sparty Lea, Riley did produce an occasional poem for the *Intelligencer* reflecting on the festival. "Sparty Lea Epilogue" captures his ambivalent feelings about the event, reflecting his mounting disillusionment with the perceptual reciprocity presented in "Introitus":

> It must be the whole continuance,
> of our lives bound through the occasion
> it must be this place given
> in return, the small room at night.
>
> The meeting was a specific node
> of exchange like a thank-you in a long
> conversation, fastening the discourse that
> sustains us to a future weather.
>
> I returned to the north and now
> I return to the south along a chain
> of hills which is also forged
> in the eye on such a listening
>
> And continue to believe in that
> occasion and exchange as a journey
> worthy of its extent, capable
> of increase as solitude closes in again.
> The hope is a trust. The hills
> are before it, the trust was offered
> against all hope
> of locating a centre.[95]

The poem ostensibly frames the festival as a realisation of the "trust" in risk that the *Intelligencer* community was predicated on: it is "a specific node | of exchange like a thank-you in a long | conversation", and it "[fastens] the discourse that | sustains us to a future weather", providing a bearing point for further poetic exploration predicated on new forms of perception. However, as Riley reminded Marriott in 1988, "[e]tymology was pursued [in the *Intelligencer*'s exchanges] in the search for the Word comprehending all words, in horror of

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encapsulated this phenomenon (albeit with an ironic edge) in 1983's *Tracks & Mineshafts*, a text which explicitly parallels British Megaliths with disused Derbyshire mines. In this sequence, he refers to "Earth Substance and sky energy [converged] at Man". Riley, *Collected Poems*, vol. i, p.349.

[95] *ibid*, p.57.

abstraction".[96] A close reading of any *Intelligencer* poem necessitates attention to the etymological currents subtending the text. This is especially true in the context of the philological work undertaken in series 2 of the *Intelligencer* (the same series in which Riley's Sparty Lea poem was published): in particular, Prynne's "Pedantic Note in Two Parts", which, as Marriott himself explains, explores "[the English rune *wynn*'s] significative function as a particularised pictographic substratum and lexical idea" in order to demonstrate how a word's meaning, rather than being stable or fixed, is dynamic and contingent on "the illocutionary context of [its] articulation in vocalic address."[97]

Reading the poem in the light of contemporary *Intelligencer* debates about both language and abstraction reveals a soberness underlying Riley's assertion that "solitude closes in again" in the wake of the festival. That the landscape has been directly "forged | in the eye" of the perceiving subject recalls the phenomenological mode of "Introitus", and so too does it invoke Merleau-Ponty's definition of attention *Phenomenology of Perception* as "the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit […] what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon […] the object is at every moment recaptured and placed once more in a state of dependence on [attention]."[98] Taking the phenomenological reading at face value, Riley's use of the word "forged" makes the speaker's attention to "the hills" seem like a moment of arcane creation, redolent of the alchemical and metallurgical *topoi* employed by other *Intelligencer* poets (most notably by Prynne in "On the Anvil", "Bronze: Fish" and "Just So", and by John James in "October"). But it also recalls Prynne's transformative intervention in Riley's thinking about the potential for an originary condition or basis for perception. Crucially, it invokes Prynne's reference in the "Note on Metal" to the "smelting & beating, followed by knowledge of alloys" which displaced value from being inherent in substance to being a secondary property ascribed to substance by mercantile interests.[99] Riley's poem tacitly acknowledges that the act of perceiving the other is an originary act of

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[96] Riley, letter to Marriott, 5 July 1988. JHPP.

[97] D. S. Marriott, "An Introduction to the Poetry of J. H. Prynne (1962-1977)" (unpublished DPhil dissertation, University of Sussex, 1993), pp.62-63. Prynne's "Pedantic Note" will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter Two.

[98] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.35.

[99] Prynne, "A Note on Metal", p.104.

abstraction, because perception itself, as a form of 'forging', constitutes the first stage in our instrumentalisation of the other.

On the one hand, Riley uses a metallurgical lexis in "Sparty Lea Epilogue" to underscore the generative properties of perception, while simultaneously allowing that lexis to disclose the feeling of alienation from the world he expressed in his letter to Prynne and Crozier, as well as a sense of the falsehood and mediation of the world in the very act of perception. It attains this multiple perspective by activating certain linguistic *topoi* familiar to *Intelligencer* readers, evincing Alex Latter's claim that, in the worksheet, "meaning [...] inhered [...] in the recognition of the special resonances of certain load-bearing words or tropes ... as well as forms and discourses".[100] "[F]orged" not only resonates with Prynne's metallurgical discourses: through its implication that the representation of the hills is a replica or a *forgery*, it also reflects a specific fear articulated in the *Intelligencer* that there were modes of poetic thinking and writing that were false or counterfeit in some way. This fear can be found in the attempts to reinvigorate a kind of Poundian and Fenollosan prosody (predicated on "the transferences of force from agent to object") as a way of properly attending to the materiality of the world, in Riley's attempts to get back to a primitive basis for phenomenological perception through archaeology, and even in fears that the poetry printed in the worksheet itself might be little more than a modish imitation of Olsonian projective verse.[101] Ian Vine's early open letter of 25 May 1966 is a manifestation of this final point, with its complaints about the *Intelligencer*'s "unoriginally American stamp".[102] Riley's "Sparty Lea Epilogue", written in what would prove to be his final months as the worksheet's editor, implicitly accepts that abstraction from the perceptual primacy aspired to in early *Intelligencer* poetry was the inevitable outcome of the project. It does so amid the numerous internal tensions and contradictions which precipitated the worksheet's dissolution: Prynne's challenges to the simplistic, archly-modernist foundations of the *Intelligencer*'s archaeological, historical and phenomenological pursuits, a mounting collective disillusionment with Olson in the wake of

[100] Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.161.
[101] Pound and Fenollosa, "The Chinese Written Character", p.331.
[102] Ian Vine, "Letter (25/5/66)" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.12-13 (p.12).

his tour of Britain in 1966, the failures (real or perceived) of the Sparty Lea Festival, and the fracas over the decline in the quality of published work that ended in Riley's removal as editor.

IV – *The Linear Journal* (1973)

Having outlined the development of Riley's poetic thinking during the run of *The English Intelligencer*, this chapter will close with a reading of his first book-length sequence after the worksheet's dissolution, 1973's *The Linear Journal*. I argue that the text represents Riley's thoroughgoing acknowledgement of the invariable mediation of the forms of perception he explored in *The English Intelligencer*, couching that acknowledgement in self-conscious reflections on the fate of the project and the high modernist prosody on which it was predicated. *The Linear Journal* achieves this by subverting and negating the specific archaeological tropes once deployed by Olson, Dorn and Riley himself, and through its pastiche of the sub-Poundian poet as a diminished version of Riley's "Antiquary", defined by his tendency towards the totalisation of his materials. Published by John Riley and Tim Longville's Grosseteste Press, the work emerged both institutionally and formally from the ruins of the *Intelligencer*. John Riley and Longville had been recipients of and frequent contributors to the worksheet, and Grosseteste had previously published several key works by significant *Intelligencer* poets, including John James's *The Welsh Poems* in 1967 and Prynne's *The White Stones* in 1969. Riley relocated to Denmark in September 1969 to take up a lectureship in literature at the University of Odense. He began composing *The Linear Journal* in the lead-up to his move, continuing the work into his time there.[103] His correspondence with Prynne noticeably thinned out after his move and after the fracas over the *Intelligencer*, but he wrote to him in the summer of 1970 to offer him a draft copy and complain that Cape Goliard had rejected the sequence.[104] The dating of the letter reflects the text's long compositional history.

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[103] The author's note at the end of *The Linear Journal* states: "It [the text] was written between March 1969 and May 1970, with some changes and additions made in 1972." Peter Riley, *The Linear Journal* (Pensnett: Grosseteste, 1973), p.51.

[104] Riley, letter to Prynne, undated (summer 1970) in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 274. JHPP.

The Linear Journal comprises four sections, each divided into smaller numbered parts, for a total of 31 poems. The individual poems are numbered and unnamed, but each poem is tethered by a footnote to a specific location in France, Andorra, Spain (including the Balearics), Italy, and, finally, an anonymous "catacomb". Referenced places include "niaux", "tarascon-sur-ariege"; "llors", "andorra-la-viella"; "alicante", "pinos"; "sasso lungo", "valle de antermont" (all sic). The sequencing of these names suggests that the text roughly traces or journals a southward movement—presumably a walking tour, given the references to hiking throughout—through the Pyrénées, along Spain's eastern coast, and eventually back north through Andorra and France, before culminating in the Dolomites. However, the poems are not fully loco-specific, because they are often only obliquely connected to the places they nominally reference. By structuring the sequence as a southward movement towards and across the Mediterranean, Riley appears to be retracing a path he described in his own musings on the alleged movement of the Britons in a letter to Prynne from 19 April 1967 (redolent of the references to Celtic migration in "From Romney Marsh"). In this letter, he speculates on "a clear & open migratory route across the top of the highland zone: Iberia—(Armorica)—Ireland—Scottish Isles round the top—Shetlands—Scandinavia & Iceland."[105] However, as we will see, *The Linear Journal* deliberately reveals how this migratory route has been evacuated of the mythopoetic potential it had for Riley in the days of the *Intelligencer*.

Writing of Riley's post-*Intelligencer* work, Keston Sutherland observes that the poems often stage the argument "that it is the proper device of poetic attention to resolve particular moments of experience into moments of sympathy, or of intelligence, whose content is essential and not exclusive or provisional [...] Particular things, when in their places, divert us away from themselves and into speculation less tied to anything in particular".[106] I am mostly in agreement with Sutherland, and I point to the oblique connection between the poems comprising *The Linear Journal* and the places they are tied to as evidence for Riley's tactic of "[diverting] us away from [particular things] and into speculation less tied to anything in particular". However, I emphasise that part of the "common or necessary intelligence" that

[105] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Notes 2 – Migration and circle", 19 April 1967. JHPP.
[106] Keston Sutherland, "The Accomplishment of Knowing One's Place" in Nate Dorward (ed.), *The Poetry of Peter Riley, The Gig* 4/5 (November 1999/March 2000), pp.133-138 (pp.135-136).

Sutherland identifies in Riley's 'mature' writing is the acknowledgement that, often, *no* "common or necessary intelligence" can be gleaned from our perception of the world.[107] In Riley's post-*Intelligencer* poetry, what is exterior to the self frequently reveals itself as resistant to the poetic and phenomenological perception which seeks to instrumentalise it, despite its pretensions towards 'direct' or unmediated contact. *The Linear Journal* attains this sense by reducing the *Intelligencer*'s model of perception-as-extension into the unproductive "occasional faltering movements" through landscape which Riley found disappointing about the Sparty Lea Festival.[108] In so doing, it illuminates the ethical failures attendant to the forms of perception which the *Intelligencer* poets—including Riley himself—had once so eagerly embraced.

Writing to Prynne in December 1970 to confirm that he had sent him a draft copy of *The Linear Journal*, Riley described the sequence in the following terms:

> I recall that it went in for a lot of colour-scape stuff as token of various desireable [sic] conditions of drift, which was rather risqué of me, and ended with an imitation of The Archpoet which probably left the self too isolate (with its shade) and stressed, in a merely inverted and negated, ironic version of former glories; but when I see it again I shall know.[109]

Riley explicitly conceived at least part of the sequence as a lampoon of the 'live tradition' he and his late modernist *confrères* had championed, one which oriented itself around "The Archpoet" (the "Big-Man-Poet at the centre, the only one capable of total assimilation", as he wrote in critique of Olson in the reviews he submitted to Andrew Crozier in 1969).[110] The "imitation" Riley writes about to Prynne occurs in poem number 30:

> and after the spasm??
> and the wider world?
>
> Look :
>
> NOW!

[107] *ibid*, p.136.
[108] Riley, letter to Crozier & Prynne, "April Fools Day nineteensixtyseven". JHPP.
[109] Riley, letter to Prynne, 18 December 1970 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 274. JHPP.
[110] Riley, "A Review of Three Unspecified Books" in letter to Prynne, 19 May 1969. JHPP.

a littered field
beautiful refuse of the mind
O
the possibilities!
O Pound O Lewis
Power : […]
O Mark Hyatt

dead. It is night in the Foro Mussolini, far off
the sound of traffic heading Into the city
and back. Ordinary – nothing moves, beautiful
refuse, they are
static on the ground, they are white with polished sides.

It is not what you need
decomposed *ersatz* of myth
except now
which will pass[111]

The paratactic, ventilated lines of free verse which open the poem, with their apostrophes to Wyndham Lewis, the bohemian poet Mark Hyatt, and Pound (the poem even begins with the *in medias res* of *Canto* I), as well as their imperative to immediate perception ("Look : | NOW!"), are killed—quite literally, with the irruption of death in line fourteen—by the relatively hypotactic lines which take over when the embodied, emplaced speaker situates herself in Foro Mussolini, Rome. Riley implicitly traces the fate of Lewis and Pound's high modernism, from "the possibilities" and "*Power*" of an aesthetic predicated on innovation and immediacy, to its inextricable connection with the evils of Italo-Fascism, and its secretion in the material, infrastructural and civic forms which persisted after the liberation of Italy. In this way, *The Linear Journal* counts among the "inverted and negated, ironic [versions] of former glories" the travesty of modernist aesthetics, and their lapse into political, philosophical and perceptual totalitarianism.

Riley appeared to view the collapse of the *Intelligencer*'s utopianism as participating in this trajectory. After giving his thoughts on the potential cessation of the worksheet and his

[111] Riley, *The Linear Journal*, p.47.

ousting as editor in a letter to Prynne from January 1968, Riley reflects on a pamphlet he had read,

> called THE COMMUNE AT KRONSTADT which brought out very clearly what happened to the October Revolution so soon after its 'success'. This sempiternal vicious circle of the successful revolution becoming the new unbearable orthodoxy—can't we yet break right out of that? It's been with us for a long time, and now infects the very first seeds of revolution, so we get a monotonous flow of no-change except where it least matters.[112]

For Riley, the violent suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion by the Bolsheviks, like the travesty of Pound and Lewis's fascism, becomes a template for "the successful revolution becoming the new unbearable orthodoxy".[113] The logic of Riley's letter connects this with his own personal disillusionment with Olson's poetics, the collapse of the *Intelligencer* and the coterminous failure of the mode of experiencing the world endorsed in its poetry and correspondence. In *The Linear Journal*, the disgraced ruins of high modernist ambition are uncovered as "a littered field", a "beautiful refuse of the mind" and the "decomposed *ersatz* of myth": they are "not what you need | … except now | which will pass". Riley presents the Poundian (and, later, Olsonian) imperative to "Look … | NOW" in a way that was always-already mediated by myth, literature and economic and social history as redundant. Moreover, this imperative is shown as especially untenable in the instant of perception, which, as soon as it comes into being, passes into history, and cannot be faithfully recuperated.

In other poems in the sequence, Riley finds that perception is never able to fully take hold of its object. Intertwined with this, he foregrounds the speaking subject's failure to establish the hoped for 'extension' into the world which haunts the text as a vestige of the

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[112] Riley, letter to Prynne, 10 January 1968 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 214, 271, The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library. Original emphasis.

[113] The idea that modernism invariably loses its revolutionary zeal and becomes reactionary, inert or complicit in the structures of capitalism has a long heritage in Marxian and Adornian thought. As Raymond Williams wrote in 1989, "What has happened quite radically is that Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance, and achieved comfortable integration into the new international capitalism." Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), p.35.

Intelligencer's failed practices. A good example of this can be found in the second poem, emplaced at "niaux" (sic), a cave-system in Occitanie. Here it is in full:

> O my eyes heart and the bottle
> is cooling in the stream.
> The desired condition flattens itself on the wall,
> textual erosion at the river-bend
> and calcium accretion, we have
> madrigals of love and war
> set up in a clearing by the road.
>
> Now there is a hard opaque layer
> over all that transportation;
> the furthest dark nick of cavern
> pulsing through the night sky.
> Intensely, our madrigals stand in the
> gloaming; green and furiously small, they attract
> flies and small groups of deviants seeking rest.
>
> O my eyes hurt and a hard opaque layer
> is cooling in the sky;
> the desired condition fastens itself on my skin –
> sexual light on the road and
> cancelled glory brings us
> crashing to a future state.
> We creep into our madrigals and die.[114]

Here, "[t]he desired condition [flattening] itself on the wall" refers to the Palaeolithic galleries of paintings covering the walls of Niaux. Riley is engaging with the archaeological tropes employed by the Black Mountain poets and their disciples—including himself in *The English Intelligencer*—to recuperate an idealised, primitivist condition from a repository of lost social, cultural and material values. Olson himself, in "La Préface", had specifically invoked the cave art of Altamira in Cantabria to gesture to the possibility of a new beginning after the atrocities of the Second World War.[115] Meanwhile in 1962, *Trobar* 2's editors had used Palaeolithic cave

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[114] Riley, *The Linear Journal*, p.7.

[115] "The dead in via
in vita nuova
in the way [...]
Buchenwald new Altamira cave
With a nail they drew the object of the hunt."

art (a "rough target", a band of hunters and a herd of oxen) to illustrate the "primal vigour" of a new American modernism.[116] We saw in parts I, II and III how the influence of this kind of thinking waxed and waned for Riley and his *Intelligencer* peers.

However, in *The Linear Journal*, the possibility of even *perceiving* the materials which would allow us to return to "[t]he desired condition" has become fraught. First, the art "flattens itself on the [cave] wall": it lacks the depth and dimensionality that had enabled Dorn and Olson, in *The Newly Fallen* and *The Mayan Letters* respectively, to engage haptically with archaeological materials and treat them as *Zuhanden*. Second, Riley renders the landscape environing Niaux as script: he finds "textual erosion at the river-bend", rather than the usual geomorphic processes of abrasion or attrition. In the 1988 letter to Marriott, Riley writes that,

> Shortly before that shop [*The English Intelligencer*] closed down I started following the notion of a supra-personal textuality beyond script, into "works" (and eventually to "art"), specifically alterations to the landscape, such as the script-like rhythmic lineation of the earth's surface in migration, and the erection of large and apparently purposeless "monuments", generally circular, in Neolithic new-settlement/trade culture.[117]

Though the artwork at Niaux is Palaeolithic rather than Neolithic, Riley's poem presents the archaeological site as part of the same "supra-personal textuality beyond script […], [extended] into … alterations to the landscape". However, the legibility and phenomenological potential of that "supra-personal textuality" has been eroded by the time of *The Linear Journal*'s composition. Despite the Heideggerian ring of a "clearing by the road", predicated on collective poetry and song ("we have | madrigals of love and war") and intersubjective communion between "flies and small groups of deviants seeking rest", there is, ultimately, "a hard opaque layer | over all that transportation", and "cancelled glory brings us | crashing to a future state."

Ultimately, the poem's endlessly recursive practice of hunting among stones culminates in "cancelled glory". Nonetheless, this hunting is an essential stage in a dialectic which brings us

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From Charles Olson, "La Préface" in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson: Excluding* The Maximus Poems, ed. by George F. Butterick (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), pp.46-47 (p.46).

[116] "EDITORIAL", *Trobar* 2, p.2.

[117] Riley, letter to Marriott, 5 July 1988. JHPP.

to a "future state" for poetry, one which can accommodate the illegibility and recalcitrance of the world and its ability to evade "the Big-Man-Poet at the centre, the only one capable of total assimilation".[118] Much later, Riley elucidated a version of this "future state" in his most sustained statement on poetics, "The Creative Moment of the Poem" (written for Denise Riley's 1992 anthology, *Poets on Writing*). Here, he draws upon the same lexis of light and opacity employed in *The Linear Journal*, describing the poem as a screen between reader and poet "neither transparent nor opaque but [...] a body of light":[119]

> It conceals because it supersedes the light before and after it. And in this concealment it also carries: images, concepts, percepts, messages, across a time-gap. If it were simply transparent there would be no feasible objectivity and language would rest on self-evidence, ecstatic intersubjective union, constantly cancelling itself [...] As a barrier it can transmit freely. But if it were completely opaque nothing would happen at all.[120]

The poem on Niaux, through its interplay of "opaque [layers]" and "[clearings]", enacts the balance between "concealment" and the "[carrying]" of messages that Riley here argues is the ideal function of poetry. By simultaneously disclosing and occluding, it offers a more faithful representation of our experience of the world than the pretensions towards perceptual clarity and 'extension' which characterised Riley's earlier work.

* * *

As we have seen, the prospect of extracting phenomenological value from the world through perception is problematised throughout *The Linear Journal*, directly reflecting on the fate of *The English Intelligencer* and the American modernist principles upon which it was predicated. In poem 12, subtitled "*(palma de maiorca)*", a visit to "another" "light yellow-ochre fading to cream" cathedral proves disappointing for a speaker who longs for it to render itself as a

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[118] Riley, "A Review of Three Unspecified Books" in letter to Prynne, 19 May 1969. JHPP.
[119] Peter Riley, "The Creative Moment of the Poem" in *Poets on Writing*, ed. by Denise Riley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), pp.92-113 (p.98).
[120] *ibid.*

"museum" to his careful attention: "the cathedral fails; it is | too dark inside and all the colour has been | scorched away."[121] Yet, just as the Browningesque dramatic monologue sections of "The Antiquary" reveal the intrusive presence of a lyric speaker who emerges from a deeper, English prosodic tradition, so too does *The Linear Journal* recruit an allusive, internalising subjectivity, "formed by" a Wordsworthian sense of thwarted expectation in the process of locating meaning in the world.[122] As a conclusion to this chapter, I wish to examine what is at stake in Riley's invocation of *The Prelude* throughout *The Linear Journal*. This serves as a segue to my chapter on R. F. Langley, whose writing, as we will see, is deeply concerned with the extent to which the perceiving subject emerges from a Romantic lyric tradition. It also demonstrates Riley's commitment to examining how perception resonates against pre-existing literary and linguistic templates following the dissolution of the *Intelligencer*.

In poem 3, emplaced at "*(port de siguer)*", Riley's speaker is ascending a peak in the Pyrénées, presenting a prospect of the Andorran landscape filled with digressions and fragments of historical and geological detail. I reproduce some of the poem's most relevant parts here:

> the simple pulse like a train is all we need
> to get up this huge pass
> escape route (1943) over the top
> and it comes easily against us at this
> intermediary age that pejorocratic machinery
> is at it again elaborating without end
> the planned failure of intent, in fact practice
> moves us right past the top of it [...]
> We go by the old routine,
> we know the words of command, they are
> thrust right into the mountain
> where they stand on quaint platforms facing
> west, which is not our line today
> and the cave slowly clogged up with calcium carbonate
> (crystalline) on and on again [...]
> I sometimes think
> a little man in the uniform of

[121] Riley, *The Linear Journal*, p.20.

[122] "[F]ormed by" here comes from Riley's description of "The Antiquary" as "a first faltering attempt to explore the possibilities of England as a subject" in Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 2nd September 1966, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268, The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library.

a ticket-inspector is peering through
everything I say [...][123]

In Book VI of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth and his friend's ascent of the Alps culminates in a moment of perceptual crisis:

That very day,
From a bare ridge we also first beheld
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
That had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be.[124]

Wordsworth here laments that an enfeebled, "soulless" external impression of Mont Blanc has "usurped" a deeper, internal "living" vision, leading to a profound sense of loss. Despite this, *The Prelude* repeatedly insists upon the restorative power of both subsequent perceptual impressions and the "unfathered vapour" of the imagination in reconstituting the subject's relationship with the world.[125] Immediately after the encounter with Mont Blanc, Wordsworth and his companion look out over a prospect of "[t]he wondrous Vale | Of Chamouny", whose "dumb cataracts and streams of ice, | A motionless array of mighty waves, | Five rivers broad and vast, made rich amends | And reconciled us to realities."[126]

In Riley's poem, the ascent takes on a more fractured, ironic character. The mountain here becomes a stage for a programme of mechanical actions and automatic perceptual engagements. Note, for example, the "simple pulse" of movement as the speaker and his party ascend "this huge pass" "like a train". Meanwhile, the assertion that "[w]e go by the old routine, | we know the words of command" suggests that Wordsworth's traversal has become a stock trope, actively "planned" for and habitually and thoughtlessly enacted. Both Wordsworth's Chamouny and Riley's Port de Sigeur offer to the perceiver a frozen tableau of glacial and geological processes. However, where *The Prelude* retains the latent, sublime dynamism of its "streams of ice" and "motionless array of mighty waves" (they are paradoxically frozen yet still

[123] Riley, *The Linear Journal*, p.8.
[124] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), p.157.
[125] *ibid*, p.160.
[126] *ibid*, p.157.

bristling with potential kinetic energy, insofar as they carry within them the memory of past motion and the promise of future movement), *The Linear Journal*'s "cave clogged up with calcium carbonate | (crystalline)" is an image of slow accretion and stagnation, rendered with sterile, scientific precision. The flat, parenthetical addition suggests an observational detail added as an afterthought, further reducing the traversal's emotional resonance. Even the prospect of encountering a "soulless image […] | That […] [usurps] upon a living thought" at the summit is bathetically undercut by Riley: "practice | moves us right past the top of it". As Daniel Eltringham writes about Riley's allusive engagement with the Wordsworthian prospect poem in the 1989 sequence *Noon Province*, Riley's "persistent self-deflations cause the poems to fail, as they must, to meet the lyric demand to be *full* of unironised wonder".[127] And yet, despite these post-Romantic subversions of Wordsworth's text, there is a latent sense here that *The Prelude* persists as an allusive framework for structuring our perception of the world: its words *are* "the words of command", and "they are | thrust right into the mountain", guiding our movements in and our engagements with the landscape, even when language is elsewhere "[peered]" through by the diminished and bureaucratic arms of financialised and state-sponsored capitalism ("a little man in the uniform of | a ticket-inspector").

The opening poem of *The Linear Journal* concludes with a pair of stanzas which reject "clarity" and guidance while simultaneously tacitly embracing Wordsworth's Alpine ascent as a fundamental structural and allusive principle:

> My regard, of you, takes the form
> of a band of adolescents in shorts
> setting out on an alpine ramble
> overburdened with tents and Camomile Lotion
> leaderless and thinking, for the first time
> of wine
>
> Out of this scramble no clarity emerges
> no government no textbook no friends
> though the light is everywhere we go[128]

[127] Daniel Eltringham, "Shifting vantage, common musings: the politics of Wordsworthian excursus in the poetry of Peter Riley" in *Textual Practice*, 33:9 (2019), pp.1481-1505 (p.1495). Original emphasis.
[128] Riley, *The Linear Journal*, pp.5-6.

In *The Linear Journal*, Wordsworth is instrumentalised by Riley to represent a certain type of Englishness, one which connects directly to his avowed interest in a "strength born in stasis […] but which can take in the full force of movement, given but the chance".[129] Even if this commitment to an older poetic 'music' ultimately led Riley to anti-modernist positions later in the 1970s, here it provides a productive synthesis of interior subjectivity and perceptual extension. The speaker's inward lyrical turn ("[m]y regard for you") is brought outward, given "form" and distributed across an intersubjective field ("a band of adolescents").[130] Despite the speaker's claim that the movement into "the light" is "leaderless", the turn to English Romanticism suggests that one leader—Olson—has merely been replaced by another.

[129] Riley, letter to Prynne and "Notes 2 – Migration and circle", 19 April 1967. JHPP.
[130] See, for example, Riley's tacit characterisation of avant-garde poetics as "[sensationalist]" and a "desert of thin words". Riley, "Four Reviews [1974?]". JHPP.

Chapter Two

"Everything Behaving Itself": Resolving the Tension Between Knowledge and Perception with R. F. Langley

Introduction

On 19 August 1970, the poet, journal-writer, teacher, close friend of J. H. Prynne, and erstwhile reader of *The English Intelligencer* (though never contributor) Roger Langley wrote in the journal he kept for most of his adult life about a car journey from Staffordshire to Cambridge:

> Mostly though, yrself as object passing amongst other objects, passing yrself on the road; if you could see this it would all be living like when facts are seen in sequence and perceived in intricate causal relationship, the paths in the wood.
>
> Tracks of wet spume like flat corkscrews off lorries meet ten feet behind the wheels, flattened, stuck to road, clots. In the sequence as it is you never really get in touch with things, they stay way off at the end of your skin while you are looking for the next one to touch... hand on the wall, small flowers in the mortar, what you are doing is trying to contact and by 'contact' all I can mean is 'make available for full recall' which itself involves feeling it as here and real, not slurring through it looking a-head. Keep the thing kicking so that there is no sequence but a network in space all alive and as fresh as there.[1]

Perhaps unsurprisingly for its provenance (it was written two years after the dissolution of the *Intelligencer* and its community's break with the phenomenologically-inflected, Olsonian prosody that had sustained it), Langley's journal entry rehearses many of the tropes common to the poetic tradition he was writing into. The most obvious points of connection are formal and stylistic. The contractions of 'yourself', for example, might reflect the hasty nature of journalling, perhaps suggesting that the entry was penned *en plein air*, during a pitstop on the car ride. Yet, taken alongside the tacit invocations of Olson's conception of "man […] himself"

[1] R. F. Langley, "The Self is Gone" in *PN Review*, 248:45 (2019), pp.15-16 <https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10527> [accessed 20 June 2022].

as "an object", and the Whiteheadian notion of seeing the self and its environing world as a set of "facts […] seen in sequence and perceived in intricate causal relationship", these linguistic choices situate the text firmly in the tradition of projective verse and its philosophical underpinnings (Whitehead was one of Olson's favourite philosophers).[2] Contractions like "yrself", in the sub-tradition Langley is engaging with, convey notational and perceptual speed (and, therefore, notational and perceptual immediacy and authenticity). For Prynne, for example, they are part of the complex of linguistic and orthographic features that imbue *Maximus* with the status of "primary writing" rather than "secondary assemblage," by compressing "the literal founding of history" into "its local cadence in speech".[3]

But the passage also reveals more contentious aspects of R. F. Langley's theoretical and poetic relationship to the late modernism he inherited. His stated ambition in the entry is to establish "contact" with the environing world, but "contact" here is emphatically *more* than the subject's capacity for immediate immersion in the world as it is "here and real". It also includes the ability to preserve the phenomenological richness of experience in memory, and to ensure that it survives the abstracting processes through which it is translated into language, knowledge and art. Langley defines "contact" as making what one experiences "'available for full recall'", which entails not allowing the immediacy of perception to collapse into a crude caricature when it is encoded in language. As we saw in the previous chapter, the quest to frame poetic "contact" as direct immersion in the world had been one of the stated goals of *The English Intelligencer*: in Peter Riley's words, it was a question of framing the self "as sharing [i]n a community of flesh" and as coextensive with the world, with "valleys mountains & trees not wholly interior or ex-[terior]" to it.[4] It was also one of the hills that the *Intelligencer* had died upon, with Riley's quest culminating in his presentation of perception in

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[2] Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.247. See, for example, Alfred North Whitehead's definition of "causal efficacy" in *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Affect*, which frames 'selves' and 'others' as existing in a field of biomechanical and physical cause and effect: "causal efficacy […] is the experience dominating the primitive living organisms, which have a sense for the fate from which they have emerged, and for the fate towards which they go […] It is a heavy, primitive experience." Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Affect* (New York: Fordham UP, 1985), p.44.

[3] J. H. Prynne, "Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI" in *The Park* 4, 5 (London: The Ferry Press, 1969), pp.64-66 (p.66, 64).

[4] Peter Riley, "Announcement" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.95-97 (p.96).

poetry as a "[forgery]" of reality in one of his final contributions to the worksheet. It is my contention in this chapter that Langley's writing in both his poetry and his journals is deeply self-reflexive about the tension between the "here and real" and the mind's compulsion to fix and organise experience into a "sequence", a tension Mark Byers calls the "torque between propositional knowledge and direct perception" in Langley's work.[5]

In its alertness to and anxiety about the tendency of perception to resolve itself into "propositional knowledge", Langley's writing has the features of having been produced by someone who witnessed the fragmentation of the *Intelligencer*'s project. As such, it demonstrates a deep scepticism about the key terms of Olson's poetics. If the failed project of *The English Intelligencer* had proven to its contributors and readers that perception could not be easily bracketed off from knowledge and abstraction, then Langley's belated arrival into this sub-tradition—his first collection, *Hem*, was published in 1978, ten years after the dissolution of the *Intelligencer*—was marked by an awareness of its institutional, philosophical and prosodic fault lines. From the outset, his writing is fully cognisant of the need to challenge claims to perceptual immediacy and immanence. From his earliest published journal entries, through to the poems he wrote in the final years before his death, his work persistently questioned to what extent the kind of "contact" with the world imagined in the afore-quoted journal entry could be achieved without collapsing into the frameworks of knowledge the perceiver invariably imposes on the moment of perception. Another enduring question for Langley was whether this tension between knowledge and perception could *ever* truly be reconciled.

Langley's diet of reading over the course of his career (an eclectic range of art history, etymological dictionaries, European phenomenology and psychoanalysis) was a touchstone for this extended investigation into the self's relation to both direct perception and the systems of knowledge and culture which mediate it. In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, a text Langley listed as having "read often" (and which thus forms a good basis for discussing

[5] Mark Byers, "R. F. Langley: Seeing Things" in *English*, 66:255 (2017), pp.331-350 (p.333).

this aspect of his work) the systems of rationalist, empirical and scientific thought are cast as abstractions derived from direct perception:[6]

> All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression. Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance qua form of being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world.[7]

Langley's description in the journal entry from August 1970 of "slurring through [perception] looking a-head" until he arrives at a sequential ordering of facts and events (note how the hyphen emphasises 'head' as the root of 'ahead', implying a Cartesian conception of the mind as the seat of intelligence) recalls Merleau-Ponty's claims here and throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the "second-order expression" of science atomises and fragments the "monadic and intersubjective unbroken text" of perception, to which it should also be understood as ontologically subordinate.[8]

Despite its notational contractions and paratactic clauses, and the impression they give of perceptual immediacy, Langley's entry also registers the inevitable abstraction of that immediacy from a "network [...] all alive and fresh" to "a sequence". It does so not only through its resignation to the "[sequence's]" persistence and endurability ("as it is"), but also through the tacit recognition of the potential for the sight of him driving, an "object passing amongst other objects", to be viewed from the detached, synoptic overview of an observer spectating the scene and fixing it to a preconceived paradigm. The question of whether this

[6] Quoted in Bradford, "The Long Question of Poetry: A Quiz for R. F. Langley".
[7] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix (my emphasis).
[8] *ibid*, p.62.

detached, synoptic perspective is the inevitable terminus of our experience of the world is foundational to Langley's thinking, both in the poetry and the journals.

This chapter takes this question as its touchstone. By offering a chronological survey of Langley's writing from the 1970s to the 1990s, I argue that his career reflects a progression from an anxiety over his book knowledge's tendency to collapse or mediate his immediate perceptual contact with the world, through to his gathering realisation that such knowledge can serve as an optic that facilitates, extends and enhances perception. Central to this realisation is Langley's discovery of a corollary for this newfound understanding of the capabilities of knowledge in what he termed the "body-like", intersubjective character of a particular lineage of English lyric poetry, comprising the dramatic monologues and conversation poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge and William Cowper.[9] This chapter demonstrates that the fluidity and complexity of Langley's understanding of what it means to write in a "dramatic monologue-like sort of way" is what allows him to re-orient the form towards intersubjectivity and the extension of his perception.[10] He does not see it as confined to the production of fictional speakers or the imaginative reproduction of the speech of actual historical individuals. While Jonathan Culler describes the dramatic monologue as "the extreme example" of "the lyric production of fictional speakers" and "the representation of events", Langley approaches it as a process of moving freely between a multitude of speaking voices, from the historical specificity of real individuals (like the Scottish seaman Alexander Selkirk or the almost-anonymous 19th-century Staffordshire villager Matthew Glover), to a more universalised, abstract lyric 'I'.[11] This lyric 'I' is rooted in a specific time and space, but floats freely from the material and temporal particulars which would anchor it in a conventional dramatic monologue.[12] Recasting the dramatic monologue as a loose spectrum, Langley demonstrates how certain forms of lyric operate not only as mediums for individual

[9] R. F. Walker, "An Interview with R. F. Langley" in *Angel Exhaust*, 13, ed. by Andrew Duncan (Cambridge: self-published, 1996), pp.118-132 (p.120).
[10] *ibid*, *p*.124.
[11] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015), p.265.
[12] For example, think of how Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" roots Fillippo Lippi in the concrete particulars of 15th-century Florence through both references to (e.g.) Cosimo de' Medici and the artifactual mimesis of Lippi's speaking voice. Browning, *Selected Poems*, pp.477-506.

expression but also as shared, communal spaces wherein direct perception merges with and resonates against a broader linguistic, philological and cultural history.

Part I will read another of Langley's journal entries from the 1970s, focussing on Langley's early conception of etymology as something that both enhances and constrains our perception. By situating Langley's entry from 17 October 1970 against his main etymological source (Walter Skeat's *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*), as well as Prynne's 1967 prose work "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts" and hitherto-unstudied correspondence between Prynne and Langley about etymological sources, I argue that, at the outset of his career, Langley presents language ambivalently. He views it as a force that enriches our understanding of the world by activating historical resonances while simultaneously delimiting direct perception by imposing fixed meanings on the world. Part II builds on this through a close reading of "Matthew Glover", the central poem of Langley's 1978 collection *Hem*. I demonstrate how Langley encodes the tension between direct sensory experience and abstract knowledge through the contrasting prosodic forms in the poem. By contrasting the research-based, projective mode of American poets like Olson with moments of alleged lyric immediacy, Langley explores how these different prosodies partition attention and shape perception.

A third section focusses on Langley's 1979 poem, "Juan Fernandez". I argue that this poem marks a turning point in Langley's work, wherein he begins to recognise the potential of his idiosyncratic understanding of dramatic monologue as a means of actualising perceptual extension. By adopting the blank verse reminiscent of Wordsworth and Coleridge's conversation poems, and allusively engaging with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (itself based on Alexander Selkirk's shipwreck on the Juan Fernández islands) and William Cowper's own dramatic monologue spoken by Selkirk and set on Juan Fernández, he arrives at a synthetic definition of dramatic monologue that hedges between historical reality, its mediation and representation in fiction, and universalised, abstract lyric reflection. In so doing, Langley explores how lyric form and the allusive structures offered by English literary history can accommodate a dynamic, outward-facing perception that is both intersubjective and self-

reflexive. In this poem, he embraces the cultural and linguistic mediation of experience rather than disavowing it or emphasising how it circumscribes our perceptual contact with the world (as he did, in part, in the early journals). The final section jumps forward to 1996. Via a close reading of "Jack's Pigeon" and its attendant journal entry (and with reference to Langley's other 'Jack' poems), I demonstrate how Langley's late poetry fully embraces the historicity of its own form and its own language, viewing them not as obstacles to perception but facilitators of it. The poem's "body-like" prosody, constructed through its lapidary form, partakes of a deep engagement with poetic history, creating an intersubjective, historically-contingent space, wherein multiple subjectivities can coexist.[13] In Langley's late poetry, knowledge—as mediated by the historicity of poetic language and form—is no longer seen as impeding perception but as an essential lens through which the world is disclosed, experienced and—ultimately—understood. In the main, this chapter demonstrates how the understanding of perception as always-already mediated by structures of knowledge arrived at during *The English Intelligencer*'s dissolution became, in the writing of one ex-*Intelligencer* reader, a source of generative poetic potential, and a means of reconciling modernist preoccupations with perception with the deep etymological structures of the English language and a broader English literary tradition.

For now, however, I wish to linger on the tension between direct perception and mediated knowledge in Langley's early poetry, to establish some key characteristics of it that will be drawn on over the course of this chapter. Another of Langley's perennial favourite sources, the British psychoanalyst Marion Milner's *A Life of One's Own* (1934), offers a valuable frame for thinking about these characteristics:

> When I considered anything that happened to me in terms of science, I had to split it up into parts and think only of those qualities which it had in common with others, so it lost that unique quality which it had as a whole, the 'thing-in-itselfness' which had so delighted me in wide perceiving […] [S]ometimes, when I came out from reading in a scientific library, the first whiff of hot pavement, the glimpse of a mangy terrier […] would make me feel as though I had risen from the

[13] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.120.

> dead. For this 'dogness' of the dog and 'stoneness' of the pavement […] were simply non-existent in abstract 'dog' and abstract 'pavement' […] Science was perhaps a system of charts for finding the way, but no amount of chart-studying would give to inlandsmen the smell of a wind from the sea. So at one time, with the usual 'all-or-noneness' of blind thinking, I had been inclined to repudiate the chart altogether because it was not also the sea.[14]

Milner's concept of "blind thinking", developed over the course of the text, aspires towards a pre-rational, pre-scientific cognition, wherein the subject "[repudiates] the chart" and engages with the objects of the world in terms of their "'thing-in-[themselvesness]", their indivisible *qualia*.[15]

Langley's writing, from the earliest published journal entries, attests to a cognate desire to "repudiate the chart" and immerse the perceiving subject more fully in the world of experience, while also acknowledging that "the chart" (or, to use Langley's term from the August 1970 journal, the "sequence") subtends and structures every experience we have of the world. A brief reading of other journal entries from the 1970s will help explicate this. The entry from 20 August 1978 navigates a narrow boundary between the realms of direct perception and propositional knowledge:

> The long grass is full of fallen apples. There is no wind at all, even in the tops of the orchard trees. But there are violent pockets of energy up there, which are sparrows, and those clubs of sticky berries are honeysuckle […]
>
> So. Anting. A song thrush. The universe goes on, doing what the books say it does. Its little, peculiar processes continue to be true, and here I am as a witness again, but never quite anticipating them in spite of having done the reading long ago, before I ever expected to see such things happen […]

[14] Marion Milner, *A Life of One's Own* (Hove: Routledge, 2011), pp.158-159 (original emphasis).
[15] As Byers points out, such claims to "optical innocence and immediacy" in modernist philosophy and poetry "were as much a rhetorical ploy—militating against 'habits of artistic perception'—as strategies achieved in fact". One can easily point to the irony latent in Milner's aspirations to 'blind thinking' in a text steeped in the complexities of Kleinian psychoanalysis and Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. Byers, "R. F. Langley: Seeing Things", pp.333-334.

> The detail spreads to two plants of black nightshade in the chinks of the concrete by the kitchen door […] The thrush is back, head down in the grass, working at the fruit. Everything behaving itself.[16]

The entry enacts the processes by which the flora and fauna surrounding Langley acquire their names, the verbal and scientific distinctions which distinguish them from the chaotic mass of "the universe". The "violent pockets of energy" amid "the tops of the orchard trees" settle into form as "sparrows", while the "clubs of sticky berries" quickly become "honeysuckle". If the syntax in the first paragraph is awkward, with its complex deixis and withholding of proper nouns, it is because Langley finds the processes by which perceptual details acquire verbal distinctions to be somewhat ungraceful. The dialectic between direct perception and propositional knowledge (or 'science', to use Merleau-Ponty and Milner's term) is implicit from the outset of the entry, but it is in the second paragraph quoted above that Langley engages more emphatically with the essence of Milner and Merleau-Ponty's arguments. Considering the relationship between the "little, peculiar processes" of nature and their description in his book learning, Langley finds some comfort in their mirroring of one another. However, he finds an even greater comfort in nature's capacity to produce wonder and astonishment in him, "in spite of [his] having done the reading", suggesting a phenomenological richness to his relationship with the world which defies and outstrips its capacity to be recorded in language.

However, reading against the grain of Langley's entry reveals the centrality of "books" to this relationship, ironising the Cartesian sense of the "great book of the world".[17] Here, propositional knowledge appears to be the base upon which Langley's immediate perception of the landscape is built, rather than vice versa (in contradistinction, Descartes claims to have "entirely quitted the study of letters" as a young man in favour of experiential immersion in the world).[18] Knowledge becomes the precursor to Langley's sensuous apprehension of the

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[16] R. F. Langley, "From a Journal" in *PN Review*, 36:1 (2009), p.11.

[17] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. by Elizabeth S. Haldane & G. R. T. Ross (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p.8.

[18] *ibid*. Bringing this tension into the 20th century, refer back to Merleau-Ponty's argument in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* that the scientific perspective is the second-order expression of our immediate apprehension of the world: "Science has not and never will have, by its nature, the same significance *qua* form of

world, which instead must be "[anticipated]" and structured according to his reading. The entry's concluding sentence thus takes on a double significance. "Everything behaving itself" might suggest that the world is behaving in a way which reinforces Langley's astonishment, but it might equally imply that the world is disclosing itself in a way which cleaves to the ordered, 'low resolution' picture of natural processes presented in books. This picture invariably cuts corners: it glosses over the more chaotic aspects of "[t]he thrush […], head down in the grass, working at the fruit", and instead offers a self-enclosed image of a single set of natural processes, neglecting the complex web of interactions that actually constitutes the landscape.

An even more fraught relationship between the perceiving subject and the world is presented in a journal entry from August 1979. Here, an owl-watching session produces a lengthy meditation on knowledge's role in mediating and structuring direct perception:

> I am under an oak, and the leaves hang round, each curled, faded. Some eaten to the veins. Others just pierced. The doing of this is something over, and knowing how it was done, by maybe, caterpillars, is like knowing a story. If I saw it being done […] it would be like listening to a story, surprisingly pleasing to be being shown it […] Instead of coming closer to objects and events, I feel them move off further into fiction […] Reality is not possible, because immediately the noise is in the past, and one of a pair or more of fictions […] A response of some sort, on the path, about five paces away. I need the binoculars to collect light enough to see even that far, and it is a... now I come to it... in bits... yes, a rabbit, rigid, looking, sitting, tense, quite clear […] Did I make it a rabbit by expecting it? Not so […] The world does continue to produce rabbits. They are features of something I am not making. But no more full of impact than events in a story, products of that decorum. To die would not be to see the world stripped of glosses then […] It would be to read it from behind this block, this thick, warm, spectatorship, this warm audience seat. Opening to the world... there is no such possibility. It would be easy to tell other stories about it, so that a demon appeared as objectively as the rabbit did but pointless, since that fiction too would be a tale […] Walking through sentences. I hear this bit, then that. Already the

being as the world which we perceive, for the simple reason that it is a rationale or explanation of that world." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix.

> rabbit is résumé […] Indeed the release will come when I just let myself out into it again, and, giving up knowing, just do it all again.[19]

Langley's final assertion here—that "the release will come when [he] just [lets himself] out into it again, and, giving up knowing, just [does] it all again"—recalls the crux of Milner's 'blind thinking'. For Milner, 'blind thinking' rejects both reason and narrative: it "completely [ignores] the laws of logic" and "[has] no sense of time in planning things, […] [seeming] unable to distinguish between the past and the present."[20] Langley's entry is preoccupied with how the perceptual details he registers in this landscape resist this aspect of 'blind thinking': they are immediately reified into elements of a fiction he is telling himself about how the world goes about its processes. No sooner does a detail of the landscape disclose itself to him, it is "in the past, and one of a pair or more of fictions." The rabbit he spots is already charged with symbolic meaning as a locus of hermeneutic instability: we might think of how Wittgenstein uses the rabbit/duck illusion to probe the distinctions between perception and interpretation.[21] In the entry, Langley once again worries that his knowledge of the world—the 'fictions' he tells himself about its processes—are anterior to his immediate perception of it. Or, to put it differently, he fears that his own particular 'way of seeing' is always-already inculcated by a range of cultural, intellectual and historical forces beyond his immediate recognition and control. The anxiety in this passage is so acute that Langley worries that the rabbits are the products of his own imagination, as if they have leapt out of his reading in Wittgenstein to pose a question about the nature of their own interpretability. As in the entry from August 1979, even if something akin to Milner's 'blind thinking' is tenable here, there is a risk of remaining stuck in a landscape that is textual rather than experiential: a risk of "[w]alking through sentences", or remaining stuck behind "this thick, warm, spectatorship, this warm audience seat".

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[19] R. F. Langley, "From a Journal" in *PN Review*, 31:2 (2004), p.12.

[20] Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, pp.96-97, 96.

[21] Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* appears as a source for Langley's later poem "Tom Thumb" in the bibliography at the back of the *Complete Poems*. R. F. Langley, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), p.168.

But, as I indicated a moment ago, Langley's fear that propositional knowledge would always occlude his perception of the world did not persist for the entirety of his career. The progression from this early anxiety about the fragility of perceptual immediacy towards a growing recognition of the role played by knowledge and poetic form in actively facilitating and extending perception can be mapped according to a chronological assessment of his career, which the remainder of this chapter will undertake.

I – "Gain by labour or contest": etymological ambivalence in the early journals

Langley's first published poetry (1978's *Hem*) frames the relationship between the perceiving subject and the world in which she is enmeshed as a dialectic of perceptual immediacy and epistemological distance. Before offering a close reading of the poetry in *Hem*, I will examine another journal entry from the 1970s, to demonstrate how this dialectic emerges out of Langley's early etymological and linguistic concerns. In his early journals, Langley presents etymology as inherently self-contradictory. On the one hand, it serves to authorise experience, deepening our understanding of the world by linking words to their historical roots and enriching perception through sedimented layers of meaning. In this view of etymology, chains of lexical associations create an intersubjective space where language and history converge to offer a structured reading of the natural world. On the other hand, Langley also highlights the constraining effects of this etymological approach. By imposing historical meanings onto sensory experiences, language also limits the richness of direct perception, locking perceptual details into predefined semantic and philological frameworks. The journal entry from 17 October 1970 illustrates this tension by foregrounding not only how knowledge mediates perception, but how that knowledge emerges from a complex of literary and linguistic foundations:

> The stream surface by the bridge is as difficult to make sense of as it always is, so I am content with this: the emerald weed is stroked out straight, and over it there are two patterns of ripples […] like wrinkled skin shifting along over a rib-cage […] Bracken fingers come through a holly hedge and make textual play with it […]

> Hedera helix […] Dock to mist. Wan green, wan wasps, 'worn out with toil'. Gwan, feeble, faint. Win. Gain by labour or contest. Now there is little more to win. Suffer. Strive. Pale, pallid, fallow, pale brownish. 'His hewe was falwe'. Fealu. Pale red. Yellowish red.[22]

If, as Wallace Stevens wrote, and Langley echoed, writing poetry is "the act of finding | What will suffice", Langley's encounter with an object which defies his perceptual capacities (the "bridge [which] is difficult to make sense of") precipitates his recourse to a range of poetic and discursive modes in order to find a sufficient pool of language to attend to the scene and make himself "content".[23] This technique is affirmed by Stephen Benson in his reading of the journals as an exercise in enacting the "essaying of words on the possibility of the perceived world".[24] Here, the "essaying" of description is a bulwark against the unknown, a self-generative operation which slips between the straightforward observation of sense-data ("grey hedge", "[w]an green", "[p]ale red. Yellowish red") and attempts to make the unfamiliar resonate with the proprioceptive familiarity of the body ("the emerald weed […] [passes] […] like wrinkled skin shifting along over a rib-cage"). Langley also turns to a number of epistemological frameworks through which perception is mediated: specifically, Linnaean taxonomy ("Hedera helix"), as well as other philological channels.

As Langley stated in an interview with R. F. Walker,

> I never write a poem without having etymological dictionaries around and—I don't necessarily look up every word—but wherever I find myself at a point where I feel something else is there or I must expand in some way, etymology is one of the major places to look. Ever since I read Hopkins and ever since Skeat's etymological dictionary [*An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*] first came into my hands, I've found etymology important. And let it lead me […] I stick within those parameters […] In addition to the virtue of direct experience, I want to feel, to some extent, authorised by etymology.[25]

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[22] R. F. Langley, *Journals* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2006), pp.9-10.
[23] These lines from Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry" appear as the epigraph to Langley's *Complete Poems*, n.p.
[24] Stephen Benson, "Description's Repertoire: The *Journals* of R. F. Langley" in *English*, 67:256 (2018), pp.43-63 (p.52).
[25] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.122.

In the entry from 17 October 1970, and throughout Langley's writing, Walter Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* becomes a means of situating the perceiving, speaking and writing self in history, "[authorising]" the subject's perceptions by grounding them in a sedimented experiential history constituted by other perceiving, speaking and writing subjects. Understood in this way, etymology becomes a vector of intersubjectivity, a means of locating the self's experiences in history and culture through the recognition that other selves have had similar experiences and have articulated them within the same linguistic and orthographic "parameters". As David-Antoine Williams writes, for Langley, "etymology 'gives' to the inventory of associated or associable meaning. It is a conceptual and a compositional instrument, a way of recirculating the world of experience into the realm of ideas, and back again, of connecting the two, and making connections within and across them."[26]

This is certainly the way Langley uses etymology later in his career. Williams's reading of Langley's etymological practices draws on the poems "Cash Point", "Depending on the Weather" and "Man Jack", all from the 1990s and 2000s. We will examine Langley's late recuperation of the historicity of language as a marker of intersubjectivity in parts III and IV of this chapter. In 1970, however, Langley's stance towards etymology is more contentious. In the journal entry above, Skeat's definitions of "wan", "win" and "fallow" trigger a chain of etymological and perceptual associations and cross-pollinations: Skeat defines 'wan' as "worn out with toil", and connects it potentially to 'win' ("gain by labour or contest") through a shared root in the Anglo-Saxon *winnan*, "to strive, contend, toil".[27] Meanwhile, the Anglo-Saxon root of "fallow", '*fealu*' (pale yellow or red) is accessed through the perceptual detail of the "[p]ale [...] Yellowish red" and "[w]an green" of the autumn scene and its "[w]an wasps". Langley's use of "fallow" prompts another dive into English philology, this time into Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" and its description of Arcite's fallow complexion ("'[h]is hewe was falwe'").[28]

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[26] David-Antoine Williams, *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.130.
[27] Walter Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1882), p.695.
[28] *ibid*, p.203.

Through these repeated excavations of the deep, Teutonic structures underpinning the English language, the words which Langley uses to register the simplest sensual details (colour, for example) lose their optical innocence. Instead, Langley reveals that they are encrusted with historical sediment: they are shaped by the repeated usages which have formed them into what they are at the moment of his writing the entry, and they can never be disentangled from this history.

Read optimistically, the chain of lexical associations in this journal entry might form part of etymology's "[authorising]" presence in Langley's writing.[29] Read another way, however, there is a sense in the entry that the recourse to etymology means that Langley has hit a bedrock of interpretative possibility. Through their 'wanness', the wasps are locked into a semantic chain projected onto them by the perceiving subject. This imposition of the spectator onto the scene is itself a form of the "[gaining] by labour or contest" parsed as 'winning' in the passage: the wasps are 'won' through description's conquest (at least in Langley's eyes). Skeat reminds us that "win" (and, by extension "wan") once carried a distinctly martial valence: "The orig. sense was to endure, fight, struggle; hence to struggle for, gain by struggling."[30] This imposition onto the scene exhausts it of its vibrant, meaningful potential: "Now there is little more to win." The "pallid, fallow" appearance of the wasps is not merely an etymologically charged description of their colour. It is also a figurative sign that they have been leeched of their 'thing-in-themselvesness', the ontological qualities which Marion Milner finds to "[delight us] in wide perceiving."[31]

Langley's decision to frame this bifurcated and ambivalent depiction of etymology around the words "win" and "wan" does not seem random. Just three years before Langley wrote this entry, Prynne had published a prose piece in *The English Intelligencer* called "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts". This polemical piece, in the style of the *Intelligencer*'s other 'notes' (see the discussion of Peter Riley's "Working Notes on British Prehistory" and Prynne's

[29] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.122.
[30] Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, p.712.
[31] Milner, *A Life of One's Own*, p.158.

"Note on Metal" in Chapter One) interrogates the etymological history of the word 'winsome' as it appears in the 1966 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (acerbically recast by Prynne as "the new Oxford Dictionary of Etymological Evasion & Cowardice").[32] It collages the Oxford Dictionary's account with examples of the use of the Old English rune *wynn* (ƿ) in the *Hávamál*, Cynewulf's *Phoenix* and various Old English place-names, as well as Julius Pokorny's account of the Proto-Indo-European etyma *u̯en-* and *u̯enə-* in his 1959 *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*. Prynne aims to produce a more complex understanding of the *win-* root than the one given by the Oxford Dictionary, which argues that the definition of 'winsome' as 'pleasant' must be an anomaly imported "into the language from the north, where it must have survived with a specialised meaning."[33] This is presumably due to 'win' being linked with a concept at odds with pleasantness: a gain made through strife, or "[g]ain by labour or contest", as Langley has it following Skeat. Through a paratactic collage of academic and literary sources (which allows for a range of disparate materials to make reciprocal and unexpected comment on one another), Prynne reveals that "[t]he English rune wynn (written ƿ) was the name for 'bliss'", and concludes that,

> The proto-Germanic rune *wunjo, "bliss", is now a name no longer audible at our current wave-length: and being a total opponent of names the Oxford Etym. Dict. will do nothing to take us back, to the sounds of our proper selves.[34]

Skeat's dictionary is not a source in the "Pedantic Note", but in a letter to Langley from 21 April 1961, Prynne explicitly recommended it as a supplement to Julius Pokorny's etymological dictionary of Proto-Indo-European:

> For crucial words, however, on which much hangs and on which you are prepared to spend some time, I really do recommend Julius Pokorny, Indogermanisches Etymologisches Worterbuch [sic] […] which is a magnificent work […] A good way of using him (unscientific, but what the hell: we are not philologists) is to look up

[32] J. H. Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.124-135 (p.124).
[33] "Winsome" in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. by C. T. Onions, G. W. S. Friedrichsen, and R. W. Burchfield (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). Quoted in Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts", p.124.
[34] Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts", p.124, 129. Original emphasis.

> the key word in Skeat, and then look up the root he gives in Pokorny; if you bear in mind the form Skeat gives for the word in Latin, Greek, Anglo-Saxon etc., and then watch for this in Pokorny's list of cognate forms, you will be able to see whether you are in the right place in Pokorny.[35]

As an active participant in conversations with Prynne about etymological dictionaries and Celtic, Teutonic and Proto-Indo-European roots (of which the letter from 21 April 1961 is a crucial part), Langley's usage of "win" and "wan" in a journal entry which also focusses on the unstable nature of etymology as an authorising force is significant in the context of the "Pedantic Note". Although Langley was not on the circulation list for *The English Intelligencer* in May 1967—the month before the "Pedantic Note" was published—his extensive correspondence with Prynne throughout the 1960s about the multivalency of certain etyma and the use of Pokorny strongly suggests an alignment in their thinking both about the *win-* root and broader questions of etymological practice.[36] For Langley at this stage in his career, just as for Prynne, etymology has the power to shut down our access to the world—and to our true selves—as much as it has the power to facilitate access to a shared pool of experience. Just as Prynne argues in the "Pedantic Note" that poor etymological practice can "do nothing to take us back, to the sounds of our proper selves", so too does Langley find that the recourse to etymology cocoons him from the vibrant particularity of the world around him, sapping the wasps of their colour and leaving them phenomenologically "pallid" and "faint." Even in his journal—a private repository of writing—Langley scrutinises how every instance of perception is structured and controlled by an English literary and philological tradition, stretching back intratextually (i.e., in terms of its own pool of allusion) to Chaucer, and, through its invocation of the specific terms of Prynne's "Pedantic Note", extratextually, to Old English runes and Proto-Indo-European etyma.

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[35] J. H. Prynne, letter to R. F. Langley, 21 April 1961 in R. F. Langley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144/7, Box 346. JHPP. Original emphasis.

[36] "Circulation List, May 1967" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, pp.137-138. Langley appears on the preceding circulation lists and roll calls.

II – "The idea of a bird come || over into sight and sound": *Hem*, lyric immediacy and epistemological distance

A reading of Langley's journals predating the publication of *Hem* reveals a preoccupation with the capacity for abstracted knowledge—particularly philological and literary knowledge—to usurp direct perception, either by fixing it to a "sequence" of "intricate causal [relationships]", or else by revealing the extent to which the perceiver's etymological and linguistic knowledge intervenes in the moment of perception, "[making] textual play with it" or else draining it of its phenomenological richness.[37] *Hem* extends this investigation: in this volume, Langley examines how the dialectic between perception and knowledge is borne out formally, partitioning these modes of attention across different prosodic textures.

Langley's own reflections on the compositional history of "Matthew Glover", the longest poem in *Hem*, underscore these formal and perceptual tensions. In the interview with R. F. Walker, Langley characterised the poem as "a fairly naïve attempt to do a minuscule Olson in an English setting […]: with willow warblers instead of kingfishers and an open verse system, a field verse system, moving in open paragraphs […] It very much came to me as an extension of Olson and areal Dorn poetry to start with."[38] In a letter to Ian Brinton from 2010, however, Langley sketches a very different line of influence:

> The pleasure lay in writing about the little willow tree I knew and how it blew in the wind, the willow warblers I had watched in the bushes at dusk on the border of the parish. Nothing so personally particular in Olson. I would guess my deepest feelings have always been for Coleridge's Conversation Poems, the Lime Tree Bower, the shock which begins where the particular strikes, beyond any general concepts, geographical, historical or whatever. The movement of the leaves as they are shaken in that particular little cutting by the water of the stream stirring the air around them, not even worrying too much about ideas of the One Life for instance.[39]

[37] Langley, "The Self is Gone", pp.15-16. Langley, *Journals*, p.10.
[38] Walker, "An Interview with R. F. Langley", p.118.
[39] Quoted in Ian Brinton, "Ditch Vision: essays on poetry, nature and place by Jeremy Hooker" in "Awen" <https://tearsinthefence.com/2017/12/04/ditch-vision-essays-on-poetry-nature-and-place-by-jeremy-hooker-awen/> [accessed 24 June 2022].

As my discussion of the journals should make clear, any appeal Langley makes to the "personally particular […] beyond any general concepts, geographical, historical" is rarely without complication: Langley was surely cognisant of the extent to which a poem like Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison" emerges out of a system of reading and thinking that transcends the immediate vantage amid the "branchless ash" and "dark green file of long lank weeds" Coleridge's speaker speaks from.[40] Nonetheless, a tension between two kinds of poetry emerges in Langley's account of "Matthew Glover": one grounded in the research poetry of Dorn and Olson, concerned with uncovering the 'areal' relations constituting a specific landscape (and the interaction of natural and cultural forms upon that landscape), and another grounded in the "personally particular" situation of the twitcher positioned "on the border of the parish", responding to the immediate stimuli of "willow warblers […] in the bushes". This tension is tied to two different prosodic traditions, and two different geographies. Langley's first published work juxtaposes the New American prosody embraced by his peers during the *Intelligencer* era with an English lyric tradition that projective verse had ostensibly opposed, but which, as my analysis of Riley in Chapter One shows, British sub-Olsonian poetry struggled to move beyond. Later in his career, Langley found a way to access some of the phenomenological aspirations of Olson's objectism—specifically, the capacity for the perceiver to enter more fully into an intersubjective realm of experience—through a prosody predicated on a synthetic constellation of dramatic monologue-esque techniques reaching allusively back to the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Cowper. The 'Englishness' of "Matthew Glover" is more ambivalent, however, functioning (like the bifurcated presentation of etymology in the journal entry from October 1970) as both a channel and an obstacle to an immediate, sensuous apprehension of the world.

As Daniel Eltringham summarises, citing Charles Mundye, "Matthew Glover" "mediates the effects of an Enclosure Bill on 'the environs of a Staffordshire village […] from an early 'open field' system through the changes effected by eighteenth-century land

[40] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Including Poems and Versions of Poems now Published for the First Time*, vol. I, ed. by E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p.179. Hereafter *Complete Poetical Works*.

enclosures'".[41] Eltringham and Mundye both foreground the poem's preoccupation with the ways in which social changes and political economy shape the Staffordshire landscape. It is my contention that "Matthew Glover" goes deeper than this: the poem is concerned with illuminating how the landscape perceived by the speaker is mediated by a range of textualities and epistemologies, not just those explicitly connected with law and economics. This is implicitly announced in the poem's opening:

> To start with throve heavy forest
> this district, on its marl
> thick blue marl
>
> a wood, preformal
>
> no stream showed downhill
> no hill rose up
> but like a seasurface
> this tract waited
> for a mark, for a –
> they would call it
>
> navel
>
> which someone did
> and from which came
> great benefit: as they cut it
> out of the trees
>
> they had it
> first time here
>
> shape, clearcut
> opens the four directions
> cardinal points in the previous wrack
> hollywrack alder bramble oak old
> dragon
>
> in good shape now for
> them to go to bed

[41] Charles Mundye, "American Odyssey: Review of Ed Dorn, *Collected Poems*" in *Poetry Review*, 103, ed. by Patrick McGuiness (2013), pp.102-107. Quoted in Eltringham, *Poetry and Commons*, p.86.

point their feet south

if they wish
and the roof
opens
the fifth way
that is, heaven

meanwhile, and because they
watched the moon, over the clearing
they had an image for growth and decay
implying resurrection.[42]

The poem's opening presents a set of interlocking perspectives on the Staffordshire village. We are asked to look back on the landscape as it was at the time of its first settlement (suggested by Langley's framing of the scene as a "start", and the image of the early inhabitants cutting a clearing or "navel" out of the trees). However, the image is textured by a technical vocabulary derived from an anthropological vantage point formulated thousands of years after that scene unfolded. Langley's source for the opening is Mircea Eliade's 1961 text *The Sacred and The Profane*, which, along with Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return*, had been a key theoretical touchstone for the *Intelligencer* community.[43] Langley's use of Eliade here, years after witnessing the disintegration of the prosodic and intellectual basis of the *Intelligencer*, is part of a paradigmatically self-reflexive practice of troping on the theoretical touchstones which originally constituted that basis. In "Matthew Glover", this practice allows him to explore the irony inherent in the *Intelligencer*'s penchant for recapitulating the Olsonian claim that that "the First, the originary, is always the most advanced", without properly acknowledging *how* that perspective on the past was coloured by contemporary anthropology.[44]

As Julian Thomas argues, "[w]e in the present can produce a reading of ancient constructed spaces, because like past people we can engage with the materiality of those

[42] Langley, *Complete Poems*, pp.25-26.
[43] See, for example, Riley's discussion with Prynne of *Myth of the Eternal Return* in Riley, letter to Prynne, 13 April 1967, in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, Box 213, 268, The J. H. Prynne Papers, Cambridge University Library.
[44] Clarke, "The Archaeology of Morning", n.p.

places. Yet our involvement will be different in quality, since it is performed on the basis of a contemporary set of prejudices and understandings […] The chance that we, existing outside the Neolithic social and cultural context, could ever present exactly the same reading of [e.g.] a megalithic tomb as would an inhabitant of Neolithic Britain is hence extremely slim."[45] Langley's use of Eliade in "Matthew Glover" resonates with Thomas' arguments here: the "wood" out of which the Staffordshire settlement emerges would only be "preformal" in Eliade's retroactive terms, as this is the word he deploys in *The Sacred and The Profane* to describe "the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence" which apparently preceded settled human society.[46] Reading the description of the clearing as a "navel" against Eliade produces a similar effect. *The Sacred and The Profane* repeatedly uses the metaphor of the 'navel of the earth' to visualise the growth of civilisations outwards in "four directions" from a "cardinal" centre: "[a] universe comes to birth from its centre; it spreads out from a central point that is, as it were, its navel", one passage affirms.[47]

Considering the poem in light of its sources, Langley's assertion that "someone did" call the clearing a "navel" takes on two meanings. On one hand, he might be excavating the etymological history of 'navel', tracing it back through the Proto-Germanic **nabalô* to the Proto-Indo-European **h₃nób^{h}ōl*, which could refer to a centre, clearing or middle point, as well as a navel. Doing so demonstrates how the metaphorical association between a navel and a clearing emerged through language, recalling Prynne's reading of Olson's charting of the "literal founding of history and its local cadence into speech" in *Maximus*.[48] On the other hand, that "someone" may just be Eliade himself, figured as an authorising presence in the text who fixes history according to his own linguistic and conceptual schema. Both readings underscore how the authority of philology, or even the act of naming, can freeze phenomena through language, paralleling how the etymologically-charged words Langley reverted to in the journal entry of 17 October 1970 left the wasps he was describing phenomenologically

[45] Julian Thomas, *Understanding the Neolithic* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.45-46.
[46] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harvest, 1959), p.130.
[47] *ibid*, p.44. My emphasis.
[48] Prynne, "Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI", p.64.

enfeebled. Langley's terse *mise-en-scène*, redolent of the immediacy of field notes or *didascalia* ("[t]o start with throve heavy forest", for example), invites us to see the scene as self-revealed. However, the use of specific, loaded terminology from Eliade's text reveals that the description is being mediated through a particular historiographical lens, breaking the illusion of visual immediacy and revealing the landscape at hand to be more textual and philological than it is geophysical.

The argument that Langley is consciously drawing upon the specialised theoretical language of the *Intelligencer* in "Matthew Glover" is evidenced by a hitherto unstudied letter Langley sent to Prynne on 4 September 1968, when he completed the initial draft of "Matthew Glover". In the letter, Langley calls back to the specific terminology of the *Intelligencer*'s debates about the Neolithic past as a site of phenomenological potential. He writes that the first draft was inspired by the,

> Early Bronze age, the laddies who put oculi on their pygmy cups and cremate children in them… Riley's mother goddess people […]
>
> Coming from my poetic attempts about the possible alignments of the Open Field system in sacred space, a naughty supposition I allowed myself, encouraged by Merleau Ponty [sic] who says Romans and the "Germanic" peoples had the old omphalos all the time.[49]

This letter complicates Langley's 2010 claims to Ian Brinton that "Matthew Glover" was not motivated by "geographical, historical" concepts. The fact that Langley's poem was in fact partially a response to Peter Riley's "Working Notes on British Prehistory" confirms that it emerged from a set of secondary and idiosyncratic reflections upon and appropriations of the Neolithic past. Langley is here referring to Riley's parsing of the Bronze Age as ushering in a new *Weltanschauung* for the Britons, centred on cremation instead of burial and therefore confirming a sense of the self as "no longer at home on his [sic] earth … [awaiting] release by purgation".[50] Taken together with the use of Eliade in the completed draft of the poem,

[49] R. F. Langley, letter to J. H, Prynne, 4 September 1968 in R. F. Langley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144/7, Box 347. JHPP.
[50] Riley, "Working Notes on British Prehistory", p.66.

Langley is drawing upon a set of sources which share the characteristic of using the British prehistoric past as a template for the present. In so doing, he positions "Matthew Glover" as—in part—a meditation on how our knowledge of ancient landscapes and peoples is circumscribed by particular historiographical agendas.

As with any of his claims for the possibility of the immediate apprehension of the "personally particular", the claims Langley makes in the interview with Brinton regarding "Matthew Glover"'s engagement with "the shock which begins where the particular strikes, beyond any general concepts, geographical, historical or whatever" must be properly scrutinised, according to both the broad terms of Langley's poetics and from within the local terms of the poem itself.[51] As I stated earlier, "Matthew Glover" moves between a projective mode when it is dealing with historical assemblage and research, and a more lyrical mode which captures the present-day speaker's observations, as he looks out over the fields and watches willow warblers. A close reading of these more immediately lyrical moments reveals that they are often more deeply structured by the speaker's propositional knowledge than the 'research' sections of the poem. This is evident both in their content and in how their prosodic and formal qualities are continually disrupted by ostensibly 'non-poetic' materials, such as historiographical reportage. Moreover, Langley's inclusion of the imagined speech of the village's historical residents in these lyrical sections ultimately breaks the illusion that they are being articulated from within a continuous and immediate lyric present. Instead, he weaves in a form of dramatic monologue that conjures the fragmentary voices of real historical figures, underscoring the presentation of the landscape as a complex synthesis of intersubjective positions, distributed across time.

These more lyrical segments are characterised by two-line stanzas detailing the movement of the birds in impressionistic detail:

> and, as the light changes, they are soft
> brown or soft yellow with such restraint

[51] Langley in Brinton, "Ditch Vision".

that their flanks
shew like ice

as they shift
the small fizz

of their flight
breaks into

your thoughts…

watching them is to see
the idea of a bird come

over into sight and sound,
momently, secretly, so

hard to see them in the air in
the bush …

they keep themselves
within pure outlines.[52]

Despite the impression of lyric immediacy and mimesis suggested by the passage's sensuous and sonorous detail ("they are **soft** | brown or **soft** yellow"; "their flank**s** | **sh**ew like i**ce** || as they **sh**ift | the **s**mall fi**zz**" [my emphasis, underscoring sibilance and rhyme]), the speaker's impressions of the warblers are caught in a complex negotiation with abstract systems of knowledge and culture. The claim that "watching [the warblers] is to see | the idea of a bird come || over into sight and sound" suggests a Kantian or Platonic form of cognition, wherein the idealised conception of a bird precedes the sensory impression of one. This is an inversion of Merleau-Ponty's formulation throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception* that "[t]he whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and […] we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression".[53] In "Matthew Glover", "basic experience" and "the world as directly experienced" run the very real risk of becoming "the second-order expression" of "[t]he whole universe of

[52] Langley, *Complete Poems*, pp.26-27.
[53] Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix.

science". This same risk underlies the journal entries predating *Hem*'s publication: when, on 1 December 1970, Langley writes that "[t]he sky is by Poussin in his most austere colours, pink cloud, slate blue in its crevices, on a duck-egg background", he is implicitly revealing the extent to which his "second-order" art historical knowledge structures and mediates his experience of the world, forming a membrane through which direct perception must pass.[54] The final couplet quoted above—the assertion that the warblers "keep themselves | within pure outlines"—suggests not only the saccadic movement of the birds as they flit "in the air | in the bush", but also their existence within the cognitive frameworks that the speaker brings to bear on the moment of their perception, echoing Langley's observation in the journal entry of 17 October 1970, that "[t]hings, which are thus not clear-cut, seem free to tug contexts around themselves."[55] Langley is here undercutting any pretensions towards lyric immediacy, by emphasising that the lyric is not immune to the processes of abstraction which also saturate the 'research' sections of the poem.

As the poem develops, Langley increasingly blurs the distinction he has drawn between minimalist lyric and the projective mode which records historical research into the village in "an open verse system, a field verse system, moving in open paragraphs".[56] The convergence between these two prosodic and perceptual modes is most strong when the poem treats the figure of Matthew Glover himself, an obscure resident of the village whose ambivalence to land enclosure leads Langley to gloss him as the "resident, who would not | speak for or against".[57] As Jeremy Noel-Tod observes, "[t]he reticent Glover is brought to life [by Langley] in a minimalist monologue adapted from a historical source, James T. Gould's *Men of Aldridge* (1957)".[58] Noel-Tod also notes that, across the different prosodic textures employed in the poem, Langley challenges the stability of a discrete speaking voice, slipping from "the thoughts of Glover", to "the present-day observer", to the present-day observer's "[musings] on Glover

[54] Langley, *Journals*, p.11.
[55] *ibid*, p.9.
[56] Walker, "An Interview with R. F. Langley", p.118.
[57] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.29.
[58] Jeremy Noel-Tod, "Dramatic Monologue: R. F. Langley and the Poem of 'Anyone in Particular'" in *Forms of Late Modernist Lyric*, ed. by Edward Allen (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2021), pp.215-242 (p.222).

in the third person, comparing the man's vanishingly slight historical trace with the small movements of the birds in the bush".[59] As Noel-Tod implies by writing of his "vanishingly slight historical trace", Matthew Glover is named once in Gould's *Men of Aldridge*:

> The man who would not declare for or against the Bill must have been Matthew Glover, a resident, but one owning very little land. His attitude is hard to understand unless he wished to oppose the Bill but was frightened of the possible results of downright opposition to his more influential neighbours.[60]

Despite (or because of) the scantness of historical material on Matthew Glover, and Gould's reliance on conjecture and inference to fill in the gaps ("… *must have been* Matthew Glover … His attitude *is hard to understand*" [my emphasis]), he becomes a figure of imaginative projection and displacement for both Langley and the speaker. He serves as the namesake of a poem ostensibly about the historical areal relations of the Staffordshire landscape, and how these have textured the perceptual experiences of a modern-day twitcher, as well as a mouthpiece for both the researcher-poet and lyric 'I'. The minimalist lyric, earlier in the poem exclusively the domain of the present-day speaking subject, begins to lose its stability by the poem's conclusion, as it takes on the imagined voice of Glover:

> Owning very little land
> rated at eightpence
> very little soil
>
> maybe I did wish
> to oppose the Bill
>
> but I dared not do it
> for fear I had missed…
>
> A long time
> I imagined
>
> each square
> five acres

[59] *ibid*, pp.222-223.
[60] James T. Gould, *Men of Aldridge: A Local History of the Area Now Included in the Urban District of Aldridge* (Bloxwich, Walsall: Press of Geof. J. Clark Ltd., 1957), pp.59-60.

I turned it
over

in my mind

no distractions.[61]

Here, multiple temporalities, subject-positions and bibliographic traces bleed into one another. "[M]aybe I did wish | to oppose the Bill" could well be Glover rationalising his ambivalence after the fact, either to himself or to another party, but "[o]wning very little land" and "rated at eightpence" are Gould's own glosses on Glover's economic situation on page 59 of *Men of Aldridge*.[62] When the margin shunts further to the right, we are even less sure of who is speaking. Given the speaker's musings throughout the poem on how the enclosure of common land has inflected his experience of birdwatching in the present day, it is possible he is the one "[imagining] || each square | five acres" as he watches warblers in the bush. Equally, however, it could be Glover again, "[turning] … over" the potential benefits of enclosure "in [his] mind". Across line and stanza breaks, we move from an imagined ventriloquising of and sympathetic identification with Glover, to the parsing of Glover's economic situation through a historiographical screen, to the merging of Glover's voice with the lyric voice of the present-day speaker.

More starkly than the poem's use of Eliade, Merleau-Ponty, or the allusions to the *Intelligencer* in the parts of the poem written in an "open verse system … moving in open paragraphs", the interpolation of Gould into the lyrical sections of the poem reveals the extent to which Langley sees our access to the "personally particular […] beyond any general concepts, geographical, historical or whatever" as mediated by a vast range of those 'second-order' "general concepts".[63] Moreover, the interplay of voices I have just described (shifting between imagined fragments of speech from a real historical figure and more generalised utterances of a speaker in the lyric present) allows Langley to freely recruit dramatic

[61] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.30.
[62] Gould, *Men of Aldridge*, p.59.
[63] Langley in Brinton, "Ditch Vision".

monologue techniques to develop multiple perceptual positions and subjectivities across the poem, which are then able to reciprocally modulate one another. Culler observes that dramatic monologues in the English tradition typically "portray a fictional speaker through his or her own words and thus often involve a mimesis of speech".[64] However, in "Matthew Glover", this mimesis is complicated by a subjectivity that oscillates across prosodic textures and temporal and intertextual layers, blending speech with historical reportage, economic data and the reflections of a more abstract lyric 'I'. Through this technique, Langley builds toward an expanded, pluralistic conception of subjectivity, activated through older forms of lyric prosody. The next section will explore this conception more thoroughly.

III – The "dramatic monologue-like sort of" prosody of "Juan Fernandez"

The gradual melding of subjectivities, registers and ways of perceiving in "Matthew Glover" is shadowed by an important question that persists throughout Langley's writing: to what extent are pretensions towards lyric immediacy in English literary history fallacies, insofar as they are always mediated by a set of formal choices that are culturally, philologically and historically contingent? As we saw in Part I, Langley's journal entries from the 1970s present a dialectical, ambivalent attitude towards etymology, showing how language itself has the capacity to collapse the phenomenological richness of perception, draining the object of perception of its constitutive 'thing-in-itselfness'. Likewise, in Part II we saw how Langley establishes the lyric prosody of "Matthew Glover" initially as a container for his subject's immediate immersion in the world, before deconstructing that immediacy. Lyric in "Matthew Glover" ultimately becomes a container for the same forms of secondary research that the poem elsewhere frames as an abstraction out of primary experience, as well as the imagined voice of a real historical figure, ruminating on land enclosure. 1979's "Juan Fernandez" (first published in Peter Ackroyd, Ian Patterson and Nick Totton's pamphlet *A Vision Very Like Reality*) marks a shift in Langley's conception of lyric prosody. It fully abandons projective verse for blank verse and employs a set of formal and structural schema which bring the poem far closer to the conversation poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge than what Langley describes as "the

[64] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p.265.

minuscule Olson in an English setting" in *Hem*.[65] Rather than using these lyric features ironically, it is my contention that Langley locates within them the capacity for the forms of perceptual extension imagined by Olson and his British descendants in the *Intelligencer* community. In "Juan Fernandez", Langley develops a deeply allusive prosody and his own idiosyncratic conception of the dramatic monologue, one which encompasses not only a loosely particularised historical speaking subject (Alexander Selkirk, whose 1704 shipwreck on the Juan Fernández archipelago inspired both a 1782 dramatic monologue by William Cowper and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) but also the fictional versions of Selkirk in Cowper's poem and Defoe's novel and a far less character-like and more abstract lyric 'I' redolent of Wordsworth and Coleridge's conversation poems. In so doing, he locates within a particular lineage of English lyric poetry the potential for a way of seeing that is both radically intersubjective and self-reflexive, wherein the fact that perception is always-already oriented towards a culture, a community and the perceiver herself is embraced rather than disavowed.

Like the lyric moments of "Matthew Glover" which ventriloquise the historical subject of Matthew Glover himself (albeit with slippages between what we expect to be the voice of Glover and Langley's own historical research into Glover, drawn from Gould's *Men of Aldridge*), "Juan Fernandez" is a dramatic monologue, insofar as it gives utterance to a speaking voice that addresses and rationalises itself to a real or imagined interlocutor.[66] A key point of distinction between "Juan Fernandez" and "Matthew Glover" is that the speaking subject of the former is only partly a recognisable historical or fictional individual. In "Juan Fernandez", Langley sometimes adopts a perspective that is universalised and abstract, but also retains the freedom to shift between the speaking voices of a range of fictional, imagined, and historical personae. Langley described this mode in an interview with R. F. Walker as a "dramatic monologue-like sort of way", which conjures the convincing impression of direct address, even if the specific identity of both addresser and the addressee is here very often

[65] *ibid.*

[66] In "Matthew Glover", moments such as Glover's admission that "maybe [he] did wish | to oppose the Bill" suggest this double act of address and self-rationalisation implicit in the mode Langley is recruiting. Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.30.

unknown or implicit.[67] As Jeremy Noel-Tod writes, citing Carol T. Christ and emphasising the array of half-formed personae and speakers Langley incorporates within his poems, "Langley's development from the late 1970s of [...] [dramatic monologue] techniques [...] [explores] [...] 'the project of imagining oneself as a character'—even if that project involves imagining oneself to be incoherent."[68]

With its loose and constellation-like qualities, Langley's "dramatic monologue-like way" recalls a central argument in Robert Langbaum's 1957 book on dramatic monologue, *The Poetry of Experience* (a text which Noel-Tod has comfortably demonstrated that Langley read).[69] Langbaum argues that lyrical content often drives dramatic monologue, above and beyond dramatic action: "the lyric [...] arises as an expression of pure will, an expression for which the dramatic situation, if any, provides merely the occasion."[70] This emphasis on lyric over dramatic action enables Langley to conceive of the dramatic monologue as a capacious form—absorbing a broad range of poetic speech acts—and therefore an intersubjective form, in which a range of personae and speaking subjects (historical and imagined) can be enfolded and articulated within the poem's shifting registers. Jonathan Culler observes that, with Langbaum's expanded conception of the dramatic monologue in mind, it becomes possible to "read other poems of the tradition as dramatic monologues, breaking the link between poet and dramatised speaker, in poems such as 'Tintern Abbey' and even Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight'".[71] I will take this approach in this section, because I believe it to be the best way to address Langley's free and expanded conception of the form, which shifts fluidly from an abstract or multiple speaker into various historical and fictional personae.

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[67] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.124.
[68] Carol T. Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.44. Quoted in Noel-Tod, "Dramatic Monologue", p.217.
[69] Noel-Tod writes that Langley's use of the phrase "the dialogue that becomes dramatic monologues" in a private commonplace book to describe the form of language which separates his 'Jack' persona (discussed in Part IV of this chapter) from himself as author demonstrates Langley's familiarity with Langbaum's argument in *The Poetry of Experience* that "dramatic monologue continued 'the imaginative apprehension gained through primary experience' of Romantic poetry." Noel-Tod, "Dramatic Monologue", p.234.
[70] Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1959), p.188.
[71] Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p.270.

Returning to "Juan Fernandez", we can immediately see Langley writing in a "dramatic monologue-like sort of way" through the poem's appeals to an abstracted 'I', 'you' and a 'we', combined with the realisation of a putatively authentic conversational speaking voice through blank verse, a prosodic scheme favoured by Wordsworth and Coleridge. I will examine the theoretical implications of these "dramatic monologue-like" features more fully later in this section, emphasising how these relate to matters of perception. In doing so, I will situate Langley's text alongside William Cowper's own dramatic monologue named after the Juan Fernández archipelago, "Verses, supposed to be written by Alexander Selkirk, during his solitary Abode in the Island of Juan Fernandez" (hereafter "Verses"). For now, I would like to focus on the allusive resonance of Langley's conversational prosody with a sub-tradition of poems Culler includes in his expanded definition of the dramatic monologue: Coleridge's conversation poems, such as "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison", "The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight". We saw in Part II how Langley invoked the conversation poems as the "deepest" influences behind "Matthew Glover" in a 2010 letter to Ian Brinton.[72] However, I contend that the conversation poems hold a far stronger relationship to "Juan Fernandez" than to "Matthew Glover", insofar as each part of "Juan Fernandez" (the poem is subdivided into six seventeen-line stanzas) is in blank verse and loosely reproduces the characteristic movement undertaken in Coleridge's poems, famously parsed by M. H. Abrams—along with other "greater Romantic lyrics" like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey"—as:

> [presenting] a determinate speaker in a particularised, and usually a localised, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent. The speaker begins with a description of the landscape; an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling […] In the course of this meditation the lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, […] or resolves an emotional problem. Often the poem rounds

[72] Langley in Brinton, "Ditch Vision".

> upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding.[73]

In the first part of "Juan Fernandez", this structure is enacted, albeit without the presence of a fully "determinate speaker" and in an outdoor setting that is far from "particularised" (though other parts of the poem do unfold in more concretely realised outdoor environments):

> As we slowly exploit the opportunities
> between the jug and the earth, sky, men
> and divinities, somewhere along the hold
> the spring has, the ring gaining the ear
> as it is picked up, the print on the bar,
> the head shakes, shakes in a rainbow nexus,
> shakes to see the old marks so very plain,
> shakes the traps in reflection, rattles
> the concentration into scrapping across
> the frame, fluttering, mercurial, rabbits
> vanish, turning everything into a large
> form protecting the small ones, a spread
> hand mothering doubts, as now that
> whoever that was has stamped past, they
> wrinkle out, filling the hollow again.
> And now is the water as firm as a heel?
> Back drops blue sky. Convenient steel.[74]

I will unpack the implications of the poem's preoccupation with the "whoever that was that [stamps] past" in the discussion of its allusive and intertextual range below. For now, it is worth focussing on the transformative effect this presence has on the perspective of the speaking subject, which evokes Abrams' reading of Coleridge's conversation poems as moving through the dialectic of speech to a renewed apprehension of the "outer scene". The poem begins with an assured sense of the speaker and her implied addressee's (signalled by the use of "we") capacity to move flexibly between the perceptual details of their surroundings and the broader cosmological frame encompassing those details: they can "slowly exploit the

[73] M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric" in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), pp.76-108 (pp.76-77).
[74] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.20.

opportunities" between not only the earthly categories of "the earth" and "men", but also between these concrete details and the "sky […] | and divinities". These opening lines are full of allusive connections to twentieth-century discussions of perception: most notably, to Heidegger's examination of the jug's thingliness as that which mediates between its concrete form *qua* vessel and the empty space ("void") it contains, but also to Wallace Stevens's "Anecdote of the Jar", in which the eponymous jar also "exploits" the perceptual frame surrounding it, "[taking] dominion everywhere".[75] But they also have a far deeper lyrical connection to the Coleridgean and Wordsworthian conversation poem. The equivocation between the jug, man, the divine, the earth and the sky evokes Coleridge's presentation of the "one Life" in "The Eolian Harp" as a pantheistic unity, while "the hold | the spring has, the ring gaining the ear | as it is picked up" is redolent of the "articulate sound" of the bells of Ottery St Mary in "Frost at Midnight", which "[falls]" on Coleridge's "ear" with the same sense of ease.[76] These more straightforward allusions are incidental to the structural and formal ties to Coleridgean and Wordsworthian lyric, however, and I will give a brief close reading to explicate these.

The "opportunities" for perceptual movement between jug, earth, man and sky at the beginning of the poem are shut down by the intrusion of a "whoever that was [who] has stamped past". The presence of this intruder in the "frame" causes all that was "fluttering, mercurial" to "vanish", or else sequesters the "smaller" details behind "a large | form", whose "protecting", barrier-like qualities recalls the "block, [the] thick, warm, spectatorship" which also mediated Langley's encounter with a bevy of rabbits in the journal entry from August 1979.[77] This intrusion leaves the once mobile landscape frozen: "And now is the water as firm as a heel? | […] Convenient steel." In structuring "Juan Fernandez" in this way, Langley perhaps intends to remind us of the boat-stealing episode Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, or the

[75] "The jug is a thing as a vessel—it can hold something […] The jug's thingness resides in its being *qua* vessel. We become aware of the vessel's holding nature when we fill the jug." Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 2001), p.166. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p.76.
[76] Coleridge, *Complete Poetical Works*, p.101, 241.
[77] Langley, "From a Journal" in *PN Review*, 31:2 (2004), p.12.

desecration of the bower in "Nutting". In both poems, a transgression into nature produces a psychological crisis that fundamentally alters how the landscape is disclosed to the speaker. Or, to return to Coleridge, we are perhaps reading an inversion of the movement undertaken in "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison", wherein the eponymous bower Coleridge writes from is transformed by his sympathetic imaginative identification with Charles Lamb as he undertakes the walk Coleridge was unable to go on:

> A delight
> Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
> As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that has sooth'd me. Pale beneath the blaze
> Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch'd
> Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov'd to see
> The shadow of the leaf and stem above
> Dappling its sunshine![78]

Where the shift in "Juan Fernandez" causes the sensuous details of nature to sequester themselves away or "vanish", or else fixes all that was once "mercurial" about the scene, in Coleridge's poem the shift causes the world to open itself up and become "transparent" to Coleridge's wide attention. Crucially, in both Coleridge and Langley's poems, the transformation of the landscape is enacted through poetic language as it imitates the 'authentic' speaking voice of a perceiving subject. The speaker slips seamlessly from thought to perception, from subjective interiority to objective exteriority, in a way that conversation—as a simultaneous act of receptiveness and projection—easily facilitates. Hence, Langley's speaker's "concentration" is externalised, and brought directly into the "frame" it was once observing. Meanwhile, the "spread | hand" (presumably belonging to the figure who intercedes on the scene) immediately moves within the perceiving and speaking consciousness, where it "[mothers] doubts". Likewise, the "[stamping]" foot of the intruder is internalised and assimilated by the speaker, who reads it as an icon of the changed landscape: "is the water as firm as a *heel*?" For Coleridge, the renewal of the bower unfolds from the "delight" which

[78] Coleridge, *Complete Poetical Works*, p.180.

"[c]omes sudden on [his] heart", a transformation which has been worked towards through the dialectical movement of conversation over the course of the poem: a process of imagining an interlocutor, and giving shape and narrative to thought so as to make oneself understood. Later parts of "Juan Fernandez" use actual conversation with an ambiguously real or imagined interlocutor as a means of externalising thought and perception, and making it a literal, concrete presence in the world. For now, it is worth emphasising the key aspect of the conversation poem Langley appears to have taken from Coleridge and Wordsworth (even if, for Langley, any 'conversation' in the Coleridgean sense remains inchoate and half-formed): the capacity for language to become a vector along which perception travels.

I now want to examine another type of conversation "Juan Fernandez" enters into, one contained within its prose sense. The poem allusively resonates with a number of eighteenth-century English texts; these intertextual connections highlight the poem's "dramatic monologue-like" features, by enhancing its preoccupation with language's capacity to enter into the world as a tangible, perceivable object, and facilitate the self-examination which shapes and structures our perception. From its title alone, "Juan Fernandez" is saturated with allusive implications that resolutely situate it in history. The 1704 shipwreck of Alexander Selkirk on the Juan Fernández archipelago most famously inspired Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Langley's sequence contains instances in which the more abstract conversational speaker just examined is discarded for a persona who resembles Crusoe the literary figure. Indeed, parts one and two of the sequence contain versions of the moment Crusoe's fantasy of solitude on the island is shattered. In part one, this moment is more elliptical: it is signalled by the intrusion of the "whoever that was" into the scene, and their "[stamping] past" the speaker. In part two, Langley invokes the specific circumstances of Crusoe's shattered illusion, by recasting his discovery of a footprint on the beach:

> […] Toes. Tokens. Miracles. Don't
> you fret. We are gently rocking again.
> Which makes it wonderful to rediscover
> the silky wet print and deliberately fit
> the foot back in it. I stood like one
> thunderstruck. It was too big. By a great

> deal too big. It was not mine. Loose my
> cattle. Demolish my bower and tent. Wear
> very quiet clothes. I've left school and
> nobody cares about my motives now. Nothing
> is clearer and more simple than a row of
> rabbits caught outright in common light.[79]

In a 'note' written in 1994 (and which opens the *Complete Poems*), Langley recruits the allusive and etymological resonance of Defoe's footprint episode once again:

> Crusoe standing thunderstruck, looking at the footprint, toes and heel,
> facing wide-reaching options […] the word 'toe' is close to 'token', 'sign',
> 'mark', even 'miracle'. It has connections with teaching, showing,
> indicating, having dignity and being worthy.[80]

The footprint in "Juan Fernandez" is emblematic of the dialectical stance Langley takes towards etymological and poetic history at this point in his career: it is both "wonderful to rediscover | […] and fit | the foot back in it", but it is also a source of terror. It serves as a reminder that, because of literary language, we may only ever be guests in the world of experience, writing into a paradigm that does not belong to us and that is overwhelmingly vast: "It was too big. By a great | deal too big. It was not mine." Note Langley's use of the words "print" and "foot" in the passage: on the one hand, "Juan Fernandez" is here recasting Crusoe's discovery of the footprint, but on the other, it is staging Langley's own encounter with typographical "print" on the page, and his attempts to situate his own poetic "[feet]" within this predefined textual space. An early letter from Prynne to Langley, from 12 November 1960, is relevant here. Reflecting on the trip the two young men had taken to Italy to see Quattrocento art the previous summer, Prynne reminds Langley of a hike up to Fiesole from Florence:

> I know you were annoyed about taking the small steep road up to
> Fiesole; but look back now on an indefinable quality of light and shade
> entwined in the twisting stone walls and cobbled roadway. It was not
> only the path up which Bocaccio retired to avoid the epidemic and
> compose the Decameron, the way up to the Florentine Platonic

[79] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.20.
[80] *ibid*, p.xvii.

> Academy; not merely the most powerful local symbol in the Western world still existing of the ascent of the mind [...] The difficulty of our ascent was Plato's and Augustine's and Ficino's and Petrarch's [...][81]

Prynne's letter reveals a desire to instil in Langley an awareness of how his steps along the road to Fiesole resonate against the steps taken by previous writers. Here, the Tuscan landscape—much like Langley's version of Juan Fernández—becomes an intersubjective space, wherein different subjects can perceive one another across both spatial and literary-historical dimensions.

Returning to the 1994 note, the connection of 'toe' and 'token' to "teaching, showing, indicating, *having dignity and being worthy*" (in his reading of the note, David-Antoine Williams shows that this connection is activated through the Proto-Indo-European **deik-*/**deig-*, "meaning 'show' and also 'to pronounce solemnly'") reinforces the notion that "Juan Fernandez" enacts a crisis of situating the perceiving, writing and speaking self within a set of pre-existing cultural parameters: of fitting one's foot into someone else's footprint.[82] This dynamic is also corroborated by the source text itself. Crusoe's realisation that the footprint in the sand might not be his own breaks his illusion of solipsistic self-enclosure on the island and recirculates his selfhood back into the intersubjective realm of human society: he is once again capable of being seen and made into a subject. The discovery causes Crusoe's narrative voice to move momentarily beyond itself:

> I was exceedingly surpriz'd with the Print of a Man's naked Foot on the Shore, which was very plain to be seen in the Sand: I stood *like one Thunder-struck*, or as if I had seen an Apparition [...] after innumerable fluttering Thoughts, *like a Man perfectly confus'd and out of my self*, I came Home to my Fortification, not feeling, as we say, the Ground I went on, but terrify'd to the last Degree, looking behind me at every two or three Steps, mistaking every Bush and Tree, and fancying every Stump at a Distance to be a Man [...]

[81] J. H. Prynne, letter to R. F. Langley, 12 November 1960, in R. F. Langley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144/7, Box 346. JHPP.
[82] Williams, *The Life of Words*, p.126.

> When I came to my Castle, for so I think I call'd it ever after this, *I fled into it like one pursued* [...][83]

My own emphasis here underscores how the narrative's 'stepping out' from beyond the limited first-person perspective of Crusoe not only allows other humans to be projected onto the island but also enables him to self-reflexively perceive himself from the vantage of an external spectator.

Langley's decision to write a Coleridgean or Wordsworthian conversation poem in blank verse full of allusions to and quotations from Defoe (in the above passage from "Juan Fernandez", "demolish my Bower, and Tent" is an instance in which the text directly ventriloquises Crusoe as he decamps after discovering the footprint) is itself a means of "having dignity" and trying to 'be worthy' insofar as it is an attempt to situate and orientate oneself within the literary culture that generated these poetic modes and (in the case of *Robinson Crusoe*) this specific text.[84] As the third poem in Langley's sequence puts it: "[i]n | its nimble way the lease suggests you can | project yourself, be big as the ancestors".[85] The trappings of prosody and etymology are imagined here as a "nimble lease", flexible enough to allow us to dwell in language and poetry (albeit at a cost) but never permitting true ownership of the ground we inhabit. "[P]roject yourself" might be a command issued by a schoolteacher, connecting with the *topos* of academic and institutional interpellation elsewhere in the poem (see the lines "I've left school and | nobody cares about my motives now" in the passage above), but it also invokes Olson's projective verse as one of the prosodic tools available to Langley in his attempts to enshrine perception in poetry. Olson is thus counted alongside Coleridge, Wordsworth and Defoe as one of Langley's literary "ancestors". Indeed, the possibility of "[being] big as the ancestors" had been a central tenet of Olson's archaeological poetics, albeit one which had come under critical pressure from Langley's peers, as we saw in Chapter One.

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[83] Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp.130-131.
[84] *ibid*, p.135.
[85] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.21.

The connection with Defoe is the most obvious allusive resonance in "Juan Fernandez", but it is not the only one. The Juan Fernández islands are also the setting of William Cowper's "Verses". As the full title makes clear, Cowper's poem, like Defoe's novel, was also inspired by Selkirk's shipwreck on the archipelago, though much more directly (*Robinson Crusoe* relocates the shipwreck to the Caribbean and creates a fictional protagonist). Cowper's poem is a dramatic monologue which also meditates on the shipwrecked sailor's ambiguous relationship with both human society and the flora and fauna of the islands. Here are its first two stanzas:

> I am monarch of all I survey,
> My right there is none to dispute;
> From the centre all round to the sea,
> I am lord of the fowl and the brute,
> Oh solitude! where are the charms,
> That sages have seen in thy face?
> Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
> Than reign in this horrible place.
>
> I am out of humanity's reach,
> I must finish my journey alone,
> Never hear the sweet music of speech,
> I start at the sound of my own.
> The beasts that roam over the plain,
> My form with indifference see;
> They are so unacquainted with man,
> Their tameness is shocking to me.[86]

Cowper's poem is spoken from the perspective of a colonising speaker, who casts the landscape of Juan Fernández and its inhabitants ("the fowl and the brute") as little more than his possessions, while also implicitly revealing that his apparent sovereignty over the islands is part of a solipsistic fallacy ("[his] right there is *none* to dispute", and the "beasts" regard him with "indifference").

[86] William Cowper, *Poems*, vol. I (London: J. Johnson, 1806), pp.207-208.

The third part of Langley's "Juan Fernandez" entails its own version of Cowper's portrayal of Alexander Selkirk:[87]

> It is a common experience to come upon a
> pale, glittering house set far back across
> a meadow. It is certainly inside you. Down
> along hours of mumbling "Hello", and for
> the attention of nettles in their darkest
> green listening uniform, whose steadiness
> miracles your ridiculous modern feet [...][88]

While Selkirk's isolation drives him to assume sovereignty over Juan Fernández in Cowper's poem, Langley's Selkirk-esque speaker experiences a more complicated disintegration of the ego, catalysed by perception. The "pale, glittering house" is first "set far back across | a meadow": it is fully exterior to the speaker. In the next sentence, however, that house has been relocated "inside" the "you" Langley's dramatic monologue addresses, be that the addressed 'you' implicit in any dramatic monologue, or a more generalised, impersonal 'you'.[89] "Juan Fernandez" is describing perception as both the self's assimilation of the other (as Cowper's "Verses" do), and as a more intersubjective, phenomenological process, wherein the membrane between self and world dissolves, leaving behind a relationship of reciprocal exchange. This latter sense is confirmed as the stanza progresses. While Cowper's Selkirk finds "[t]he beasts that roam the plain" indifferent to him, Langley's speaker "[mumbles] 'Hello', [...] for | the attention of nettles in their darkest | green listening uniform". He is in dialogue with the island, and the island is emphatically "listening" back. Crucially, however, the nettles' "listening" is here contingent upon their donning a "uniform", recalling the militaristic undertones of perception explored in the journal entry from 17 October 1970.[90] Even when

[87] I am not the first person to note the connection between Langley's poem and Cowper's. In his unpublished PhD thesis, former *Intelligencer* poet John Hall makes the connection in a footnote, but does not develop the comparison any further. John Hall, "Writings, Readings and Not Writing: Poems, Prose Fiction and Essays" (unpublished PhD thesis, Dartington College of Arts, 2005), p.170 n.13.

[88] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.21.

[89] The presence of an addressed 'you' is particularly complex in poems spoken by isolated castaways, as Cowper's is, and Langley's sometimes is.

[90] Langley, *Journals*, pp.9-10. Here, Langley presents his perception of wasps as his 'winning' of them, defining win via Skeat as "Gain by labour or contest".

Langley's poetry frames perception in phenomenological and utopian terms, it remains subtly fraught with tension and conflict.

Cowper's "Verses" found their most famous critical appraisal in Wordsworth's 1802 appendix to the *Lyrical Ballads*, where he gives this reading of one of its stanzas:

> [It is] throughout admirably expressed: it would be equally good whether in prose or in verse, except that the Reader has the exquisite pleasure in seeing such natural language so naturally connected with metre. The beauty of this stanza tempts me here to add a sentiment […] namely, that in proportion as ideas and feelings are valuable, whether the composition be in prose or in verse, they require and exact one and the same language.[91]

Wordsworth's commentary on the poem has been read as a reflection of its theme: that is, that isolation from a linguistic community ("I am out of humanity's reach, | I must finish my journey alone, | Never hear the sweet music of speech, | I start at the sound of my own") has in effect 'naturalised' Selkirk's speech by removing it from the artifice of poetic diction.[92] For Wordsworth to have found Cowper's language "natural" in the poem creates an important tension, however, because Cowper's Selkirk finds his own speaking voice utterly defamiliarised and unnatural, to the extent that he "[starts] at the sound of [his] own" voice.

"Juan Fernandez" is deeply invested in this tension, 'othering' the speaker's speech to such an extent that the speaker externalises the 'listening' and 'speaking' component of his solitary self, projecting an interlocutor onto the island who fulfils the role of both footprint-maker and the imagined addressee of the dramatic monologue. This imagined other is also capable of engaging the speaker in conversation. This dynamic gives rise to the final seven lines of the third stanza:

> […] "It's a light touch," he shouts back,
> "that will cause a great burning!" To which

[91] William Wordsworth, "Appendix on Poetic Diction from 1802 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*" in William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett & A. R. Jones, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.311-316 (p.315).
[92] See, for example, Tom Clucas, "Romantic Reclusion in the Works of Cowper and Wordsworth" (unpublished DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 2014), p.98.

> the response has to be a firm shake of the
> head or a slight widening of the eyes. Then
> he's hurrying up, laughing, with his silly
> reassurance that "It's only you!" and
> another blue funk is absolutely everywhere.[93]

Jeremy Noel-Tod argues that Langley uses the dramatic monologue "as a form of lyric self-discovery," and that "Langley's anonymous lyric speakers are both 'the poet' and other people."[94] He goes on to cite a particularly relevant passage of Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience*: "in 'Prufrock' […] Eliot makes 'explicit what is implicit in all dramatic monologues': that they are 'addressed ultimately […] to some projection of the speaker […] [T]he speaker speaks to understand something about himself […] directing his address outward in order that it may return with a meaning he was not aware of'."[95]

In "Juan Fernandez", the splitting of the consciousness into a pair of speaking and listening subjects (who are signalled elsewhere in the poem as "we") reveals the intersubjectivity inherent in dramatic monologue as an exercise in "lyric self-discovery".[96] Even the voice affirming the speaker's total solitude ("'[i]t's only you!'") is articulated by a presence concrete enough to have a characteristically "silly | reassurance". Langley is bringing to the foreground something latent in Cowper's poem and Wordsworth's appraisal of its "natural language" (and, for Langbaum, something which is "implicit in all dramatic monologues"): even when it appears at its most solitary, the lyric voice contains within itself the possibility for an outward movement towards an imagined 'other', a movement which is simultaneously a movement towards self-awareness and—in Langley's poem—literal self-perception. Or, to put it another way, dramatic monologue affords the speaker the opportunity to hear and attend to her own voice, to "start" (in Cowper's words) at its unfamiliarity, and, in turn, to imagine what it might be like to perceive oneself. The opening

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[93] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.21.
[94] Noel-Tod, "Dramatic Monologue", p.219, 217.
[95] Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition*, revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.187. Quoted in *ibid*, p.218.
[96] "Snug, close and whispering up a trade, we
peep abroad to find the planets …". Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.20.

couplet of Cowper's "Verses" tacitly affirms this process, through the adjustment Alexander Selkirk makes to his self-presentation: "I am monarch of all I survey, | My right there is none to dispute".[97] The process of Selkirk giving shape to his thoughts about his 'sovereignty' and externalising them through utterance produces a more complex, three-dimensional image of him, based on his relationship to others and how he might be perceived. As Coleridge's 'talking through' his isolation in the bower produces a renewed assessment of its beauty, so too does Selkirk's account of his relationship with the island—and with human society—morph through dramatic utterance. Within the critical framework of *The Poetry of Experience*, Langbaum may have argued that Cowper's "Verses", by virtue of their pre- or proto-Romanticism, are less concerned with the self's mutual imbrication with the external world than Wordsworth's or Coleridge's poetry. Taking Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" as the quintessential example of the eighteenth-century "topographical or meditative-descriptive poem", he argues that such writing "tries to […] combine thought and feeling by providing an occasion which can give rise to both and can justify both as having an objective counterpart."[98] Yet, just as Wordsworth found in Cowper's dramatic monologue the kind of "natural language" which apparently swore off 'poetic diction' and a concomitant instrumentalisation of the landscape, so too does Langley locate within it the capacity for speech and language to leave the solipsistic confines of the self-enclosed mind, and become an object of the external world.

The outward trajectory of "Juan Fernandez" is explicitly affirmed by Langley in the 1994 note:

> "Juan Fernandez" ran ahead of me well, feeling fit, keeping me surprised. It has stayed in front for years, and isn't exhausted yet. I don't write many poems, so each one has to be able to keep running, faster than I can, for as long as possible.[99]

[97] Cowper, *Poems*, p.207.
[98] Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience* (1959), p.39.
[99] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.xvii.

Langley's use of the lyric voice in the poem—specifically, the dramatic monologue—is a dynamic and externally oriented process. It entails both the freedom to recruit different historical and fictional personae as speakers, as well as a generalised lyric 'I', and the capacity for the text to "[run] ahead" of the poet and into the implicitly dialectical nature of the form itself (that is, into the processes which allow dramatic monologue to enact the self-discovery and self-perception described above). By dissolving the static vantage of a singular speaker through this recruitment of multiple, fragmentary personae—who are never fully allowed to form—the poem resists the monolithic, sub-Poundian ego parodied by Peter Riley in *The Linear Journal*. It also avoids becoming totalising or assimilative by stopping short of an encyclopaedic, fully historicising approach to those personae that "would [...] [expect] the reader to read the books [Langley has] read" (to paraphrase Riley), maintaining instead a field of shifting, exploratory subjectivities.[100] Langley's prosody connects the text with a stockpile of allusions that situate it within a broader tradition of English poetry and prose, be that the conversation poems of Coleridge, Cowper's dramatic monologues on Juan Fernández, or Defoe's *tour de force* of adventure writing. Yet it does so in a way that is fluid and gestural. As Langley said to Walker, the poem is "led by things extrinsic to [it] [...] though [it is] interested in not being so led."[101] Crucially, "Juan Fernandez" relocates within English lyric prosody the latent potential for a form of intersubjectivity akin to that aspired to in the earlier experiments of the New American poets and their British disciples, wherein the self can attend more faithfully to itself—and, consequently, the world—through the externalising/internalising dynamics of conversation.

Where "Matthew Glover" equivocated between direct perception and propositional knowledge through the balancing and eventual blurring of lyric and projective verse, it was more preoccupied with using that prosodic tension (and the geographic divisions underscoring it) to illustrate the tendency of propositional knowledge to mediate and collapse direct perception. "Juan Fernandez", on the other hand, shows that mediation is immanent to

[100] Riley, letter to Marriott, 5 July 1988. JHPP.
[101] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.122.

lyric itself. This is evident in the poem's continual abstraction away from itself and into a network of intertextual relationships stretching back into the eighteenth-century, and through its self-conscious engagement with dramatic monologue's intrinsic preoccupations with the presentation and justification of a certain voice and vantage point. At the same time, it demonstrates that the external orientations of lyric utterance—especially the conversational capacities of dramatic monologue—have the capacity to produce a version of intersubjectivity akin to the one aspired to by Olson in "Projective Verse", by showing how language externalises itself and joins with "man [...] himself" as "an object" in a field of mutual interpretability and perceivability.[102]

IV – Form as facilitator of perception: "body talk" in "Jack's Pigeon"

In a lecture he delivered on the BBC's *Third Programme* in December 1962—reprinted in 1963 as "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry"—J. H. Prynne gives the following account of Romantic poetry's engagement with the external and objective details of the world as part of its processes of subjective meditation:

> Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" takes us to the end of a long Augustan tradition of prospect poems, where the reflecting mind is brought into the central focus by the familiar tactic of diminishing the poetic universe into a receding panoramic vista. But [...] observed details do stand as legitimate experiential antecedents, as the roots, however apparently slight, from which the subsequent reflection springs. Meditation as a poetic exercise inevitably conducts most of its business in conceptual terms, or by means of correlative imagery; but in Wordsworth's encounter with his theme, there remains a positive force of circumstance—there are facts of experience that have to be accounted for.[103]

In contradistinction to the meditative lyrics of Wordsworth's conservative Victorian descendants (Prynne especially targets Tennyson and Matthew Arnold), which "[abandon] the ambition to present the reflecting mind as part of an experiential context and [withdraw] into a self-generating ambience of regret", Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" portrays the perceiving

[102] Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.254.
[103] Prynne, "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", p.290.

subject as deeply imbricated in the world.[104] For Prynne, "Tintern Abbey" is a meditative, subjectivist lyric, but its meditative, subjectivist elements are anchored firmly to objective, concrete percepts in external reality. Without this connection, the poem would, as in the work of the Victorian elegiacs Prynne's lecture critiques, become a mere solipsistic cocoon, a form of meditative poetry "whose function is to enhance the mind's awareness of its own conscious processes—to listen to its own internal music."[105] In addition to Wordsworth, Prynne reaches back to Milton in his search for an outwardly oriented prosody: he reads "Lycidas" as "essentially a public [event], [a monument] crafted out of a shared language, in such a way that the feeling expressed was cogently personal but also anonymous; the voice was human but not inevitably the property of a distinct individual."[106]

It is my contention that Langley's later poems seek to recuperate a similar model of lyric subjectivity to the one described by Prynne in his account of Wordsworth and Milton in "The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry". In this model, the self's subjectivity is tempered through a direct relationship with the world with which it is inextricably imbricated. Lyric language becomes cognisant of its own concreteness and its own historicity, its status as "[a monument] crafted out of a shared language". Where both the early journals (examined in the Introduction and Part I of this chapter) and 1978's *Hem* (examined in Part II) investigated to varying degrees the possibility of a mode of cognition akin to Marion Milner's "blind thinking", wherein direct perception wrests itself from the propositional knowledge that mediates and collapses it, Langley's poetry and journalling from the 1990s and 2000s accept the inevitability of mediation. In Part III, we saw that as early as 1979's "Juan Fernandez", Langley had begun to accept the radical potential of the dramatic monologue as a means of creating a "voice [which] was human but not inevitably the property of a distinct individual". This is evident both in the poem's "[running] ahead" of Langley into a network of intertextual links which recirculate the text into literary and philological history, and in its use of the dialectical functions inherent to the form to imagine an array of distinct speaking and listening subjects whose presence creates an intersubjective community of mutual perceivability. This

[104] *ibid*, p.291.
[105] *ibid*, pp.290-291.
[106] *ibid*, p.290.

section reads Langley's 1996 poem "Jack's Pigeon" alongside its attendant journal entry to show how his late poetry celebrates poetic language and form's historicity as a facilitator of perception, rather than an obstacle to it.

Langley's late shift towards a prosody resembling the one Prynne traces in "The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry" is tied to his own reconceptualisation of the materiality of poetry. In the interview with R. F. Walker, Langley describes this shift in detail, stating that it revolves around a newfound theorisation of the poem as acquiring—or becoming—a "body". Responding to a question about his "[mending]" of iambic pentameter in response to Pound's invective in *Canto* LXXXI "[t]o break [it]", Langley states that he has "slumped back into [pentameter]" and "has allowed more rhyme into the poetry again, and become more concerned with the structure of it, the body of it."[107] He goes on:

> there's the last chapter in [the art critic Richard Wollheim's] book *Painting as Art* where he talks about how a painting can become a body. He invents the word 'metaphorise', the painting metaphorises a body, […] and he says things like the skin of the paint becomes the skin of a body and what's inside the frame becomes a metaphor for the body […] And then he talks about how painting becomes a body […] And it just occurred to me that […] the poem might become much more of a body too. And that my poems weren't very body-like […] [T]he things that would make the [poem-body] would obviously be the small formal elements, wouldn't they? It's easy to talk about sound effects in terms of imitation and so on, but there are millions and millions of assonances and consonances and rhymes that have got nothing to do with imitation at all […] [W]hat they're doing, I suppose, some of them, is something like those little things that Wollheim talks about that make a picture into a body and pull it together as a structure and give it a head and a tail and make it exist.[108]

For Langley, the poem's "body" inheres in the formal features which exceed its paraphrasable or mimetic content—in the "millions and millions of assonances and consonances and rhymes that have got nothing to do with imitation at all", and which are instead modular units disclosing language's deep structure. These 'body-like' characteristics are, by Langley's

[107] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.119.
[108] *ibid*, pp.119-120.

reckoning, absent in earlier poems like "Matthew Glover". Simon Jarvis (now disgraced) has written extensively about the capacity for poetry's prosodic or 'musical' elements to transmit meaning that outstrips or even runs counter to surface content. In "Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody", he describes "prosody's elusive yet undeniable cognitive character", which is predicated on a "thinking which is made up of music" and which produces a layer of meaning "which is not precisely the same as what [the author] may have thought, in the sense that in every writing 'we meant something other than we meant to mean'".[109]

Langley's theorisation of the 'body' of the poem is cognate with Jarvis's phenomenological account of prosody in some ways, insofar as both are concerned with letting the poem "exist" in the phenomenological sense and both allow for the text to "[run] ahead of [the poet]" into a realm of meaning the poet does not fully control (to borrow from the 1994 note).[110] However, Langley's poem-body has a historical and cultural dimension to it that is stronger than any connection it has to the phenomenology of the fleshly body or the psychoanalytic mind. To "make [the poem] exist" means to allow it to stand as a structure with real historical and spatial dimensions, perceivable across time and functioning as a venue for a range of subjectivities who are brought into the world of the poem without being totally assimilated by a central consciousness. The construction of this 'body' requires Langley to see the etymological and allusive charge of words and the literary-historical charge of poetic form not as forces which will collapse direct perception but as tools which facilitate it. This entails a theorisation of language and poetic form as perceivable objects themselves. A reading of the journal entry which inspired "Jack's Pigeon" will help elucidate this.

In an entry from August 1988, Langley recounts how, during a visit to the Church of St Philibert in Tournus, France, the architectural space of the church opens into a network of phenomenological and intersubjective meaning that is only deepened by its connection to

[109] Simon Jarvis, "Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody" in *Paragraph* 28:2 (2005), pp.57-71 (pp.57-58).
[110] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.xvii.

history and culture. Prior to entering St Philibert's, Langley sees a dying pigeon on a street in Tournus: "big as your fist, yellow fur sparse over white flesh, muscular, spiky wings, closed eyes, rather hooked beak, big head […] It convulses, opening the beak, heaving itself over with the stubby wings. Silent howl."[111] The dying pigeon has its identity and destiny foreclosed by another passer-by, who "continues to scratch the surface of a card to see if the number revealed shows he has won a prize" before "[looking] at the bird, [and identifying] it with one word, unintelligible to me".[112] In contradistinction to the man who fixes the pigeon and its death with "one word", Langley carries the bird's "[s]ilent howl" into the abbey like an unanswered question, where he finds that the architectural space opens up into an extension of the indivisible 'isness' of the bird as it expands into aesthetic form and language:

> To read the notices. Because they speak of the self, the familiar codifications, not of the other, as do the pillars and walls and vaults and apertures. These are body talk, not explanations of the sort the inscriptions articulate. Gesture. The open beak of the dying fledgling, wide and silent. The body screwed up at the moment of its being given up, or taken away. The head stretched up at the last active point. St Philibert's takes the opening and reaching and holds it permanently, and without the agony and self-reference, and pain. A calm, complete going. The gesture of the fledgling, and that of anything else like that, in here, contained and assimilated, lifted and opened and held.[113]

Like Prynne in "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", Langley here distinguishes between two forms of language: one which constitutes the notices and inscriptions in the church, defined by "agony and self-reference" and which can only "speak of the self, the familiar codifications", and a "body talk" which speaks "of the other", and which allows "the gesture of the fledgling" to be "contained and assimilated, lifted and opened and held."[114] The transient instance of the pigeon's death is held in the "body talk" of St Philibert's "permanently", as a sort of "public [event]" or "monument" (to use Prynne's terms). This

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[111] Langley, *Journals*, p.48.
[112] *ibid*.
[113] *ibid*, pp.49-50.
[114] The distinction here takes us back to Merleau-Ponty's description in *The Phenomenology of Perception* of scientific discourse as an abstraction out of the primacy of perception: "The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced". Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.ix.

reveals the temporal aspect of this extension: it preserves the bird as a locus of phenomenological meaning, which is continually renewed and perceptible across time by a potentially limitless range of subjects. Langley finds that this capacity to "[hold]" the bird is borne out through the church's physical form—its "pillars and walls and vaults and apertures"—rather than through the "explanations" offered by the exegetic language of its inscriptions. Through these formal features, Langley finds a vocabulary that—despite (or perhaps because) it is encrusted with historical sediment accrued over centuries of ecclesiastical history and underpinned by a wealth of technical, architectural and mathematical knowledge—is able to re-circulate the bird into an immediately intuitive, communal realm of perception. This newfound identification of a phenomenologically-attuned form of language with a set of formal conditions that are deeply historically and technically contingent is a stark contrast to Langley's stance in the early- to mid-seventies, when technical, rationalist or overly-historicised uses of language were seen as potential threats to the indivisible 'isness' of the perceived subject (as when, in the journal entry from 17 October 1970, the recourse to the etymology of the word "wan" left the wasps Langley was describing appearing "feeble, faint").[115] Langley encompasses the multiple perceiving subjects contained within the church within its architectonic vocabulary or "body talk", too. They are made continuous with its "arches" and "columns": "[e]verything anyone does is emphasised in the height, the simplicity, the size, the rosy colour."[116] As we will see through a close reading of "Jack's Pigeon", these architectural features find a correlative in the prosodic texture of Langley's "body-like" poems: the "assonances and consonances and rhymes that have got nothing to do with imitation at all", which come together to produce a *melopoeiac* tapestry enriched by *logopoeiac* resonances, derived from etymology and literary history.

1996's "Jack's Pigeon", from the "Jack" sequence Langley published over the course of the 1990s, derives its autobiographical content from the August 1988 journal entry detailing the death of the pigeon in Tournus. Langley's "Jack" sequence—comprising this poem, "Poor Moth", "The Barber's Beard", "Tom Thumb" and the much commented on "Man Jack"—has

[115] Langley, *Journals*, p.10.
[116] *ibid*, p.49.

been parsed by Jack Belloli in terms of its 'body-like' qualities. For Belloli, these poems are "brought into an unassertive coherence by employing a limited set of distinctive formal devices in different combinations: not only internal and end-rhyme, but also a preference for assigning lines of fixed syllabic length, a more or less loose iambic pentameter, and attention to the length and arrangement of sentences."[117] He goes on to explicitly emphasise this coherence in terms of Langley's 'body' analogy, arguing that "[d]rawing connections between the poems on the basis of their shared features is a matter of discovering family resemblances between a set of distinct verse bodies, rather than identifying the common rules that they all follow."[118] Beyond the "unassertive coherence" of their "limited set" of shared formal principles, the poems in the sequence are unified by the recurring figure of Jack, who serves as a focalising presence. Jack represents Langley's late-stage conception of perception as fortified and enhanced by a connection to a culture and a foundation of propositional knowledge. In "Man Jack", Jack becomes a metaphor for our perceptual stake in the world, as indexed according to the "dozens of columns in the Oxford Dictionary on the word 'Jack'."[119] "So Jack's your man, Jack is your man in things", the poem's opening proclaims.[120] Here, perceptual meaning inheres in the active meeting of the self and the world through perception: the collaboration between "your man" and "things". However, this collaboration is only activated according to the etymological vectors laid out in the dictionary, which open up, as David-Antoine Williams writes, "a vast inventory of connotative potential."[121] Hence, Jack is "your man" because the OED defines him as "[a]n ordinary man or boy; a lad, a fellow", but he can also be commanded by the speaker to "[g]o back and carry | logs into the hall", because another entry in the OED defines a 'jack' as "[a] mechanical device used for lifting heavy

[117] Jack Belloli, "Bruno Latour and R. F. Langley" in *Religion & Literature*, 49:2 (2017), p.270.
[118] *ibid.*
[119] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.125.
[120] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.5.
[121] Williams, *The Life of Words*, p.113.

objects with force from below, typically operated by means of a rack and a pinion, screw, or hydraulic mechanism".[122]

In "Jack's Pigeon", Jack is similarly cast as a figure who legitimises perception according to a set of formal codes and conditions. Here, however, he is a proxy for the myriad perspectives encoded within the journal entry from August 1988. He becomes a vessel in which all the ways of seeing contained in that entry are held and authorised against one another, just as the columns of definitions contained in the dictionary provide an authoritative index of how people have historically perceived the world and encoded those perceptions into language. In this way, the poem enacts Langley's assertion in the journal that "[e]verything anyone does [in the church] is emphasised in the height, the simplicity, the size, the rosy colour."[123] Langley houses this iteration of Jack within a distinctly 'body-like' or architectonic prosody, consisting of five stanzas of twenty decasyllabic lines with a broadly iambic feel. The stanzas are full of internal rhymes, but there is a gathering dependence on end-rhyme as the poem progresses, with stanza five dominated by rhyming couplets. Belloli writes that the "unusually overdetermined formal features here correspond with the architectural features of the abbey into which [Langley] wanders after seeing the pigeon die."[124] I take this to be broadly true, but I would qualify that Langley's poem is not quite as mimetic as Belloli implies here. Rather than attempting to mimic architectural space *qua* architectural space, Langley's prosody embraces what he described to R. F. Walker as the "assonances and consonances and rhymes that have got nothing to do with imitation at all" instead to emphasise what the entry from August 1988 called the "body talk" of St Philibert's: its capacity to "[contain]" and [assimilate], [lift] […] and [hold]" a multiplicity of perceiving subjects and the dead bird within the formal resources of its architecture.[125] In doing so, the poem produces what Prynne might call a "public … monument" to an intersubjective model of perception.[126] My reading

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[122] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.6. "Jack" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), I.2.a <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/jack_n2?tab=meaning_and_use#40539428> [accessed 1 March 2024]. *ibid*, II.10 <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/jack_n2?tab=meaning_and_use#40540276> [accessed 1 March 2024].
[123] Langley, *Journals*, p.49.
[124] Belloli, "Bruno Latour and R. F. Langley", p.273.
[125] Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.120.
[126] Prynne, "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", p.290.

will show how Langley's late poem combines his vision of the prose sense of the poem as recorded in the journal with his new sense of a "body-like" prosody to demonstrate how form—and its connection to a literary-historical culture—deepens and enrichens the perception the poem records and encodes.

Because Jack is shown in "Man Jack" to possess an everyman quality—enacted through his lexical multivalence—he is able, in "Jack's Pigeon", to embody the multitude of vantage points recorded in the August 1988 journal entry. In the first stanza of "Jack's Pigeon", "Jack leans on the wall. He says it's true or | not; decides that right on nine is the time for the blue bee to come to the senna bush".[127] In the journal entry, Langley is,

> caught by surprise by a young figure, leaning, arm bent, hand head-high, against the front left hand column in the north aisle, turning his face, wearing scarlet. For a second it is a robe, and there is a sense of ecclesiastical power. Young. High placed. But the red garment is a knee-length anorak. There are jeans below it. Yet, leaning against the bottom of that huge pillar, looking at ease, and young enough to be challenging, and bright scarlet… a touch of awe. Outlined against the brighter twelfth-century work.[128]

In "Jack's Pigeon", Jack is the "young figure, leaning", but he is also endowed with the capacity to orchestrate the perceptual details of the scene: he can fix the way the world is disclosed to us, much like the lexical strata of the OED can. Hence, he is the one to "say it's true or | not; decides that right on nine is the time for the blue bee to come to the senna bush". Internal rhyme here—"nine", "time", and their assonant slant rhyme with "right", plus the alliterative "blue bee"—emphasises these perceptual interactions as *faits accomplis*. Jack's role as the arbiter of the scene is textured by Langley's misidentification of the leaning man as a cardinal in the journal, whose "red garment" visually rhymes with the "rosy stone" of the church.[129] But, of course, this is bathetically undercut by the revelation that "the red garment is a knee-length anorak. There are jeans below it."

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[127] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.55.
[128] Langley, *Journals*, p.49.
[129] *ibid.*

Similarly, in the poem, Jack's mastery over the scene unravels in the second stanza:

> […] Nothing about
> the yellow senna flowers when we get home.
> No Jack. No bee. We leave it well alone.[130]

There is "[n]othing about | the yellow senna flowers" in the spatial, prepositional sense: that is, there is no bee hovering around them. But there is also "[n]othing about" them in the sense that the exegetic quality of a 'scientific' form of perception (to return to Merleau-Ponty and Milner's terminology) and the language which attends it (defined in the August 1988 journal as the language which comprises the notices and inscriptions, which "[spoke] of the self, the familiar codifications") cannot gain a foothold here. This exegetic perspective is signalled in the preceding lines, where Jack is recast as the passer-by who dismissed the dying pigeon with "one word" in the journal entry: "then he too had gone. | He's just another one who saw, the man | who stopped outside the door, then shrugged, and checked | his scratchcard, and moved on."[131] Jack cannot "bring | himself to touch" the dying pigeon, who the poem recasts as "Ophelia, the pigeon squab".[132] I will pay specific attention to the poem's use of *Hamlet* momentarily. For now, it is worth noting that his failure "to touch" the bird, and his choice to remain static and outside the 'body' of the church ("stopped outside the door"), constitutes a failure to engage with the other in haptic, sensuous terms. It also represents a failure to engage with the allusive resources of literary history, which can offer entry into an intersubjective framework for perception: the same framework Langley had worked towards in "Juan Fernandez". "[Bringing] himself" (or rather, failing to) Jack is here enclosed in a self-reflexive, solipsistic syntax, which only "[speaks] of the self, the familiar codifications."[133] Or, as Prynne might argue, he succumbs to the withdrawal of "the reflecting mind as part of an experiential context […] into a self-generating ambience of regret."[134]

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[130] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.56.
[131] *ibid.*
[132] *ibid*, pp.55-56.
[133] Langley, *Journals*, p.49.
[134] Prynne, "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", p.291.

But, just as St Philibert's can accommodate and sublate the 'scientific' or exegetic perspectives it contains both within and through its architecture, so too can the poem reintegrate Jack, despite his inability to establish perceptual contact with the reality of "Ophelia, the pigeon squab". He is 'redeemed' in the third and fourth stanzas, when he recuperates by sequestering himself within the hard exteriority of the abbey's masonry. Stanza three begins with this act: "Jack built himself a house to hide in and | take stock. This is his property in France."[135] This marks a *volta* in the poem, and stanza four finds Jack again leaning against the wall of St Philibert's:

> Who is the quiet guard with his elbow
> braced against the pillar, thinking his thoughts
> close to the stone? He is hard to make out
> and easy for shadows to take away.[136]

At first, it seems Jack is continuing his solipsism ("thinking *his* thoughts"), but this is undercut by the revelation that his mind has been brought into resonance with the resistant materiality of "the stone". "[H]is thoughts" are once again tethered to "legitimate experiential antecedents […] the roots […] from which […] subsequent reflection springs."[137] Jack's renewed presentation here recalls and reformulates a central element of the high modernist art critic (and another of Langley's favourite thinkers) Adrian Stokes's 'carving' aesthetic.[138] In *The Stones of Rimini*, Stokes describes how, in his carving of the Tempio Malatestiano, the architect Alberti created an artwork that, like all good Quattrocento art, "expresses" the essential character of its patron and the figure to whom it is dedicated.[139] Stokes writes,

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[135] Langley, *Complete Poems* p.57.
[136] *ibid*, p.58.
[137] Prynne, "The Elegiac World in Victorian Poetry", p.290.
[138] Works by Stokes appear 20 times in Noel-Tod's bibliography to the *Complete Poems*. Langley, *Complete Poems*, pp.163-174. Langley himself admitted that his introduction to Stokes's blend of aesthetic philosophy with Kleinian psychoanalysis during a talk by his supervisor Donald Davie at the Jesus College Literary Society constituted an encounter with "the first coherent aesthetic that [he'd] ever met". Walker, "An interview with R. F. Langley", p.119. For more on Langley and Stokes, see Conor Carville, "'The Degree of Power Exercised': Recent Ekphrasis" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp.286-302.
[139] Adrian Stokes, *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini* (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2018), p.188.

> Sigismundo [Malatesta's] Tempio and Alfonso's arch cannot for any purpose be dissociated from those princes. Their emblematic fury needed room […] There [Sigismundo] is [on the worked surface of the Tempio], projected directly into stone, not as a succession or a story, but as something immediate […] Artists needed little abstraction to project Sigismundo into stone. Each characteristic passed easily into a form of art, non-musical, tense.[140]

Stokes conceived of carving as expressing what he called elsewhere "the power of charged outwardness", wherein the skilled carver reveals the apparently immanent truth of stone and realises, in his medium, the essential qualities of a historical individual or an idea.[141] These can then be intuitively and "[immediately]" grasped by the viewer. In contrast, "Jack's Pigeon" offers a far more fragile perceptual encounter with masonry. Jack is "hard to make out | and easy for shadows to take away". We must exercise perceptual effort and sensitivity if we are to take stock of him. His presence in the church is neither fixed nor reducible by the exegetic language of the inscriptions, but neither is it bombastically and immanently self-revealed in the worked surface of the stone. Through their shared focus on Sigismundo Malatesta and their emphasis on the totalising and essentialist qualities of art, Stokes's carving aesthetic and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* ultimately became indivisible from one another in the minds of many poets and critics. As Donald Davie observes, both writers use the image of the Tempio Malatestiano to "[compress] into a single perception the whole process of the composition of marble from the incrustation of sunken timber by algae, through shell-encrusted cliff and cave, to the hewn stone of the palazzo with its feet in water".[142] By connecting Jack with the church's stonework, Langley recuperates Stokes's and Pound's preoccupation with subjectivity as formed by and perceptually extended through external, concrete elements of the world. However, Langley resists framing this process in the monolithic or totalising terms of his high modernist forebears, instead emphasising its fragility and dependence on attentive perception.

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[140] *ibid.*

[141] Adrian Stokes, *Colour and Form* in *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes, Vol II 1937-1958*, ed. by Lawrence Gowing (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), p.24.

[142] Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York: OUP, 1964), p.128. This is notwithstanding the biographical linkage between the two men: "Adrian Stokes … met Pound many times in 1927, 1928, and 1929, both in Rapallo and in Venice". *ibid*, p.127.

This point in the poem also marks Langley's renewed and deepened engagement with the pool of allusive resources he draws upon. Syntactically, the passage quoted above evokes the coming of Christ in the final section of *The Waste Land*, "What the Thunder Said":

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
> When I count, there are only you and I together
> But when I look ahead up the white road
> There is always another one walking beside you [...][143]

In Eliot's poem too, the intercession of a spectral presence—who is also "difficult to make out"—expands the range of subjects navigating the "stony places" the poem records, and anticipates the note of renewal upon which the text ends.[144] More importantly, however, Langley's invocation of Eliot's high modernist epic—itself an intensely polyvocal text—recirculates "Jack's Pigeon" back into an intertextual fold, allowing the poem to register the historicity of its own language. In the wake of Jack's 'redemption', poetic language accrues a renewed capacity to be a perceivable object in the world, and once again parallels the worked stone from which the abbey is constructed. Consequently, Langley leans even more heavily into allusion in the following lines: "Jill reads the posy in | her ring and then she smiles. The farmer owns | old cockerels which peck dirt".[145] One of these "old cockerels" might well be the "cock [...] on the rooftree" in "What the Thunder Said", whose "[c]o co rico" brings the "flash of lightning" and "damp gust" which initiate *The Waste Land*'s final deluge.[146] Yet these lines also resonate with an older English literary tradition. From the beginning, "Jack's Pigeon" has been saturated with allusions to *Hamlet*, but these allusions were part of the complex of historical materials Jack was once unwilling to 'touch'. In the first stanza, "Ophelia, the pigeon squab, thuds to | the gutter in convulsions, gaping for | forty thousand brothers", in an episode

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[143] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), p.73.

[144] The compression of Eliot's structure of renewal in "Jack's Pigeon" recalls Nigel Alderman and C. D. Blanton's categorisation of the "pocket epic" in British poetry after high modernism. "Pocket epics" are poems which (as Alderman writes) "are not unfinished, ever-expanding structures like Pound's *Cantos*; they are not lyric sequences; [and] they don't have the organising mythic narrative of Eliot's *The Waste Land*". Instead, "pocket epics" freely recruit structural, thematic and formal features from their high modernist forebears, interpolating these in a more compressed format. See, Nigel Alderman, "Pocket Epics: British Poetry After Modernism" in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13:1 (2000), pp.1-2 (p.1).

[145] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.57.

[146] Eliot, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p.74.

which directly references Hamlet's lamentations at Ophelia's funeral in Act V of Shakespeare's play.[147] In the lines quoted above from stanza four, Langley recuperates Hamlet's bitter equivalence of "woman's love" with "the posy of a ring" on the grounds of a shared "[briefness]".[148] Here, Jill—Jack's partner in "Jack's Pigeon"—"reads the posy in | her ring and then she smiles". Rather than signifying impermanence, the posy ring here is correctly understood by Jill (and now by Jack, if we assume he gave it to her) as a material embodiment of poetic language: the externalisation of spoken utterance as a tangible object that can be re-encountered and perceived by different subjectivities across history, just as Langley's poem re-engages Shakespeare's and Eliot's texts for us as we read it. As Juliet Fleming writes, "[w]hile formally a posy must be short […], its defining characteristic is to be written in such a way that its material embodiment forms an important part of its meaning. The posy, in short, is a saying or poem that is pointed by being written *on* something."[149] Langley's poem is an inventory of these "material [embodiments]", from its lapidary, decasyllabic stanzas, to its gathering of allusive material within its prosodic 'body', so that this material can be reactivated by the reader.

The final stanza is where Langley brings his "body-like" prosody fully into coherence with the prose sense I have been tracing. Here it is in full:

> There's no more to be done. No more to be done.
> And what there was, was what we didn't do.
> It needed two of us to move as one,
> to shake hands with a hand that's shaking, if
> tint were to be tant, and breaking making.
> Now, on the terrace, huddled in my chair,
> we start to mend a bird that isn't there,
> fanning out feathers that had never grown
> with clever fingers that are not our own;
> stroking the lilac into the dove grey,

[147] "HAMLET: I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers | Could not, with all their quantity of love, | Make up my sum." William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. by E. K. Chambers (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1917), pp.129-130.
[148] *ibid*, p.73.
[149] Juliet Fleming, "Graffiti, Grammatology and the Age of Shakespeare" in *Criticism*, 39:1 (1997), pp.1-30 (p.6). Original emphasis.

hearing the croodle that she couldn't say.
Night wind gives a cool hoot in the neck of
Jack's beer bottle, open on the table.
Triggered by this, the dormouse shoots along
the sill, illuminated well enough
for us to see her safely drop down through
the wriggling of the walnut tree to find
some parings of the fruit we ate today,
set out on the white concrete, under the
full presentation of the Milky Way.[150]

Now that Jack and the speaker "move as one", the "[broken]" rhyme scheme—which until this point has consisted mainly of slant rhymes and internal rhymes, or conspicuously near-perfect rhymes, like "shaking, if | […] making"—can be "[mended]" into perfect rhyming couplets. As the speaker and Jack sit together "on the terrace […] | […] [mending] a bird that isn't there", the stanza enacts the journal's claim that, through the worked materials of the abbey, "[t]he gesture of the fledgling, and that of anything else like that, in here, [is] contained and assimilated, lifted and opened and held."[151] However, Langley introduces crucial caveats to this. First, the "clever fingers" with which Jack and the speaker fix the pigeon "are not [their] own", because they are the collectively-owned "fingers" of a common literary and philological culture, encompassing not only the overly-determined rhyme scheme the poem has settled into, but the allusions which have become optics for viewing the bird and the scene unfolding in the abbey. The stanza thus enacts a technique Peter Riley finds paradigmatic of Langley's poetry, wherein "the epiphanic belief becomes literary and socialised", and any experiences that seem particularised and individual are "[lifted] […] out of the particular" through "[t]he craft of their forming".[152]

Second, the turn to these formal and cultural resources as a way of converting the pigeon into something which can be perceived and memorialised across space and time is fully acknowledged as an act which takes place *within* the abstractions and mediations of language, even if these abstractions and mediations have paradoxically been shown by the

[150] Langley, *Complete Poems*, p.59.
[151] Langley, *Journals*, p.50.
[152] Peter Riley, *A Poetry in Favour of the World: A Review (with two asides…)* (London: Form Books, 1997), n.p.

poem to be actual, irreducible objects of the world. As Jack Belloli writes, Langley's "rhyming couplets document an attempt, 'now' and at some distance, to perform a recuperative ritual that succeeds in mourning the death, even if the speaker seems to know that the bird 'isn't there' and any ritual is a therapeutic illusion."[153] The poem's cognisance of the fragility of the recuperative illusion is affirmed when the couplets disappear almost as soon as they gain a foothold in the prosodic scheme, in lines which implicitly acknowledge the artifice of mimesis: "Night wind gives a cool hoot in the neck of | Jack's beer bottle, open on the table." The passage of air through the neck of a beer bottle produces a "cool hoot" which is no closer to the actual hoot of the pigeon than the column-like stanzas, heroic couplets and allusions the poem has assembled as a means of "[containing] and [assimilating]" the dying squab.[154] Instead, these devices—like the beer bottle hoot—are a refraction of sensory impressions from the external world through a prism produced by human culture.

Crucially, the poem concludes by showing how the artificial representation of the pigeon's hoot is reflected back into the world as a perceivable force in its own right, which can enter into its own chains of causality and, in turn, modulate and shape the behaviour of others. Hence, the sound produced by the bottle explicitly "[triggers]" the dormouse to "[shoot] along | the sill" and discover the "parings of the fruit [Jack and the speaker] ate". The forces of culture and propositional knowledge are here recognised as objects or 'bodies' which extend into and participate in the world, and as optics which "[illuminate] well enough" other objects of the world and enhance our perception of them. As Stokes writes in "Living in Ticino, 1947-1950" (one of Langley's sources for the poem, as per the bibliography in the *Complete Poems*):

> That which arrests us in a painting will not continue to do so unless it contains a structure that evokes or fits in with some aspect of what is permanent in many states of mind, in all our various relationships with objects.[155]

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[153] Belloli, "Bruno Latour and R. F. Langley", p.273.
[154] Langley, *Journals*, p.50.
[155] Adrian Stokes, *The Image in Form: Selected Writings*, ed. by Richard Wollheim (New York: Icon, 1972), pp.316-317.

Artworks and poems—in their "body-like" conception—maintain a tangible connection to the real world by being socially, historically and materially constituted. They act as a bridge between the external world of objects and a communal intersubjectivity, simultaneously activating "what is permanent in many states of mind" and "all our various relationships with objects." As such, they shape, condition and productively interact with our perception of reality. In his late poetry, Langley embraces this conception. However, he does not insist on attention to specific elements of European culture, nor does he present the poem or the artwork as a monolithic or totalising entity, as Pound and Stokes did. Rather, the architectural and poetic resources recruited in "Jack's Pigeon"—the masonry of St Philibert's, the heroic couplets, and an allusive network of English prosody containing Shakespeare and Eliot, among others—comprise a dynamic and flexible 'body', renewed and reanimated with each engagement, and capable of being adopted or set aside as needed.

The presentation of poetic language in "Jack's Pigeon" as both an optic and an agent which productively intervenes in and facilitates our perception of the world anticipates the conclusion of Langley's poetic trajectory. A journal entry from 1 April 2006 reveals Langley's late-career acceptance of propositional knowledge as a means of enriching and structuring his perception. Looking out of a plane window, Langley observes the "[w]hite files of small clouds" which pass beneath him as he moves above Britain and continental Europe:

> Odd how they change shape so slowly as they move, holding out their thin texture in curls and fixed gestures, as if they were forgetting what they were doing and had been caught by a thought. Or you can steady yourself and see them in their meteorology—small pieces of cumulus boiled up over the land and carried by the wind, in their parallel streams, out to sea. Plate 2. Forms of Cumulus. The result of convection, heated ground from morning sunlight, thermals rise to, and through, their condensation level. Their duller fringes are the evaporating parts, held up as they disappear, slowly, whiter tops, very white and still sharp and confident for a while […] I read on the plane, my head falling forward again and again as I sleep. The neat little Fontana Modern Master on Freud by Wollheim, taken to fit into luggage and be worthwhile. I am still in early chapters—on the Theory of the Mind […] all so impossible to believe even though the bright

> clouds outside the portholes behave and behave, in pathways, in quantities, moving to systems.[156]

A crucial distinction between Langley's later and earlier writing is the capacity for the perceiver to move fluently and by choice between direct perception and knowledge. In the entry from August 1979, Langley fretted that his reading would cocoon him from the phenomenological richness and wonder of reality, leaving him stuck "behind this block, this thick, warm, spectatorship".[157] By 2006, however, Langley can choose to see the clouds as instantaneous perceptual details floating freely from any pre-existing cognitive scheme or narrative he projects onto the scene, "as if they were forgetting what they were doing". "Or" (to use the operative word in Langley's entry), he can "steady himself" and engage his propositional knowledge to add depth to his observation of the clouds, tethering them to his book-learning. Hence, his empirical understanding of the clouds as "[t]he result of convection, heated ground from morning sunlight" integrates seamlessly into his observation, not as something superimposed onto the scene, but as an actual, perceivable detail of the clouds themselves. Likewise, the view out the plane's "portholes" becomes interchangeable with "Plate 2" of a meteorological text Langley likely encountered in his prior research. The portability of knowledge, symbolised by the compactness of Wollheim's book ("taken to fit into luggage and be worthwhile"), suggests its seamless integration into Langley's experience of the world: he is no longer burdened by the overwhelming bulk of Descartes' "great book of the world".[158] The wonder which closes the entry is not the wonder of direct perceptual immersion. It is rather the wonder that such perceptual immersion can exist interchangeably with the public 'body' of knowledge that Langley once worried would collapse the phenomenological depth of the world. Langley's entry moves fluidly from direct perception to books, then back to the "bright clouds" outside, and finally back to the "pathways, […] quantities, […] [and] systems" of Wollheim's text, showing how language need not commit itself solely to abstract signification. Instead, as with the poetic language that encoded the essence of the dying pigeon and "[held] it permanently" in the formal features of St Philibert's,

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[156] R. F. Langley, "From the Journals of R. F. Langley" in *PN Review*, 43:4 (2017), p.14.
[157] Langley, "From a Journal" in *PN Review*, 31:2 (2004), p.12.
[158] Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, p.8.

Langley has uncovered language's capacity to extend into the world, not as an imposition or a mediating lens through which reality is disclosed to us, but as a perceivable and constitutive part of reality itself.[159]

It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that all late modernist British poets saw language's capacity to actively extend into the world and structure our perception always in such positive and productive terms. In Colin Simms's work, language's role in shaping geography constitutes an intrusion: it imposes optics and screens which circumscribe and foreclose our access to the landscape. It is to these optics and screens that we will now turn.

[159] Langley, *Journals*, p.50.

Chapter Three
Perceiving Landscapes & Animals with Colin Simms

Introduction

> […] we need *to learn* to use our eyes. Each of us uses his eyes differently; one seeing a certain part of his environment and the other seeing another part. If you need a demonstration of this, let three people look briefly at the same landscape, real or portrayed, and then note what they have individually seen. One might have been concerned about the sky and clouds, another with the middle ground, the third concentrated on one particular element—a hill or a building or a river. One might carry a strong impression of colour, another of movement, a third of relief or distance.[1]

So begins the self-proclaimed "artist-naturalist" Colin Simms's 1970 herpetological study of the British Isles, *Lives of British Lizards*.[2] The usual trappings of a work of natural history are visible throughout Simms's book: the frontispiece bears his postnominals (Fellow of the Linnaean Society and member of both the British and American Herpetological Societies), the foreword includes an accolade from the then-president of the British Herpetological Society, J. F. D. Frazer, and Simms compiles a range of data from "seven seasons and about seven hundred captures," presented through figures, graphs, tables, facsimiles of handwritten fieldwork and full-colour photographs.[3] Yet there are many moments in the text in which Simms's register slips from a rigorously analytical study of lizards to a phenomenological investigation of the nature of perception. The above passage is a case in point: Simms's emphasis on perspectivism in the observation of the landscape—on how perceived objects in the landscape depend on the perceiving subject—makes the book as much about the life of perception itself as it is about the lives of British lizards.

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[1] Colin Simms, *Lives of British Lizards* (Norwich: Goose & Son, 1970), p.14. Original emphasis.
[2] I take the term "artist-naturalist" from a piece Simms prepared for the York Festival, 1980: *The Artist-Naturalist in Britain* (York: self-published, 1980).
[3] Simms, *Lives of British Lizards*, pp.3-7.

This oscillation between an overt analysis of perceived objects—in this case, the lizards whose diurnal movements and breeding patterns are closely documented—and an implicit interrogation of the phenomenological observer is crucial to understanding the work Simms produced in his other vocation, poetry. Like Langley, Simms's poetry is preoccupied with how human perception and knowledge mediate the disclosure of biological and geographic realities. His primary subject, both in *Lives of British Lizards* and in the some 40 poetry books he produced in his life, is the self-reflexivity of perceiving and knowing. Simms insists that the foundations of both scientific and poetic knowledge are contested terrains, rather than two harmoniously integrated, but distinct, fields of practice. His work in both fields reveals that the act of perception is never neutral but is always-already shaped by the observer's specialised knowledge, enacted specifically through forms like maps, graphs, figures and the proliferations of text which underpin his geographic research. Simms shows how these forms are optics which simultaneously illuminate and occlude the particularity of the other.

This dialectical stance towards the optic is the central tension to which this chapter attends. Specifically, I focus on how Simms applies this stance to his perception of his perennial favourite subject matter: landscapes, and the animals and humans that inhabit them. Placing Simms's poetry into dialogue with his geographic and poetic sources, I argue that his work evolves from a conception of geography as immanently legible in his early career, into a growing realisation that his geographic subjects are always disclosed through forms of knowledge which actively intervene in and reshape them. I examine Simms's career chronologically, placing his poetry into dialogue with his shifting institutional, personal and professional relationships with specific scenes and poets: most notably, the London-based axis of experimental poets who coalesced around Eric Mottram in the 1970s, and Basil Bunting, whose emphasis on the sonorous, oral dimensions of poetry offered Simms in his later career an escape from the emphatically bookish, research-oriented qualities of his early geographic poetry. Ultimately, this chapter makes a novel case for Simms as a figure who became disillusioned with the American modernism of figures like Dorn and Olson (as these figures were mediated to him by his British mentors). I demonstrate that, in the wake of this disillusionment, Simms developed a self-reflexive poetics grounded in his biogeographic

expertise and growing scepticism about human attempts to instrumentalise landscapes and animals.

Simms's later poetry increasingly strives to become (in his own terms) a "poetry of observed relationship," wherein animals typically situated in the North of England (such as otters, gyrfalcons and goshawks) serve as focal points for questioning the nature of observation itself.[4] Unlike the Cambridge nexus this thesis elsewhere focusses on (Riley, Langley and Prynne), this later poetry is marked by its lack of engagement with certain traditions like English Romanticism and the dramatic monologue. Instead, it employs Anglo-Saxon alliterative textures, ellipses and *lacunae*, and techniques which suggest the material accretion and compacting of language, such as kennings. Simms does not simply use these techniques to mimetically reproduce the particularity of these animals or the Northern English landscapes within which he situates them. Rather, he emphasises that these are optics that the perceiving and speaking subject self-consciously brings to bear on the moment of perception. Further than this, though, he historicises these forms by situating them (alongside words from other Northern European languages that his poetry increasingly incorporates, such as Icelandic, Norse, Scots and Frisian) in what he calls in a 1994 letter to Bill Griffiths a "spectrum" of 'Northern' linguistic and literary material.[5] The perception of animals like otters and goshawks becomes central to constructing this spectrum. They are used by Simms to project a vision of the Northern English landscape as both deeply particular and inextricably linked to a broader cultural and geological continuum of places shaped by Teutonic languages and cultures, as well as ancient geophysical connections.

Simms's preoccupation with perception and its mediation in both science and poetry has important literary-historical and theoretical precedents. I will begin with a biographical sketch which situates him in the lineage of Poundian and Olsonian modernism and its afterlife in British late modernist poetry. This biographical sketch is important because no such account exists in existing critical literature. Born in Cleveland in 1939, Simms fits neatly

[4] Simms, "The Crags at Crookleth Beacon", p.138.
[5] Colin Simms, letter to Bill Griffiths, 5 November 1994, GB/1975/BG/9/1, Bill Griffiths Archive, Brunel University London Special Collections. Hereafter BGA.

within the generation of British Poetry Revival poets who began publishing work in the 1960s and 1970s. He is roughly coeval with J. H. Prynne (b. 1936), Peter Riley (b. 1940) and R. F. Langley (b. 1938), to take examples immanent to this thesis. He remained in the North East of England throughout his life, though he frequently travelled to North America and Central Asia for what he saw as the mutually imbricated activities of poetic and biogeographic fieldwork. In the 1970s, he lived and worked in York, and in Buckler Studio in Bessie Surtees House, on Newcastle's Sandhill (his "weekend base" or writing studio).[6] In the 1980s and 1990s, he moved first to Tarset, then to Bellingham, and finally to Garrigill. He published his first poems in 1960, at the end of his studies at Keele University. Two privately printed works, *Trawling* and *Tearlach*, appeared that year. There is no record of their collection in any library or archive, nor any clue about their contents in any secondary writing on Simms. Beyond these, the 1960s was a period of bibliographic quietude, perhaps for professional reasons: Simms was hired as Keeper at the Yorkshire Museum in 1964, and spent the remainder of the decade completing the research that would inform *Lives of British Lizards*.

In the early 1970s, Simms became chair of the York Poetry Society (known as the North York Poetry Society from 1974), and editor of its imprint, York Poetry.[7] In this capacity his engagement with the British Poetry Revival was fully realised. Beyond publishing his first mature chapbooks with York Poetry, and establishing his own imprint, Genera, Simms spent the early part of the 1970s soliciting advice and criticism from established Revival poets, as well as his high modernist forebears in both Britain and across the Atlantic. In 1972 he began corresponding with Eric Mottram, an exchange that continued right up to the latter's death in January 1995.[8] As the most comprehensive collection of Simms's correspondence available anywhere, these letters to Mottram will be drawn on heavily throughout this chapter. For now,

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[6] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 14 December 1974, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

[7] As David Miller and Richard Price elucidate, York Poetry was the imprint of the York Poetry Society. "The first volume was an anthology of poems offered to the York Poetry Society Inaugural Poetry Competition, but later issues were single-author collections. The first few of these were by Simms himself, but later ones were by other poets". David Miller and Richard Price, *British Poetry Magazines, 1914-2000* (London & New Castle, Delaware: The British Library & Oak Knoll Press, 2006), p.215.

[8] The last letter sent from Simms to Mottram in the Mottram Collection is dated 11 December 1994. Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 11 December 1994, Mottram 5/220/1-5, Mottram Collection, King's College London.

it is worth mentioning that Simms's relationship with Mottram echoed the pedagogical or master-apprentice dynamic between Ezra Pound and Basil Bunting, Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen. Simms also clearly saw Mottram as a point of access to London's burgeoning experimental poetry scene (especially during Mottram's editorship of *Poetry Review* between 1971 and 1977), and to the varieties of American late modernism that Mottram researched and taught at King's College London.

Bunting was another hugely important mentor for Simms, as existing critical studies have documented. Harriet Tarlo's "Radical Landscapes: Contemporary Poetry in the Bunting Tradition" reads a number of Simms's early 'American poems' through the prism of Bunting's influence, while Andrew Duncan lists Simms alongside Barry MacSweeney and John Seed as one of "three excellent poets [from the North East of England]" to have been "helped" by Bunting's influence.[9] Even if Duncan's comments somewhat oversimplify the field of North Eastern poetry after Basil Bunting, that Simms was "helped" by Bunting is undeniable. One letter he sent to Mottram in February 1991 was written on the back of an early printing of Bunting's list of advice to young poets, "I suggest". Overleaf, Simms describes it as "a genuine bit of Buntingiana".[10] The Poundian dictums which comprise "I suggest"—"[j]ettison ornament gaily but keep shape" and "[c]ut out every word you dare"—might have informed the "'post-mortem dissections'" that, according to Simms, Bunting carried out on one of his unpublished poems in 1976.[11]

For all that Simms benefited from Bunting's tuition, so too did Bunting benefit from Simms's company and care in his final years. In July 1984 Bunting wrote to his biographer Victoria Forde of having exclusively relied on his "daughter and son-in-law, [his] ex-wife and

[9] Harriet Tarlo, "Radical British Landscape Poetry in the Bunting Tradition" in *"The Star You Steer By": Basil Bunting and British Modernism*, ed. by Richard Price and James McGonigal (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2000), pp.149-183. Andrew Duncan, *Origins of the Underground: British Poetry Between Apocryphon and Incident Light, 1933-79* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008), p.102.
[10] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 14 February 1991, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[11] Basil Bunting, "I suggest", Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, Durham University. Also appears in Ric Caddel & Anthony Flowers, *Basil Bunting: A Northern Life* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Newcastle Libraries & Information Services, 1997), p.49. Colin Simms, *The American Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2005), p.205.

Colin Simms" for help in moving to Fox Cottage in Whitley Chapel that month.[12] Bunting's death a year later profoundly affected Simms. In a letter which implicitly figures Bunting as a paternal figure, Simms wrote to Barry MacSweeney in 1988 of,

> a very traumatic emotional bust-up in '86, after deaths of Basil & me dad [which] had set a pattern reverberating, I've been very much alone and <u>in a sense</u> lonely. Traumas still echo, and I'm probably best away from most circles.[13]

Simms's sense of loneliness, and his belief that he had been ex-communicated from a wider poetic community, emerges elsewhere in the same letter, where he suggests that he saw his membership of that community as partially contingent on his relationship with Bunting:

> I have invited poets, only Jeremy Hilton has made it since the days beside Basil; when they came thick and fast as leaves in Vallombrosa, or whatever it was, and this place [Simms's house in Bellingham] is so tiny & dusty you canna blame 'em, especially the fastidious, the likes of Eric Mottram…![14]

Ex-communication and self-imposed exile are common tropes in Simms's letters to Mottram, too. Over the course of this chapter, these concerns will be placed into dialogue with the gradual localisation of his poetry across the decades, from the topographical, open field 'American' long poems he wrote in the 1970s, to the more ostensibly narrowly focussed, site-specific poems of animal-encounter he wrote in the 1980s and 1990s.

Simms's connection to an American modernist tradition encompassing figures like Pound, Williams, Zukofsky and Olson was not simply mediated through British figures like Mottram and Bunting. In a 1986 letter to the Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson, he writes of having previously sent poetry to, and received encouragement from, not only Bunting,

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[12] Basil Bunting, letter to Victoria Forde, 14 July 1984 in *The Letters of Basil Bunting*, ed. by Alex Niven (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2022), pp.408-410 (p.408).
[13] Colin Simms, letter to Barry MacSweeney, 20 August 1988, BM 3/5/75/2, Barry MacSweeney Archive, Newcastle University Library. Original emphasis.
[14] *ibid.*

Herbert Read and Hugh MacDiarmid, but also Zukofsky and Pound themselves.[15] Andrew Duncan brands Simms a 'neo-Objectivist' when he counts Simms among the "three excellent poets" of the North East, largely because of Bunting's influence.[16] However, there are equally strong conceptual and prosodic connections linking Simms directly to Objectivism's original tenets. The emphasis on perception as structuring the constitution of the perceived world in *Lives of British Lizards* ("[e]ach of us uses his eyes differently; one seeing a certain part of his environment and the other seeing another part") recalls Zukofsky in "Programme: 'Objectivists' 1931", the movement's *de facto* statement of purpose:[17]

> *An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.*[18]

Both Simms and Zukofsky describe the act of perception in essentially Kantian terms, as a harmonious interplay between an object 'out there' and for-itself and a subject who parses that object for herself, according to her own *a priori* preconceptions or "[desires]".[19] In both cases, perception is figured as an optical instrument—a camera or a telescope—directed by the subject's intellect. Both poets conceive of the optic as mechanically innocent. Simms's claim that "we need *to learn* to use our eyes" suggests that they are inert mediators that can be mastered by the intellect.[20] Meanwhile, Zukofsky argued that his study *Bottom: On*

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[15] Colin Simms, letter to Norman Nicholson, 21 November 1986, GB 133 NBK/217, Norman Nicholson Book Collection, John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.
[16] Duncan, *Origins of the Underground*, p.98, 102.
[17] Simms, *Lives of British Lizards*, p.14.
[18] Louis Zukofsky, "Programme: 'Objectivists' 1931" in *Poetry*, 37:5 (1931), pp.268-272 (p.268).
[19] Kant argues in *Critique of Pure Reason* that "experience itself is a kind of cognition requiring the understanding, whose rule I have to presuppose in myself before any object is given to me … to which all objects of experience must therefore necessarily conform, and with which they must agree … [W]e can cognise of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them." The object is not known as it is *in itself* (the noumenon), but rather as it is disclosed to us (the phenomenon), shaped by our *a priori* categories and concepts. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p.111.
[20] Simms, *Lives of British Lizards*, p.14. My emphasis.

Shakespeare explores a tension Shakespeare allegedly stages between "the *clear physical eye* against the erring brain."[21]

However, attempts to bring the brain, the eye and the external world into coherence are rarely straightforward for Simms, despite his idealist claims above. Writing to Mottram in 1984, he complicates his conception of his own poetry through reference to American modernist precedents:

> As W. C. Williams points out, among others, attempting to 'copy' nature is false […] All this must sound facile to you, yet I am aware I am neither 'describing' what [I] see nor 'reporting' it but something else […] the observations (of use in natural history accumulations) are the thing. And how I see them, what I consciously and unconsciously compare them with.[22]

The "something else" Simms sees himself as bringing to bear on the act of observation is the sheer amount of knowledge he compresses into his work. From the long poems he wrote in the 1970s, to his more condensed, lapidary lyrics in the 1980s and 1990s, Simms's poems are always poems *containing history*. However, unlike for Pound, that history is as much natural and geographic as it is human, socio-cultural, economic and literary. Simms insists that these forms of history and knowledge constitute screens through which direct perception must always be mediated.

Crucially, Simms does not treat mediation as merely an obstacle between subject and object, nor as something the poetic subject must work to overcome, either through recourse to a more 'natural' language, or through "[d]irect treatment of the 'thing'".[23] Rather, Simms presents mediation as the subject and content of the poem itself. In his poems, "the medium is the message", to borrow from the media theorist Marshall McLuhan.[24] Simms appears to have read McLuhan and internalised the broad principles of his 1964 text, *Understanding Media:*

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[21] Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions* (London: Rapp & Carroll, 1967), p.159. My emphasis.
[22] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 30 August 1984, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[23] Ezra Pound, *Pavannes and Divisions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), p.95.
[24] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p.7.

The Extensions of Man. An early poem entitled "Corelli" (collected in Ric and Ann Caddel's anthology of Simms's poetry, *Eyes Own Ideas*) reveals this engagement. After cascading lines in which Simms describes how his musical tastes were shaped through Bunting's recommendations, the poem concludes with a final meditation on influence and semiotics:

> McLuhan is only afterwards Peirce, Wittgenstein, Levi-Strauss [sic]
>
> the meaning of a symbol is another symbol
>
> ultimate meaning is (otherwise) inexpressible[25]

The presentation of McLuhan as the latest stage in a particular intellectual tradition is mimetically enacted in the spatial arrangement of the passage. The hemistich holds McLuhan apart from Charles Peirce, Wittgenstein and Claude Lévi-Strauss as if to hold him in balance with his predecessors: no member of this intellectual lineage is cancelled out or subordinated to one another, even as it progresses, and the names form "an organic unity in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity constitutes the life of the whole."[26] McLuhan's primary argument in *Understanding Media*—that "the 'content' [...] is always another medium"—resonates with these lines, through their shared emphasis on the irrecuperable status of absolute knowledge or "ultimate meaning".[27] Simms treats McLuhan as a mediated figure: he is the product of specific intellectual and historical circumstances, a symbol whose "meaning [...] is another symbol".

Moreover, Simms's growing critique of the proliferations of text which inform both his geographic practice and his "natural history accumulations", and his later experiments with a more orally oriented prosody and with actual typographic gaps and redactions, parallel specific elements of McLuhan's 1962 text, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic*

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[25] Colin Simms, *Eyes Own Ideas* (Durham: Pig Press, 1987), p.43.
[26] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.2.
[27] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.305.

Man. By breaking world history down into broad epochs, McLuhan argues that "[t]he invention of typography [in the 15th century] confirmed and extended the new visual stress of applied knowledge", which fragments and abstracts the Western self into "specialism and individualism".[28] McLuhan laments the loss of "the magical world of the ear" and "the implicit, magical world of the resonant oral world", to which Western society might partially return by emphasising auditory technologies over visual ones.[29] Simms does not view orality (and the rejection of text) anywhere near as sentimentally as McLuhan did in 1962: as we will see, even the most alliterative verse of his late career emphasises its own constructed nature and its relation to specialised forms of knowledge. Nonetheless, his interest in the material, sonorous qualities of poetic language, and occasional retreat from text altogether into typographic *lacunae*, offer a contrast to Riley, Langley and Prynne, whose work frequently emphasises the proliferation of text and the abstracted historicity of English poetic forms to underscore the mediated nature of perception.

In arguing for the centrality of mediation to Simms's poetics, I am arguing against the emerging critical consensus that is already foreclosing his writing. Andrew Duncan, for instance, claims Simms's poetry is concerned with,

> the actions of split-seconds [...] [the] first half-second during and after sense perception, he is interested in splitting it and getting back to the first fractions of a second, rather than expanding it to include all the sequela of articulation and rationalisation.[30]

Given my account of Simms's poetry so far, this reading should seem peculiar. Simms's poetic subjects are always filtered through lenses, from the "optical [instruments]" of the bazookas that ravage the earth in his late volume *In Afghanistan*, to the maps, records, extratextual citations and recorded speech which comprise the assemblages of the 'American poems' of the 1970s.[31] To emphasise, Simms sees our perception and understanding of the biological and

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[28] Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p.124, 25.
[29] *ibid*, p.22, 19.
[30] Andrew Duncan, *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), pp.149-150.
[31] Colin Simms, *In Afghanistan* (London: Writers Forum, 1994), n.p.

geographical world as always-already mediated through a multitude of textual, epistemological and linguistic screens.

In arguing that Simms applies critical pressure to the relationship between the observer and the observed, I do not wish to go as far as Rosalind Alderman, who has recently written in somewhat binary terms of "Simms's thoroughgoing suspicion of taxonomies of all kinds, and most particularly those based on the skewed morphologies of Western science that operate as an apparatus of biopolitics."[32] Rather, I see Simms's scientific expertise— and his embeddedness within the very institutions of Western science that Alderman argues he critiques—as integral to and constitutive of his poetic thinking. His biogeographic work both contains and informs his poetry, and vice versa. Simms appears to have seen it this way, too: in a 1988 letter to Barry MacSweeney, he writes of "doing a lot of 'extra' fieldwork [that year], on account of the goodish autumn", and leveraging that fieldwork for both poetic sequences and more straightforwardly scientific writing.[33]

This chapter will consist of three parts. Parts I and II examine how Simms investigates the mediating processes of Western geography in some of his earliest collections, *Bear Skull* (1974), and *No North Western Passage* (1976). Simms grouped these works as 'American poems' in his 2005 Shearsman retrospective collection of the same name. Thematically, they are 'American' insofar as their subject is the North American continent: its geology, its indigenous and colonial populations and the ways in which the landmass has shaped and been shaped by those who inhabit it. But they are also formally 'American', in that they adopt the epic but loco-specific mode of texts like Williams's *Paterson* (1946-1958), Charles Olson's *Maximus* (1950-1970), and Ed Dorn's *The North Atlantic Turbine* (1967) more fully than Simms's later poetry does. Simms's poetic technique in these works draws heavily on Olson's open field composition and Williams's variable foot. He wrote most of these texts during a period of particularly intense exchange and engagement with Mottram and the community

[32] Rosalind Alderman, "'A poetry of observed relationship:' Observation, objectivity and creaturely (inter-)subjectivity in the radical landscape poetry of Colin Simms" in *Anglistik*, 27:2 (2016), pp.111-124 (p.114).
[33] Colin Simms, letter to Barry MacSweeney, 23 October 1988, BM 3/5/75/2, Barry MacSweeney Archive, Newcastle University Library.

which coalesced around *Poetry Review* under Mottram's editorship, and it will be argued that the form and focus of these 'American poems' emerges to an extent from these institutional contexts.

Part I places *Bear Skull* into dialogue with the work of the American cultural geographers Carl Sauer and John Fraser Hart, two figures explicitly (in the case of Hart) and implicitly (in the case of Sauer) evoked in the text. This section examines how Simms's earliest writing complicates the conception of man and landscape as 'organically' imbricated and coextensive with one another, a conception that Simms ultimately derived from Sauer and Hart, but which had also been internalised by his poetic influences, Williams, Olson and Dorn. Though Simms takes some aspects of this cultural geographic framework at face value, he also challenges other elements of it. Specifically, he demonstrates that the 'cultural forms' humans inscribe onto the landscape are rarely harmoniously integrated with the natural forms of the world. Instead, these cultural forms mediate our perception of and access to the landscape, and they often actively change the constitution of the landscape itself. Part II shows how Simms develops this investigation further in the poem *No North Western Passage*. This paratactic, open field 'American' sequence challenges the association of its inherited form with spatial and presentational immediacy and legibility. *No North Western Passage* plays with mediation in both its material presentation and its prosody to emphasise a relationship with landscape defined by detached observation, rather than meaningful phenomenological immersion. This detachment arises from Simms's growing insistence on the landscape as always-already materially and historically contingent, and as produced by a set of inscrutable practices which cannot be faithfully captured by the increasingly centrifugal speaking voice his 'American poetry' has developed. In *No North Western Passage*, Simms reveals how his knowledge of the colonial geography of the Americas—as well as his knowledge of the land economy and trade practices subtending that colonial geography—mediates and structures his access to this environment. He also emphasises how these forces have actively shaped the American landscape.

Part III examines some of the poems of animal-encounter Simms wrote over the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, as collected in 2004's *Otters and Martens*. The poems in this volume combine loco-specificity with encounters with otters, embracing the animal's radical alterity. In these poems, the poem's subject cannot subsume or control its object, resulting in a form of "thinking with the things as they exist" *par excellence*.[34] Simms draws on Anglo-Saxon, Old Icelandic and Old Norse poetic forms and allusions, as well as other Teutonic languages like Frisian, Scots, Icelandic and Westrobothnian, to embed the particularity and alterity of otters into an ancient and expansive vision of the Northern English landscape. At the same time, the perceptual encounter with the otter expands outward into an archipelagic vision of the North of England, enfolding Greater Scandinavia. This vision reflects the historical movement of peoples and speaking communities across this area, from Angle and Viking invasions to maritime contact between Tynesiders and the Dutch in the fishing and whaling industries of the early modern period and beyond. Simms's archipelagic vision mirrors how otters, through their transgressive movements across water and land, remake human geography, revealing connections that transcend modern borders and illuminating deeper cultural, geophysical and ecological continuities.

I – "Geography grows by precepts and then by discerning": *Bear Skull*'s Sauerian beginnings

> Vancouver was no stolid Dutchman, either, Donald Davie,
> out of Norfolk puddings maybe, but of that cosmopolitan navy
> exploring, distinguishing, reflecting sense in learning
> that geography grows by precepts and then by discerning;
> for Karel Voous mind-opening beyond race to the new concepts.[35]

Simms wrote these lines—the final quintain of "Oystercatchers"—between Puget Sound, Washington, and The Wash, East Anglia, in 1973. Beyond the material, semiotic translation of

[34] Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p.20.
[35] Simms, *Eyes Own Ideas*, p.42.

these place names across the Atlantic, deeper historical echoes are at play here. George Vancouver, born in King's Lynn, on The Wash, charted a course around the coast of Washington, and gave Puget Sound its colonial name in 1792. On one level, "Oystercatchers" suggests a coherence between man and different landmasses (in this case, Britain and the Pacific Northwest Coast). Viewed historiographically, Puget Sound appears to share an immanent connection with Norfolk, facilitated through the voyage of one sailor, Vancouver. This relationship is mirrored in Simms's punning reconfiguration of The Wash into Washington.

But Simms stops short of framing that relationship as mythopoetic and without complication. As Amy Cutler notes, the poem is "concerned with the narratives told about earlier geographical explorers such as Captain Vancouver, and the reification of understandings of place and belonging by 'avian systematists'".[36] In one of his earliest mature pieces, Simms is already forging a poetic voice which critically interrogates the ways in which geographic knowledge is produced—how "new concepts" are minted, in a "race" that bypasses more complicated geographical realities—and how such knowledge is disseminated and judged as 'authoritative'. The poem dismisses Donald Davie's archly-Movement valorisation of Vancouver for his "stolid" perseverance and fierce loyalty in his first *Collected Poems* (1972), and instead redistributes the practical, diplomatic and geographic 'successes' (colonial incursions) of the Vancouver Expedition among "that cosmopolitan navy".[37] Simms's decisive use of "of" highlights George Vancouver as just one constituent part of a larger, multinational endeavour. The revision challenges both the poem's implied coherence between Britain and America—by exposing the voyage as the effort of many peoples, not just one nation—as well as Davie's use of Vancouver as a vehicle for advancing a set of historically and culturally specific values. In a few lines, the poem critiques received geographic dogma and narratives which unduly valorise a single Western individual, or which posit an immanent connection between

[36] Amy Cutler, "Language disembarked: the coast and forest in modern British poetry" (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2014), p.93.
[37] Davie's poem is simply titled "Vancouver", and is also available in Donald Davie, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990), pp.200-203.

two landmasses, as the semiotic translation of place names between the 'Old' and 'New' worlds implicitly signals.

Crucial to Simms's thinking about landscape in the 1970s is "Oystercatchers"' claim that "geography grows by precepts and then by discerning". This suggests that geographic practices are predicated on epistemological frameworks that are anterior to the actual act of perception, structuring and informing *how* and *what* we see. This brings us back to *Lives of British Lizards*, with its account of sight as contingent upon the preconceptions and inclinations of the observer. Through the claims made in "Oystercatchers", Simms argues that geographical knowledge is foundational to the perception of landscape: it deepens, enriches or even occludes our access to the environment. This notion is extended in his 1974 volume, *Bear Skull*, to which this section will now turn. Though "Oystercatchers" is not collected in *Bear Skull*, it is roughly contemporaneous with it, and there are clear correspondences in Simms's thinking in both texts. *Bear Skull* is preoccupied with the extent to which geographic knowledge—in the form of specific epistemological methods, but also maps and other means of representing biogeographic and human geographic data—constitutes an optic through which the world is disclosed to us. Crucially, however, it also imagines an alternative relationship with landscape, one outside of these limited frameworks and instead grounded in the phenomenological experience of the emplaced, embodied observer.

Because *Bear Skull* comprises poems Simms had previously published in venues like *Poetry Review*, it is essentially a retrospective of some of his earliest work. It rehearses many of the thematic tropes of its time, indicative of the young poet developing his own voice through imitation. This is immediately manifest in the deferential attitude towards American modernism evident in its subtitle, "*poems before America*" (original emphasis). Here, "before" functions as both a temporal and spatial preposition, implying in the first sense that Simms wrote these poems in the lead up to one of his fieldwork trips. In the second sense, it suggests Simms's self-positioning *in front of* an avatar of America, engaging it in dialogue and offering these poems as a tribute. While this second reading might initially seem speculative, many of these poems apostrophically address themselves to North America, aspiring to a literal

dialogic relationship between self and landscape. This approach emerges from Simms's engagement with American cultural geography and the American poets who mediated its insights: chiefly, Olson, Dorn and Williams. In his self-presentation, the young Simms situates himself within the live tradition of American modernism, flaunting his understanding of the New American Poetry and its intellectual contexts, before subjecting that poetic and intellectual lineage to the kind of scrutiny demonstrated by "Oystercatchers".

For all their devotion to American modernism, the poems in *Bear Skull* do not adopt the same paratactic, open field forms that Simms explored in later 'American' poems—more on the reason for this in Part II. However, the collection's focus on a dialogic, reciprocal relationship between man and landscape derives from a complex of American modernist approaches to geography, both in poetic thought and from within the methodological frameworks of cultural geography. A close reading of two poems—"To New Cities: Another Geography Lesson" and "Global Tutorial"—will elucidate these influences and reveal some of the important modifications Simms makes to them.

"Global Tutorial" establishes the importance of cultural geography to the collection by making one of its chief architects, John Fraser Hart (recognisable in the text because he taught at Indiana University), a protagonist:

> We had reached the Midwest's nets
> spread out like pigeon-nests of wire against
> the white of the map
> But Professor Hart of Indiana
> tied his terse handkerchief into bandana
> and threw off his shoes and lept onto the table
> to enthuse his broad manner
> into the sleeping tents that seminar,
> spinning the globe, his own bulk to give us
> things in the round,
> what was settled, iron
> which was good bottom-ground.[38]

[38] Colin Simms, *Bear Skull* (York: North York Poetry, 1974), p.4.

Modern cultural geography, as its foundational figure Carl Sauer argues in "The Morphology of Landscape", insists upon "areal reality and relation", and conceives of its central task as,

> the establishment of a critical system which embraces the phenomenology of landscape, in order to grasp in all of its meaning and colour the varied terrestrial scene [...] *It includes the works of man as an integral expression of the scene* [...]
>
> The objects which exist together in the landscape exist in interrelation. We assert that they constitute a reality as a whole that is not expressed by a consideration of the constituent parts separately, that area has form, structure and function, and hence position in a system, and that it is subject to development, change and completion.[39]

For Sauer, the scope of what we call landscape must be expanded to include the cultural forms of man as well as man *qua* phenomenological observer: "[w]e are interested in that part of the areal scene that concerns us as human beings because we are part of it, live with it, are limited by it, and modify it."[40] In this view, man and his cultural forms are immanent with the natural forms with which they share space, and all these elements exist in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. Landscape, then, is an intersubjective, relational field, and geography as a discipline must account for this.

John Fraser Hart applied Sauer's methods specifically to rural areal scenes, challenging the conception that rural and urban spaces are neatly distinct from one another. He argued that the poles of city and countryside are dynamically entwined: "city people are now widely dispersed through the countryside, country people are becoming increasingly urbane, and the countryside has come to have a very different place in our scale of values."[41] Perhaps the most significant aspect of Hart's thinking for *Bear Skull*, and indeed for Simms's thinking about geography throughout the 1970s, is his presentation of the map as a rhetorical tool and optical medium. Hart suggests that the map's top-down perspective on the land supplements, but

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[39] Carl O. Sauer, *Land and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, ed. by John Leighly (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp.320-321. Emphasis mine.
[40] *ibid*, p.325.
[41] John Fraser Hart, "The Three R's of Rural Northeastern United States" in *The Canadian Geographer*, 7:1 (1963), pp.13-22 (p.13).

does not necessarily override, an embodied and emplaced perspective on the ground. In one essay on agricultural land use, he writes that "field patterns can be seen from the air, and they can be observed and mapped, but not photographed on the ground. They provide a superb example of a phenomenon about which insight can best be gained through the *rhetoric of the map*."[42] Hart's conception of the surface of the map as a rhetorical surface and epistemic screen will be more relevant to my discussion of "To New Cities" below. For the purposes of "Global Tutorial" it is worth noting the Sauerian light in which Simms depicts him. Vivaciously enthusing the soporific seminar room in "his broad manner", Hart is positioned in direct relation with the globe he uses to lead the tutorial. Through the image of Hart "spinning the globe, his own bulk to give us | things in the round", Simms suggests coherence between the movement of the human body and the movement of the Earth (or at least its iconic representation as a "globe"), conveying the sense of mutual imbrication that informs Sauer's observations that "we are part of […], live with […], are limited by […], and modify" the areal scene.[43] In this poem at least, *Bear Skull*'s avowed aim of making landscape a joint protagonist with the speaking and perceiving poetic subject is a real possibility, one that can be activated through a specific geographic method advanced and developed by a real intellectual figure situated within the text.

Simms's poem closes with another important Sauerian formulation: beneath the cultural landscape, there lies a "settled", "good bottom-ground", a striated geological foundation which subtends our cultural forms and gives them coherence and stability. As Sauer writes, "[b]ehind the present forms lie processual associations, previous or ancestral forms, and almost inscrutable expressions of time."[44] "Global Tutorial" posits that "bottom-ground" as "iron", suggesting perhaps the Precambrian banded iron formations that constitute much of the North American continental shield, and which form part of the deep historical

[42] John Fraser Hart, "Field Patterns in Indiana" in *Geographical Review*, 58:3 (1968), pp.450-471 (p.450).
[43] Sauer, *Land and Life*, p.325.
[44] *ibid*, p.329. Hart's writing advances cognate thoughts. In *The Look of the Land* he argues that certain more basal forms in the landscape might adapt more slowly to changing cultural forms and practices: "the layout of fields, as a general rule, is even more conservative, and changes even more slowly, than agricultural practices. The field pattern of an area often reflects past agricultural practices better than it reflects those of today." John Fraser Hart, *The Look of the Land* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1975), p.74.

ground poems like Ed Dorn's "The Land Below" (1964) seek to excavate and recuperate.[45] For Dorn, Olson and Simms (at this point in his career), the existence of this basal substrate suggested a common geological fundament underwriting our humanity. This fundament made it possible to imagine the coherence of peoples, animals and natural and cultural forms across landmasses and in spite of the legal fictions of borders. Charles Olson had prescribed Sauer's "Morphology of Landscape" and 1948 article "Environment and Culture during the Last Deglaciation" as essential reading to Dorn.[46] James J. Parsons writes that Dorn, Olson, Williams, Robert Creeley, and others, "found an exhilarating model and source of inspiration in Sauer's insistence on the immutable link between history and geography and [...] his sensitivity to the aesthetic values of the humanised landscape."[47] There is a clear literary-historical heritage to *Bear Skull*'s Sauerian formulations, then. However, by making John Fraser Hart an integral part of the text, and situating his thinking in the broader field of cultural geography, Simms shows an engagement with that field that extends beyond a passive reception of Sauer through reading Dorn, Olson and others.[48]

With the parameters of this intellectual and poetic heritage established, we can better understand *Bear Skull*'s most Sauerian—and most Hartian—poem, "To New Cities: Another Geography Lesson", as well as the generative complications Simms introduces into that

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[45] Upon encountering the Native American family who have apparently allowed their lifestyle to become saturated with capitalism, Dorn laments that they,

> [...] wouldn't have yearned for the lime-secreting pre-cambrian
> algae, not using lime stone, as a product.

Ed Dorn, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012), p.103.

[46] Charles Olson, "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn" in Ed Dorn, *Gunslinger: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2018), p.236.

[47] James J. Parsons, "'Mr. Sauer' and the Writers" in *Geographical Review*, 86:1 (1996), pp.22-41 (p.23).

[48] *Bear Skull* has clear institutional links to Ed Dorn. As the frontmatter indicates, the collection was put together by Simms alongside R. W. "Herbie" Butterfield, at that point lecturer in American literature at the newly created University of Essex. Essex had hosted Ed Dorn as a Fulbright Scholar between 1965 and 1970; and he and Butterfield were friends as well as colleagues, as Butterfield's memorial speech for Dorn in 2000 indicates: Herbie Butterfield, "Ed(ward Merton) Dorn (1929-1999): A Memoir, an Introduction, an Overview, Some Poems and a Song", lecture (University of Essex, April 2000), <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/dorn/DORN_CENTO/dorn_butterfield.html> [accessed 9 March 2021]. For more on this moment in the University of Essex's history, see Latter, *Late Modernism and* The English Intelligencer, p.21.

heritage. As we will see, these complications also lie at the root of the later American poems. Here is the poem in full:

> And will your landscape be like this, America?
> Will you shuffle your hundreds of miles
> qualitatively, as our tens; reduce your prairie
> to patina'd meadows I can comprehend
> or will you slug my trail with slippery?
>
> Chicago
> I know (on paper, though)
> has grown so
> rolled out of Gogebic, Menominee, Marinette,
> a net eased off the cartographer's pores
> rattling, cattling, glistening wet
> high blocks cast short shadows on the pens;
>
> they ink your shores
> with piers.
> And will your texture be like this, America?
> Carding people behind such smiles of files,
> decking and dealing Who Where out to wary
> beyond complexions nature can never mend
> before the net your way reaches out to me?[49]

The poem's title, signalling its projective movement from addresser to addressee, invokes the 'letters' which comprise Olson's *Maximus*, an organisational principle that Anne Day Dewey argues reflects Olson's interest in the interpersonal and dialogic "processes by which collective culture develops."[50] It also evokes the pedagogical, quasi-academic mode of Ed Dorn's *The North Atlantic Turbine*. Simms's "Geography Lesson", like the "Global Tutorial", echoes the "Thesis", "Theory", "first note" and "Notation" which comprise Dorn's book, reinforcing Simms's engagement with a tradition of geographically oriented research poetry.[51] *The North Atlantic Turbine* also makes claims for a dialogic relation with the British landscape,

[49] Simms, *Bear Skull*, p.9.
[50] Anne Day Dewey, *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), p.37.
[51] Ed Dorn, *The North Atlantic Turbine* (London: Fulcrum, 1967).

employing problematically gendered apostrophes to "lovely […] England | with her swollen bellies" (the "pregnant lovely" hills and downs of Sussex).[52] Simms's America, at least in this poem, is not feminised. Still, his conception of landscape as something with which he can engage in an instructive relationship suggests he sees it as—metaphorically—pregnant with meaning. It is worth noting, however, that elsewhere in *Bear Skull* Simms is not above eroticising the landscape and the seascape in pursuit of a Sauerian ideal wherein the human body and every areal feature exist in harmonious interdependence. In "A Re-Cycling of Elements for a Watcher on the Shore", Simms posits the same immanent geomorphic connection between America and the British Isles he imagines in "Oystercatchers": he writes of "[pushing] off south from Ireland" on a raft "hired from nature", only to "be cycled round to you | gazing out to sea at Galveston [Texas] | […] because this ocean is a revolving and uncoiling creature". He punctuates his lyrical address to the North Atlantic Drift with descriptions of being "caressed at the lips and hand" by "some cyclonic feature; | rain on wind".[53]

"To New Cities" equivocates between two ways of relating with the land: one predicated on comprehending a newly-discovered landscape through the screen of geographic knowledge and familiar cartographic templates, and another that prizes the phenomenological encounter with landscape as an embodied, emplaced and grounded subject. However, the potential for this second option is invariably subsumed by and abstracted into the former. Simms's poem reveals that certain cultural forms—specifically, maps—ultimately dictate how areal reality is constructed and disclosed. After the *in medias res* of the opening line (whose decisively rhetorical mode situates us in the midst of the "lesson"), the terms are set for these two approaches. The "[shuffling]" of landscape initiates the poem's central conceit of rendering the land as fragments of paper, from cards, to maps, to "files". Geographic distance "[shuffled]" like a deck of cards implies its reduction to a set of portable thumbnails, to be easily "[comprehended]" by the observer. The simplification is formally enacted in the internal slant rhyme connecting the "tens" of British miles to "comprehend", and in the non-standard

[52] *ibid*, p.11.
[53] Simms, *Bear Skull*, p.12.

contraction of 'patinaed' to "patina'd", a typographic minutia which breaks the rhetorical illusion and draws attention to the poem as ink on paper, another of the printed treatments of the landscape which proliferate in the poem.

The alternative relationship emerges when the speaker—who is embodied and emplaced in the landscape, following a "trail"—asks if America will "slug [her] trail with slippery". In contrast to the straightforward hypotaxis of the four lines preceding it, the final line of the first stanza has an oblique, unfinished quality. It implies that America's landscape, 'unshuffled', will disrupt the speaker's movement through it, but "slippery" has either become either an uncountable noun or else retains its adjectival function but now floats freely from the noun(s) it modifies. Syntactic and semantic breakdowns of this kind are a hallmark of Simms's poetics, becoming significantly more radical in the later works this chapter will move on to discuss: as such, it is worth considering their function at this stage. Writing on form and syntax in Objectivist poetry, Peter Quartermain argues that,

> [Objectivist poetry] is too conscious of the world as, in the long run, unknowable, impenetrable, and disobedient to human order; of the future as utterly unpredictable. Similarly, of the incapacity of language to describe or fix, and also of the blur, rather than the distinction, of the outer and inner world [...] Ordinary syntax is, like the language of classical mathematics, incapable of describing a world whose unity seems more often delusional than actual.[54]

Unsurprisingly, Simms does not feature in Quartermain's study, but many of his influences appear (Zukofsky, Pound, Williams, Olson and Bunting). In "To New Cities", there is a clear parallel between Quartermain's description of Objectivist prosody failing "to describe or fix" a world that is always-already "unknowable, impenetrable, and disobedient to human order" and Simms's letting language fail at *precisely* the moment in which the embodied, emplaced and grounded subject enters into the poem. It is as if language—at least in its intelligible, socially constituted and printed form—loses its capacity to faithfully capture the qualities of

[54] Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.3.

landscape the closer it comes to recording the phenomenological experience of moving through it. Where R. F. Langley often resorted to self-generating strings of language as a defence against the unknown in the phenomenological encounter with landscape (as in the journal entry from October 1970, where 'finding what will suffice' precipitates recourse to Linnaean taxonomy, quotations from Chaucer and etymological definitions from Walter Skeat), Simms retreats from language altogether.[55]

The remainder of the poem attends directly to the reproduction of the American landscape through maps. The speaker parenthetically admits that her knowledge of Chicago is epistemic (gleaned from "paper"), rather than experiential. Simms once again frames this as a reductive foreclosure of an "unknowable, impenetrable and disobedient world" through his use of rhyme, in the monotonous clang of "Chicago | [...] though) | [...] so", hurried along by the abrupt lineation.[56] Chicago's urban development, reproduced on the map as a 'rolling', becomes an uncomplicated extension of townships southward from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, through Wisconsin and into Illinois. Simms's sequential listing of "Gogebic, Menominee, Marinette" linearly reproduces their latitudinal arrangement on the map, and, in so doing, enacts how the map freezes space "as a continuous surface [...] [a] completed product [...] a coherent and closed system [...] completely and instantaneously interconnected," as Doreen Massey observes in *For Space*.[57] By presenting landscape as a "completed product", the narrative projected by the map occludes the messier realities of settler expansion across North America. For one, it fails to account for the violent expulsion of the indigenous Menominee, Ojibwe, Ottawa and Potawatomi peoples from the regions the poem records, legitimised through acts like the Treaty of Chicago in 1833. One historian writes that the Treaty precipitated changes to the geography of the region which were hardly discernible from the map, but visible from the perspective of a grounded subject: "[c]ornfields that had been cultivated by Native Americans were now under the control of a new wave of

[55] Langley, *Journals*, pp.9-10.
[56] Simms, *Bear Skull*, p.12.
[57] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage, 2005), p.106.

farmers […] farm fields and trails by which Native Americans had transformed this region were quickly appropriated by the new settlers and lost their distinctive Indian origins."[58]

Simms only makes passing references to America's indigenous populations in *Bear Skull*, reserving deeper investigations into their abuse at the hands of European settlers and their representation in his ethnographic and geographic source material for later American poems like *No North Western Passage* and *Rushmore Inhabitation*. Even if it is not explicit about what has been circumscribed by the map, "To New Cities" implies that, at least in the professionalised and disciplinised field of human geography, the cartographer ultimately controls the production of place. We are given a double perspective on Chicago at the end of the second stanza: the city's "high blocks" dwarf the embodied and emplaced experience of a human walking the streets at ground level, but on the plane of the map these are, in turn, dwarfed by the map maker's "pen". The uncomfortable close-up of the "cartographer's pores", "glistening wet", and freed from the netting of the map's black ink on the page, connects with Chicago's uncomplicated "[rolling]" to suggest that this abstraction of the landscape lets the cartographer off the hook. Writing on maps and mapping in poetry in modern poetry, Ian Davidson argues that,

> The map […] provides, within boundaries, a series of places, principally arranged according to their congruity rather than causally. The map […] is a 'slice through time', and as such can […] reveal connections and links which are otherwise concealed. A reading of the map as representative of a particular social and cultural perspective will not only critique the map's aura of objectivity, but can also identify the reasons for what is included and what has been left out, the significance of the symbolism used, and the scale […] Through reading the map, or travelling the terrain it represents, the subject position can be various. Instead of a single view from above […] there are a number of ways through both map and terrain, and multiple perspectives.[59]

[58] Ann Durkin Keating, *Chicagoland: City and Suburbs in the Railroad Age* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p.32.
[59] Ian Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.61.

This is broadly true of Simms's map and its encoding of a discrete perspective on the American Midwest. Despite its pretensions to objectivity, its surface is historically and ideologically mediated, even in its depiction of geomorphic features, our understanding of which is likewise contingent on certain material, epistemic and institutional circumstances. An actual, phenomenological experience of moving through the landscape it depicts would uncover innumerable subject positions and would "slug [our] trail with slippery". As Doreen Massey asks, could we ever conceive of a map that records "the sphere of a dynamic simultaneity, constantly disconnected by new arrivals, constantly waiting to be determined (and therefore always undetermined) by the construction of new relations"?[60] As we will see, some of Simms's later American poems aspire towards the production of a map as radically open as Massey's.

"To New Cities" offers a productive complication of Davidson's binary of map and world, couched in Simms's conception of language and human knowledge as forces that intervene in and constitute the world. Simms's map is not a flat, two-dimensional document, sealed off in an abstract epistemological domain, but an object in the world which exists in relation to other objects. The three-dimensionality of the map (Chicago's "high blocks [casting] short shadows on the pens"), coupled with its capacity to shape the landscape ("they ink your shores with piers"), reveals Simms's conception of the data and the texts which shape his geographic knowledge—be these poems, maps or treaties expelling indigenous populations—as part of the very fabric of the land. Ultimately, this conception can be traced back to Sauer, whose argument that "the works of man" form "an integral expression of the [areal] scene" is capacious enough to cover just about anything that isn't 'natural'.[61] But a more direct source is probably John Fraser Hart, the "Professor" of "Global Tutorial", whose attention to "the rhetoric of the map" seems to be a crucial and early influence on Simms's geographic poetry.[62]

With its confident engagements with and constitutive subversions of the geographers and geographic paradigms that were *de rigueur* among American and British late modernists

[60] Massey, *For Space*, p.107.
[61] Sauer, *Land and Life*, p.321.
[62] Hart, "Field Patterns in Indiana", p.450.

throughout the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, *Bear Skull* announces Simms's intervention in the sub-tradition he was writing into. Crucially, it establishes a paradigm which will resonate throughout his career. Though it attempts to imagine a relationship with the land predicated on the phenomenological immersion of the grounded and emplaced subject (expressed through syntactic and linguistic breakdowns and *lacunae*), it is also resigned to the fact that our access to the world is always-already mediated through the optics of professional geography: maps, secondary commentaries on place, and other forms of geographic data. In later poems, Simms brings the different textual fragments and data points through which we access and understand the land closer to the surface of his writing, creating poetic sequences with increasingly collagist and montage-like textures. 1976's *No North Western Passage*, to which this thesis now turns, uses these paratactic qualities to present a non-linear image of American geography, which disrupts the presentational immediacy of the conventional map and reveals how the landscape is continually re-structured and re-disclosed to us through colonial geography, land economy and the systems of knowledge which sustain them.

II – "Geography—the abstraction of place": *No North Western Passage* (1976)

In a letter written to Mottram in December 1974, Simms recalls having sent him an "'American' series of poems" the previous year, and remembers that Mottram had been "so encouraging about [them]".[63] He promises Mottram his "first long poem (on the North West)", if he would be inclined to read it.[64] That "'American' series" is likely to have been *Bear Skull*, not only due to the synchronicity in dates (*Bear Skull* was first published in 1972), but also because of details we can glean from another letter from Mottram to Simms in the Mottram Collection. In this letter, Mottram offers both praise and criticism on a number of early geographic poems written in 'rhyme' and 'sentences'. His feedback is worth quoting at length:

[63] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 14 December 1974, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[64] *ibid.*

> You're lucky to have a location: the problem seems to be not to exploit it or to let it exploit you. Location has its terminology but it is not a language which operates itself—which is what romantic landscape poets, especially hordes of amateurs still at it, assume. The way you do it [...] is when the order of words keeps challenging the locations you know so well [...]
>
> I'm not sure why you need rhyme so much—that sort of repetition and surface order: surely what Duncan calls 'rime' (the actual order of events) is enough. Patterning what is already patterned may get in the way of transmission [...] I have a feeling the time has come to construct orders more consciously and not work from the transmission of material first [...] [T]he sentences [...] which make for an accurate account of experience do work: but [...] often hold down the energy too much—poetry doesn't need sentences any more than a painting needs perspective. Like: the plane of the page is the plane of the picture, to be gestured on. Why should a sentence and a meter—acts of saying: recognise this—insist so much? [...] What I've always admired in your work is how you can make a precise statement of facts in the middle of them—that is, your body under no order except its own responses. So that inherited repetitions of form are liable to get in the way of that [...] The ands and punctuation and reporting interfere [...] Where you work is where topography interacts with topology: topos—but you want narrative still, and the topos is space: so that your poetic events want place and temporal (action reported) [...] Sentence—temporal; space—other devices of syntactical organisation, presentation.[65]

There is a lot going on in Mottram's critique, and Simms went to great lengths to action this feedback in his forthcoming "long poem (on the North West)", 1976's *No North Western Passage*. Mottram's warning against an apparently "romantic" habit of instrumentalising location, or letting location's "terminology" instrumentalise the poet, prompted Simms to write two prose pieces on the topic of place in 1975. These essays argue that landscape is produced through a tension between word and world, an idea that is also a *précis* for *No North Western Passage*—more on this momentarily. For now, we should note that matters of style and form—and the philosophical and conceptual concerns underpinning them—are

[65] Eric Mottram, typescript letter to Colin Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

Mottram's primary focus above. His arguments that "poetry doesn't need sentences any more than a painting needs perspective", that "the plane of the page is the plane of the picture, to be gestured on", and that the "[s]entence" is "temporal", while "space" is enacted by "other devices of syntactical organisation, presentation", are all part of a lineage of modernist poetic practice stretching back through figures like Olson to Pound. We might recall Olson's claims in "Projective Verse" that the open field poem must "[break open] the conventions which logic has forced on syntax" through a renewed emphasis on the spatial organisation of poetic material, or Pound's assertion that "[w]e no longer need to think in terms of monolinear logic, the sentence structure, subject, predicate, object, etc."[66]

Mottram's assumption—derived from his modernist forebears—is that the visual presentation of poetry in a way which uses the full dimensions of the page provides a more "accurate account of experience" than a poetic voice mediated through conventional syntax. Traditional syntax apparently temporalises and abstracts experience and perception. In doing so, it "[holds] down [their] energy". For Mottram, the page is a visual plane "to be gestured on", a site for phenomenological encounter and exchange between poet and reader, where meaning is immanent and immediately legible because it is self-revealed.[67] The thinking of Alfred North Whitehead (a key philosophical source for Olson) is surely also behind Mottram's conception of the spatialised poem. For Whitehead, space's "presentational immediacy" apparently aligns it with "our immediate perception of the contemporary external world," making it "[appear] as an element constitutive of our own experience."[68] Mottram's advice to Simms bears a specific philosophical and poetic heritage on its surface, engaging many of the core tenets of American modernism after Pound and Williams, and it accepts many of those tenets uncritically.

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[66] Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.244. Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Harriet Zinnes (New York: New Directions, 1980), p.166.

[67] Mottram's idiom in the letter is phenomenological. Compare his presentation of 'gesture' as implicitly immediate with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: "I beckon across the world, I beckon over there, where my friend is; the distance between us, his consent or refusal are immediately read in my gesture; there is not a perception followed by a movement, for both form a system which varies as a whole." Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p.127.

[68] Whitehead, *Symbolism*, p.21.

This section examines how Simms's *No North Western Passage* responds to Mottram's critique. The poem challenges the assumed binary of "[s]entence—temporal; space—other devices of syntactical organisation, presentation", by using the textual-visual hybrid medium of the open field poem as a container for multiple mediated engagements with place. At the same time, it also demonstrates how a given landscape can fundamentally resist our attempts to understand it. Simms's sequence is an account of Captain Cook's failed attempt to chart the Northwest Passage, a sea route between the Atlantic and the Pacific, between 1776 and his death in 1779. It is preoccupied with the failure to establish congruity between observer, language and landscape, and with the processes through which landscape and seascape is abstracted into economic value. Simms's poem adopts Mottram's apparently immediate "devices of syntactical organisation, presentation" to present the landscapes it focusses on as always mediated and always determining, because they are constantly being overwritten by colonial practices of exploration and exploitation, and the systems of knowledge production subtending them.

Returning to Mottram's letter, it is worth noting that a prescribed regime of reading emerges in the feedback. Later in the letter, he implores Simms to,

> Stop reading Frost! Read Eigner and Dorn and Zukofsky for a bit! [...] [your] rhymes asphyxiate the measures because they bang the end of the line into lopsidedness—the place of lyric in narrative is highly tricky. Frankly a lot of the [poetry] is strained [...] the strain comes out as language not as articulation (adjectival and wordy). Address to a river seems unfortunate. It stops the thing being there—anthropomorphises in hinderance of its fact.[69]

The Sauerian qualities of *Bear Skull* suggest that Simms was already familiar with Dorn before receiving Mottram's letter. However, *No North Western Passage*, through its presentation of the North Atlantic, North Pacific and the eponymous North Western Passage not as measurable Euclidean spaces but as landscapes constructed through the economics of the fur trade, colonial exploration and expansion and the attendant abuse of animals and humans,

[69] Mottram, letter to Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

suggests Simms's deeper engagement with Dorn's *The North Atlantic Turbine* during its composition. Dorn's sequence argues that the history of the North Atlantic is shaped by the trafficking of "[m]olasses or molasses skinned persons", underscoring its shared preoccupation with systems of colonial trade and exploitation.[70] Prosodically, Simms's "first long poem" embraces many of the suggestions Mottram makes in his recourse to Dorn, Zukofsky and Larry Eigner: *Bear Skull*'s privileging of 'material', aural rhyme (see the discussion of "To New Cities" above) over "the actual order of events" recedes, and Simms foregoes the "temporal" sentence as a structural principle in favour of "other devices of syntactical organisation, presentation". Additionally, the habit of apostrophically 'addressing' landscape, as seen in *Bear Skull*, has been done away with. However, he appears to have quietly resisted some of Mottram's pretensions to the phenomenological immediacy of a "body under no order except its own responses." To properly read *No North Western Passage*, we need to examine these subtle but significant subversions of Mottram's feedback.

In an open letter printed in issue 12/13 of Peter Hodgkiss' *Poetry Information*, roughly contemporaneous with his receipt of Mottram's feedback, Simms intervened in a dialogue between Jeremy Hilton and Allen Fisher on the topic of place, articulating his own position as such:

> 1. […] Look across to hills and the space between forms words. It is our territory: we select.
>
> 2. A lot of the quality of 'land' is in its words. Phrases associated with it; perhaps by someone else, but a lot of them under our own breath. We own it by them, learn more from it and of it only with and after them. They are remembered, even when they seem trivial.[71]

For Simms, language obtains in the gap between self and landscape, intervening as a socially constituted membrane through which our perception and understanding of place is mediated. In this formulation, there is no possibility for the immanent congruity between landscape and

[70] Dorn, *The North Atlantic Turbine*, p.18. Obviously Dorn's language here is racist and dehumanising.
[71] Colin Simms, "PLACE" in *Poetry Information*, 12/13 (1975), p.38.

perceiving body imagined by Mottram. Nor can we resist "[letting location] exploit [us]".[72] Instead, the "quality' of a given landscape is a composite of everything that has been said or written about it, however "trivial" that might be. Simms's letter takes us back to familiar ground: his assertion that "words" in some way precede "'land'" echoes the claim in "Oystercatchers" that "geography grows by precepts and then by discerning".[73] These interventions complicate Mottram's conception of Simms's poems as "precise [statements] of [facts]" by revealing that those facts to be ideologically and materially contingent: they are produced by "someone [else's]" knowledge, or else part of an ambient *Lebenswelt* we are only semi-conscious of, which we carry "under our own breath."

Simms reinforces this position in a draft essay in the Mottram Collection, titled "Seeing":

> A naturalist, I have long been aware, at times rock-solid and at others just twanging a bit, that we tend to see what we look for […]
>
> In recent Poetry Information there's been positive acknowledgement of 'place' in the consciousness or awareness of the poet; welcome and refreshing when so many favoured Movement-men […] maintain or affect a negative attitude to the powers of place upon work although they might find pegs of colour or association in geography—the abstraction of place. Place is worked at, repeated ploughings or run-ups by so many serious artists that these notes from one observer, coming to the art from the background of a naturalist-scientist and trying to find his way in it, might have useful repercussions.[74]

Despite arguing that "geography" is the "abstraction of place", Simms does not suggest that place itself can be intuitively or immanently grasped. Examined dialectically, place reveals its own abstraction and artificiality: it is "worked at" by the "repeated ploughings or run-ups by so many serious artists". Simms goes on to state that it is produced by "the assemblage of

[72] Mottram, typescript letter to Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[73] Simms, *Eyes Own Ideas*, p.42.
[74] Colin Simms, "Seeing", no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5, Mottram Collection, King's College London, n.p. Original emphasis.

associations we carry around, accumulating."[75] *No North Western Passage* is a record of some of those "repeated ploughings or run-ups". The sequence is directly motivated by Captain Cook's failures to observe and comprehend a radically unfamiliar American landscape and seascape, failures which bathetically undercut any pretension to a coherence between the world, "the clear physical eye", and "the erring brain", to borrow from Zukofsky.[76] More fundamentally, however, Simms reveals how Cook's expedition and its observational failures actively produce the colonial perspective on the Americas. This perspective, in turn, produces the evil abuses, instrumentalisations, exploitations and transformations of the American landscape and its indigenous populations, flora and fauna by the European colonial centre. If *Bear Skull* showed how Western geography both mediates our access to the landscape and intervenes in its constitution, *No North Western Passage* pushes this to its logical extreme. The sequence uses the simulated materiality and parataxis inherent to its open field form to show that the American landscape is inextricable from the colonial geographic framework that mediates it.

Reading *No North Western Passage* requires what Jerome McGann calls "radial reading".[77] Because it is a content-specific poem that pulls a vast array of extratextual sources and citations into its orbit, our reading of it "regularly transcends its own ocular physical bases", and we are continually drawn away from the poem at hand "to check some historical or geographical reference."[78] Crucially, however, the poem builds the instability and untrustworthiness of these historical and geographic references into itself, both thematically and in terms of its material, visual presentation. Published by Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum, a press founded on Cobbing's credo to "publish the unpublishable", Simms's material text bears all the hallmarks of Cobbing's usual production methods: the combination of "stencils on a type-writer" with electro-scanned "hand-written texts and drawings" to create dynamic

[75] *ibid*.
[76] Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p.159.
[77] Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), p.119.
[78] *ibid*, p.116.

interactions between different registers of text and image.[79] *No North Western Passage* leverages this interplay to mimetically suggest that we are reading Cook's logbook or itinerary: the text is full of botanical and zoological proper nouns ("hyphae of fungi; [e]piphyte or parasite"; "Apricarius", "Megaptera boops") and latitudinal co-ordinates ("44° 55'N., 135° 54'E"), sometimes crossed out as if recorded in error, or otherwise handwritten in the margins, as if afterthoughts added to a working document which is constantly being overwritten.[80] On this purely mimetic plane, the poem enacts Mottram's advice that poetry should capture the "body under no order except its own responses."[81] However, it does so by embracing the fallibility of perception itself, recording Cook's immediate perceptual responses to the North American continental shield, the passage of those responses into writing, and their subsequent revision or redaction. Simms underscores the simulated materiality of the text by incorporating citations from the actual journal Cook kept aboard HMS *Resolution*:

> 'so far advanced to the northward and eastward' (remember they had
> opened the Pacific)
> 'as to be far beyond the limits of European geography
> and to have reached the void space in our maps
> which is marked as a country unknown'
> their great design the Atlantic via
> Alaska
> into and through the new cartography[82]

The lines in inverted commas derive directly from Cook's account of navigating Nootka Sound in 1778.[83] Simms's glosses emphasise that the terminus of this part of the voyage ("the Atlantic via Alaska") is a theoretical space: it is a "void space" beyond the epistemological margins of "European geography", and it will be reified "through the new cartography" and its attendant processes of naming and mapping. The idea that these landscapes will only be

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[79] Bob Cobbing, quoted in Lawrence Upton, "Writers Forum: Life by 1000 Books" in *A Book of the Book: Some Works and Projections about the Book and Writing*, ed. by Jerome Rothenberg and Steven Clay (New York: Granary Books, 1999), pp.431-439 (p.438).
[80] Colin Simms, *No North Western Passage* (London: Writers Forum, 1976), n.p.
[81] Mottram, typescript letter to Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[82] Simms, *No North Western Passage*, n.p.
[83] James Cook and John Rickman, *Captain Cook's Last Voyage to the Pacific Ocean on Discovery* (London: E. Newbery, 1781), p.233.

brought out of the epistemological "void" through Cook's observations is made darkly humorous by the reader's cognisance that Cook is—like any of us—prone to perceptual errors and misinterpretations.

Epistemological errors, gaps and aporias are central to the presentation of geography in ways that are more oblique than the poem's use of citation or its visual playfulness. Cook's dubious navigational reckonings are a central focus of the first section, "Cape Flattery (48° 38'N., 124° 73'E.)":

> [The crew] would not have named the next Cape after Cook […]
> who after getting Santa Monica all wrong from the stars
> was really on the hook
> and making mistakes got to him (Cook) not just in case they got into the book
> for our historical sources *the stars must have moved their courses*[84]

Cook's failure to chart a course by the stars incites his fear that his navigational reckonings will be preserved in "our historical sources". Multiple subjects and temporal positions are encoded across the enjambment: we presume "the book" to be the *Resolution*'s logbook, but it is also the chapbook the reader is holding in her hands as she reads these lines, as well as the primary geographic records that both future explorers and the 'we' of the present will come to know the landscapes and seascapes encountered by the crew. Cook's miscalculations are figured a set of references upon which subsequent expeditions will be based. They thus have become sedimented in the epistemological foundation of North American geography, influencing all subsequent engagements with these landscapes.

At other moments in the poem, Simms brings the limitations of the historiographical and geographical record to bear on his composition of the text itself:

> Whitby is a statement out of the mouth of the Esk and the sea.
> Poetry is the truth we got
> to see

[84] Simms, *No North Western Passage*, n.p.

whether it happened quite that way or not
The Celts and the Romans met at Whitby
Synod
in the seventh century
so that sailships and otters can bear the same name
the headlands enclose the Bay : whatever it is we
see.
The *Rachel* made only one voyage out of Whitby
a whaler, 1776, on the Greenland Game
but there is no record of her foundering
nor of any change of name[85]

The nautical history of Whitby (where Cook learned seamanship) is adumbrated through Simms's archival research and fieldwork, which must invariably remain partial and incomplete. The vignette of the *Rachel* is left as an unresolved fragment, because Simms *as researcher* can find "no record of her foundering | nor of any change of name", and the best "truth" his poem can offer is a fragmentary account of events which might have happened "that way or not". Rather than presenting Whitby as a stable place, Simms uncovers its discursive nature. It is "a statement out of the mouth of the Esk and the sea": here, "the mouth" is at once a geomorphic feature and the site of utterance, producing "[statements]".

In a commentary on Simms's 1977 collection *Voices* in *Reality Studios* 3, Tony Baker writes that, in order to properly read the sequence,

> An order of attention is needed that can include intuition, peripheral vision, remote or vestigial modes of perception, as intricacies within the 'knowableness' of anything. I suppose this amounts to saying that involvement in can't be detached from understanding of. You're being asked to 'go along with' the poem, bringing the senses willingly sharpened to the reading so that a full range of intelligence can be engaged in it.[86]

[85] *ibid*, n.p.
[86] Tony Baker, "A few notes on the work of Colin Simms" in *Reality Studios*, 3 (1981), pp.17-21 (pp.17-18).

This kind of reading—one that engages "a full range of intelligence", "intuition, peripheral vision, remote or vestigial modes of perception"—is precisely what the passage quoted above demands. If the lines on Whitby bring an understanding of the mutability of place into our "peripheral vision", then we are encouraged to apply that understanding to the material surrounding those lines. Simms is continually folding a vast range of poetic material into this framework. For example, in the above passage, Whitby's status at the intersection of competing liturgical traditions (the Whitby Synod of 664 saw King Oswiu of Northumbria accepting the Roman calculation of Easter in favour of the former Ionan calculation) is obliquely connected to later forms of etymological and nominal plurality (the homonymous "sailships and otters"). The link implies a fundamental incongruity between human attempts to impose fixed names and settled definitions and a world that persistently eludes and resists these attempts. Through its emphasis on the fraught relationship between text, names and landscape, *No North Western Passage* deepens and extends a concern that was central to *Bear Skull*. While Simms's earlier collection suggested that place was shaped by language, *No North Western Passage* emphatically demonstrates that geography is completely controlled by it, be that the language found in colonial logbooks, the texts Simms encounters in the archive, or even the other "[p]hrases associated with [land]; perhaps by someone else, but a lot of them under our own breath."[87]

In her commentary on the poem, Amy Cutler writes that "[c]rucial to the text's representation of space is the deliberate slippage in geographical references across the North Atlantic. Simms particularly enjoys the etymological confirmation of the translation of places in the name Cleveland, sometimes meaning Cleveland in England and, on other occasions, Cleveland in Connecticut, USA."[88] Through these slippages, Cutler argues that Simms has "constructed a 'multi-territorial pun'".[89] This "'multi-territorial pun'" is woven into the compositional history of the sequence itself: in a 1977 letter to Norman Nicholson, Simms

[87] Simms, "PLACE", p.38.
[88] Amy Cutler, "'Whitby is a statement': Littoral Geographies in British Poetry" in *Poetry and Geography: Space and Place in Post-War Poetry*, ed. by Neal Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp.120-133 (p.128).
[89] *ibid.*

recalls having finished it during a trip "via Bunting and Teesdale and […] a mild quiet night near [Hugh] MacDiarmid […] reading [it] through to him", reflecting the sequence's status as equally the product of British and North American geographies.[90] Cutler's reading of the poem overlooks one crucial aspect of these "deliberate [slippages] in geographical references across the North Atlantic", however: the way in which they register how European colonialism in America, and its attendant strategies of fixing landscape through text, transform colonised land and its inhabitants into dialectical others, abstracting them into forms of knowledge or economic value for the benefit of the imperial centre. Cook's voyage is not the only colonial expedition into the Americas recorded in the poem. Lewis and Clark's expedition of 1803-1806 is also brought into the assemblage:

> […] Lewis and Clark didnt [sic] quite reach with Sacajawea
> though the getting there had been remarkable enough
> the communication ahead of them all the time
> like the birds have by their calls or the animal scents downwind
> or what they'd have us believe of old African drums
> they went where they were expected and were received because of it
> […] and relieved
> (to list and describe all the birds trees plants fish weather oysters
> geology
> to sketch the characteristic
> profile of every native they came across for an entire continent after
> the
> Louisiana Purchase after
> marching
> over the single range to the Pacific')[91]

Rod Edmond writes that "[t]here was, during the eighteenth century, a paradigm shift in the way in which the inhabitants of new worlds came to be understood and described … [The] religiously framed colonialism [of the Renaissance] was being replaced by natural history as the basis for constructing otherness. Human variety came to be seen as analogous to the

[90] Colin Simms, letter to Norman Nicholson, 21 September 1977, GB 133 NCN7/11/11, Norman Nicholson Book Collection, John Rylands Research Institute and Library, University of Manchester.
[91] Simms, *No North Western Passage*, n.p.

differences between animal species."[92] Simms's passage above reflects the "paradigm shift" Edmond describes. The asyndetic "list" of "birds trees plants fisher weather oysters geology" collapses the constitutive distinctions between these very different phenomena, subsuming them—along with the "native", whose "characteristic | profile" is pared down to a "sketch"—under the sign of European taxonomy and its grounding in "naturalised typification and essentialised difference."[93] Similarly, "old African drums" are invoked as a familiar reference point for the sensuous world Lewis and Clark find themselves in, despite having no connection to the indigenous population of the Americas whatsoever. Simms's use of terms like "list" and "sketch" highlights how the approach to the landscape employed by Western European colonists is predicated on—and proliferates via—textual marks made upon a page, which function as crude, reductive caricatures of the actual sensory world of the American landscape, with its bird "calls" and "animal scents downwind".

The anti-colonial critiques underpinning *No North Western Passage* bear a strong resemblance to the arguments of Harold Innis, the Canadian economic historian and communications theorist, and colleague of Marshall McLuhan (the influence of whom on Simms was discussed in the introduction to this chapter). The central premise of Innis's 1950 text, *Empire and Communications*, is that the medium of writing gave imperial powers,

> an artificially extended and verifiable memory of objects and events not present to sight or recollection. Individuals applied their minds to symbols rather than things, and went beyond the world of concrete experience into the world of conceptual relations created within an enlarged time and space universe [...] Writing enormously enhanced a capacity for abstract thinking which had been evident in the growth of language in the oral tradition [...] Man's activities and powers were roughly extended in proportion to the increased use and perfection of written records. The old magic was transformed into a new and more potent record of the written word.[94]

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[92] Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p.7.
[93] *ibid.*
[94] Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Victoria: Press Porcépic, 1986), p.7.

Elsewhere in the text, Innis argues that "[m]edia which emphasise space"—light and easily transportable materials like paper—"are suited to wide areas in administration and trade", allowing what he calls the 'space-oriented' empires of Western Europe to proliferate the written record over vast territories.[95] According to Innis, these media facilitate the extension of imperial dominion by reifying knowledge into standardised and portable forms suited for remote government and control.

There are clear correspondences between Simms's poem and Innis's account of the imperial centre's power to proliferate itself through media like paper. We can see these in the sheer amount of textual fragments Simms incorporates within the fabric of the poem: citations from logbooks, data from maps and other documentary records. Simms also reveals the imperial written record's ability to transform "the world of concrete experience into the world of conceptual relations" in his depiction of Lewis and Clark's taxonomic practices, which freeze the Americas into "[lists]" and "[sketches]". He also emphasises this through the direct citations he selects from Cook's journals. Part two of the poem, "Astoria", ends with an account of Cook's encounter with the indigenous Nuu-chah-nulth at Vancouver Island from the journal he kept on his third voyage: "one 'sang a very agreeable air | with a degree of softness and melody which we could not have expected' | 'the word *haëla* being often repeated as the burden of the song.'"[96] Simms's citations from Cook's writings in the poem repeatedly contain episodes like this, where the practices and customs of non-European peoples are parsed according to a European cultural, aesthetic and linguistic idiom (here, the conventions of Western European musicology and orthography). This recalls Innis's sentimentalising paradigm of "old magic […] transformed into a new and more potent record of the written word."[97] By uncovering the processes by which the American landscape and its indigenous populations are fixed through the textual and conceptual frameworks the colonist imposes on the landscape, Simms actualises a central claim of his letter in *Poetry Information*: the way the

[95] *ibid*, p.5.
[96] Simms, *No North Western Passage*, n.p.
[97] Innis, *Empire and Communications*, p.7.

'we' of the historical present "own" the American landscape is "by them [those colonial frameworks]", and we only arrive at that landscape "with and after them."[98]

Beyond these overarching theoretical similarities to Innis's *Empire and Communications*, *No North Western Passage* appears to derive its analysis of how colonial North America has been abstracted into economic value from Innis's 'staples thesis'. In *The Fur Trade in Canada*, Innis argues that,

> Fundamentally the civilisation of North America is the civilisation of Europe [...] The economic history of Canada has been dominated by the discrepancy between the centre and the margin of western civilisation. Energy has been directed toward the exploitation of staple products [...] The raw material supplied to the mother country stimulated manufactures of the finished product and [...] the products which were in demand in the colony [...] [E]nergy in the colony was drawn into the production of the staple commodity both directly and indirectly [...] Agriculture, industry, transportation, trade, finance, and governmental activities tend to become subordinate to the production of the staple [...][99]

In Innis's account, the "staples" most important for North America's colonial development were beaver fur, spruce and fish, and these are the resources to which Simms's poem repeatedly turns in its depiction of the economics of colonial America. Simms uses his "'multi-territorial pun'" and paratactic jumps to formally enact Innis's account of the transfer of resources from the "margin" to the "centre" of "western civilisation". These techniques are also used to reveal that, once they are absorbed into the colonial economy, these 'staples' have their purpose and futurity foreclosed and their value rigidly demarcated. In "Astoria", Simms invokes "sitka spruce" and "[t]wenty-year pulp-trees", only to reconfigure them as lumber "to build the boats for England" ten lines later.[100] Meanwhile, the beavers and otters encountered by Cook and his crew in "Cape Flattery" are immediately reduced to "[l]iving fur, type of the economy of nature". As soon as these animals enter the poem, they are displaced by

[98] Simms, "PLACE", p.38.
[99] Harold Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1930), pp.386-388.
[100] Simms, *No North Western Passage*, n.p.

lines describing how they were "nearly [taken] […] to | extinction | with demand for furs in the Depression".[101] By using the temporal and spatial disruptions inherent to the paratactic, open field form his poem employs, Simms illuminates how colonial economics abstracts North America's flora and fauna into commodities, erasing their status as living beings and violently severing them from the landscapes they once inhabited. *No North Western Passage* ultimately critiques the colonial processes that sought to reduce the richness of the North American continent to lists, sketches and units of trade, positioning these practices as extensions of the textual mediation that both facilitated and justified imperial expansion.

Elsewhere, Simms reveals that the land itself is vulnerable to the same processes of abstraction and foreclosure:

> I will remember Cape Flattery my head-land
> Space for my morning stride Whitby Strand, you at my side
> sky, heather, and sea moved over for me back in Whitby
> where you looked away from the the motel pattern banned patinas
> 'NO INDIANS'[102]

In this especially anacoluthic fragment, we shuttle through time and space across line-breaks, but also between and within individual words. The first couplet's jump between Cape Flattery and Whitby Strand brackets another dislocation. The "head-land" of Cape Flattery is both a stable geomorphic feature, offering Cook "[s]pace" for his "morning stride", but it is also a landscape confined to and only accessible through memory and imagination: literally, a land within the head. This gives way to a pastoral recollection of Whitby, where internal rhymes underscore the allegedly perfect harmony between the landscape and Cook. The next cut is more abrupt. We are not told what "you looked away from" on Whitby's open coastline: instead, we are transplanted once more across the Atlantic to the confined, profit-oriented space of "the motel", where space can be rented but never owned, and only along segregated lines ("'NO INDIANS'"). The explicit racism here connects back to Lewis and Clark's "[sketching] the characteristic | profile of every native they came across", offering a modern

[101] *ibid.*
[102] *ibid.*

parallel to the taxonomic practices of the sequence's explorers. Simms is once again moving between Innis's poles of "margin" and "centre" through his parataxis. However, he is using his formal transformations to foreground the increasing sectionalisation of space in the American "margin" in contradistinction to the perceived openness of a British colonial "centre", from coastal "head-land", to the indoor, segregated spaces of "the motel". The movement in prosodic texture in the passage—from rhyme to the flat assemblage of found text (which gives the convincing impression of Simms having assimilated an actual segregationist motel sign into the fabric of the poem)—underscores this, recalling Simms's argument in *Poetry Information* that the language of place can be "[carried] […] under our own breath" as a material (rhythmic, philological or syntactic) force.

No North Western Passage offers an incisive critique of how the colonial centre sustains itself through the exploitation of its margins. Yet it is worth acknowledging that, by situating both himself and his poetry in landscapes in which he is *ipso facto* an outsider—born and raised in the former colonial centre—Simms cannot wholly avoid partaking in touristic practices of 'othering' the cultural groups which inhabit those landscapes. Simms's poetry is elsewhere not above rehearsing tired, offensive tropes about the 'organic' interrelationship between Native Americans and the land. In *Missouri River-Songs* (published in 1980, but composed between 1975 and 1977), Simms depicts indigenous Americans sentimentally, underscoring their 'illiteracy' and supposedly atavistic resonance with the landscape:

> Plain Man listen dream
> bluffs sway
> their individual trees to each say
> like the hills speak teach being illiterate the
> blindman
> to birdhood shaking-cottonwood
> sacred to pass Greasy Grass sand
> and
> stream not always on stream but in process.[103]

[103] Colin Simms, *Missouri River-Songs* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Genera, 1980), n.p.

No North Western Passage manages to avoid such explicitly patronising pitfalls, by focussing more on the material conditions of colonial exploitation and by directly quoting archival sources to reveal how Native Americans were historically framed in Western texts. Moreover, in composing these later 'American poems', Simms made some material effort to orient his work towards Native American communities rather than white British or American readerships, instead allowing the writing to feed back into the base which generated it. Enclosing a typescript of his poem *Parflèche*, Simms wrote to Mottram in March 1976 describing the work's "more committed, political" orientations and its "support of non-violent elements in A. I. M. [the American Indian Movement]", noting that Mottram was the second party to read it, after "some of the A. I. M."[104] Another letter describes a 1977 reading Simms gave of his 1976 poem, *Rushmore Inhabitation*, at South Dakota's Blue Cloud Abbey:

> I was glad of your remarks on Rushmore Inhabitation; the form published is not entirely how I would have it now but was taken from that first reading at Blue Cloud [...] The 'audience', the doors to the prairies outside, visions of delight like the front row of listeners (enclosed) a photograph by an Indian friend on that occasion.[105]

Simms's emphasis on including his audience within the paratextual orbit of *Rushmore Inhabitation* is somewhat cheapened by the "(enclosed) [...] photograph", a voyeuristic shot of a young female Native American audience member in traditional dress. However, in both letters cited above there is at least a partially sincere attempt to make the poetry coextensive with the material and social conditions from which it arises, either by virtue of its political dimensions, its direct address to Native American communities or political groups, or even (in the case of the *Rushmore Inhabitation* reading) the capacity for the work to become congruent with the geography in which it is performed: passing beyond "the 'audience'" and extending out "the doors to the prairies outside".

Simms's *No North Western Passage* articulates a vision of the Northwest Passage that resonates with Doreen Massey's claim that "the understanding of any locality must precisely

[104] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 26 March 1976, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[105] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, undated ('end of July 1977'), Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

draw on the links beyond its boundaries."[106] It also troubles the Sauerian conception of the grounded, emplaced and embodied observer as "part of [the areal scene], [living] with it, limited by it, and [modifying] it."[107] Simms reveals that certain 'cultural forms' imposed upon the landscape—specifically, the apparatus of European colonialism—intervene in and mediate its constitution, to such an extent that the mutual imbrication between the self, the natural world and the cultural world imagined by Sauer becomes untenable. Simms's poem shows that an investigation of any aspect of the North American landscape in the context of colonialism must account for a chain of connections to the colonial centre. These connections continually displace experience and perception into complex networks of land economy, trade, the mass appropriation of resources and the displacement and abuse of indigenous populations. By foregrounding these processes, *No North Western Passage* challenges both the immediacy of the phenomenological observer and the supposedly neutral optic of the map, revealing how both are shaped by histories of colonial intervention. Crucially, Simms attains this against the backdrop of Eric Mottram's evaluation of his writing as composed of "precise [statements] of [fact]" and reflecting the "body under no order except its own responses".[108] Rather than simply accepting the modernist aesthetic of "space [via] other devices of syntactical organisation, presentation", Simms leverages the simulative materiality, archival method and parataxis of the open field form he recruits to show how landscapes are continually restructured and re-disclosed through the mechanisms of colonial exploration, economic exploitation, and the textual records that sustain them.[109]

III – "Give me a poetry of observed relationship": *Otters and Martens* (2004)

> Sometimes I wish I was more involved in the 'scene', instead of being apparently outside of all scenes, then I wake up to a marten on my

[106] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p.120.
[107] Sauer, *Land and Life*, p.325.
[108] Mottram, typescript letter to Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[109] *ibid.*

> windowsill or the passage of golden-plover over, and I know I'm in the right place for the moment.[110]

For all that *No North Western Passage* marked a break with the finer points of Eric Mottram's advice, Simms would, in the years following the sequence's publication, undergo a failure of nerve regarding Mottram and the poetic communities and institutions in which he was embedded. Mottram's ousting from the editorship of *Poetry Review* in 1977, and the restoration of the magazine to its formally and ideologically conservative basis, signalled to many Revival poets the collapse of an institutional framework which could facilitate the production and dissemination of experimental British work influenced by the New American Poetry.[111] Simms himself was furious about Mottram's dismissal, writing to him in February 1978 to explicitly affirm his allegiance and to confirm that he had "resigned P.S. [Poetry Society] membership, as [he] told [Mottram he] would."[112]

Despite these declarations of solidarity, Simms's relationship with Mottram was strained just a few months later. The full details of the breakdown in their relationship are hard to ascertain, as the archive only offers one side of the story (Simms's letters to Mottram), but it goes something like this: in 1976, Simms offered to publish Mottram's sequence, "A Faithful Private", on his Genera imprint. Logistical delays and complications ensued, leaving Simms feeling that he had somehow let Mottram down and that their relationship was

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[110] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, undated ('1984'), Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

[111] Mottram became editor of *Poetry Review* in 1971, after a series of power vacuums led to the election of several radical poets (including Bob Cobbing, Asa Benveniste and Allen Fisher) to its parent institution, the Poetry Society. He remained in post until 1977, when the Arts Council's Witt enquiry found the Society to have been "seriously handicapped by internal dissension", and that *Poetry Review* itself "[had] been misused as a vehicle for the dissemination of propaganda" and reduced to "a physically shabby magazine". Witt Report, quoted in Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), pp.87-88. Barry notes that Mottram's editorship of *Poetry Review* was characterised by attempts to create immanent links "across the Atlantic for models […] and […] [to forge] strong affinities with the dissenting voices of American poetry", with Mottram publishing work by Denise Levertov, Barbara Guest and Alice Notley (among others) during his tenure. *ibid*, p.2, 35-36.

[112] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 10/11 February 1978, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

irrevocably jeopardised.[113] When "A Faithful Private" was finally ready in June 1978, Simms was profoundly affected by not having been able to prevent those complications:

> [L]et me just say first I very much regret my offences to you personally and to those who stand with you and are more involved than I have been. And to apologise for my miserable treatment of you over "A Faithful Private" […]
>
> I seem to have lost your confidence; but not MacDiarmid's or Bunting's. I have <u>had</u> to see things for myself, go my own slow way, work things out including fears and fumblings for the next few years, but I have cut myself off from not only 'the' Poetry Society but also the 'American' one […][114]

The alienation Simms describes here is not just alienation from Mottram, but alienation from the axis to which Mottram was connected during his tenure at *Poetry Review*, as well as the "'American'" poetic community Simms had spent the decade fostering connections with, by conducting poetic and biogeographic fieldwork across North America and giving readings of his American sequences in spaces like South Dakota's Blue Cloud Abbey.

As Simms's assertion that he had not lost the confidence of Basil Bunting and Hugh MacDiarmid suggests, he gravitated toward poetic influences closer to home in the wake of his perceived alienation from Mottram and America.[115] Writing again to Mottram from Bellingham in 1984, he explains that he is "surviving in a 'simple' sort of way, with much help from friends but above all Basil, who (though he's now over 30 miles away, was 1 ½ m for a while and next door for about two years) is a very great influence of course."[116] This proximity to Bunting had an effect on the formal qualities of his later poetry. Rather than producing

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[113] In 1976, Simms wrote to Mottram to detail these logistical delays. "My printers belay me with the excuse of holidays to explain why you haven't seen the revised (new) proofs of Faithful Private; I think you'll agree it's worth waiting for though. They are the best-equipped litho printers in York." Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, (undated), 1976, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

[114] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 25 June 1978, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL. Original emphasis.

[115] I do not wish to suggest that Simms's more 'Northern' mode is diametrically at odds with his earlier 'American' mode. Simms himself certainly did not see it this way. In a newspaper clipping sent to Mottram in 1979, comprising an interview with Simms on the failure of the Arts Council to devolve funding locally, Simms constellates poetry from the North of England with poetry from North America: "Northern poetry, he claimed, was nearly always published first in America and many Northern poets were disgusted at the 'London chauvinism' of the so-called national poetry competitions." In Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 2/3 February 1979, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

[116] Colin Simms, letter to Eric Mottram, 30 August 1984, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.

expansive, topographical sequences which fully explored the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the page, as he had done in the 1970s, Simms began writing more condensed pieces, visually reminiscent of the pared-back, lapidary verse of *Briggflatts*. Moreover, he renewed his focus on the 'material', aural qualities of rhyme over the patterning of conceptual data, the "sort of repetition and surface order" from which Mottram had attempted to dissuade him in the 1970s.[117] This late emphasis on poetic sound directly recalls the sonorous patterning of Bunting's epic. Most significantly, however, his subjects in his later poems are the more immediate Northern English landscapes he found himself in—Tarset, Bellingham and, latterly, Garrigill, rather than South Dakota, the Northwest Passage and Puget Sound—and the mustelids and raptors which inhabit them.

This section will focus on Simms's 2004 collection, *Otters and Martens*, a volume which collects many of the sequences Simms wrote on mustelids during the 1980s and 1990s (including 1994's *Shots at Otters*). In its turn to Northern English localities, and the otters, goshawks and gyrfalcons which make them their home, Simms's later poetry moves away from portraying his biogeographic subjects as products of the same intricate web of geographic, economic, anthropological and cultural forces that his 'American' sequences focussed on. In *Otters and Martens*, Simms focusses instead on the act of observation itself, exploring the encounter with the otter in its immediate landscape as a moment of dynamic interplay wherein subject and object mutually perceive one another. He also emphasises the ability of the nonhuman animal to escape being foreclosed, instrumentalised and othered as an 'object' altogether. As the final couplet of the late poem "The Crags at Crookleth Beacon" affirms, "never mind the economics of the trip | Give me a poetry of observed relationship".[118] In this late work, Simms rejects his earlier practices of framing his biogeographic subjects through economic and cultural lenses, committing instead to the immediate and relational moment of the encounter and an extreme version of Zukofsky's "thinking with the things as they exist", wherein the 'thing' can in no way be subsumed by the poem's speaking consciousness.[119] In so

[117] Mottram, typescript letter to Simms, no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[118] Simms, "The Crags at Crookleth Beacon", p.138.
[119] Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, p.20.

doing, Simms's writing on nonhuman animals aligns with an ecological poetics which John Kerrigan, in a recent article on Simms, Ted Hughes and Maggie O'Sullivan (among others), describes as registering a "power in Nature" derived from "Romantic ecology out of D. H. Lawrence and a late modernism that locates ideas in things and resists anthropomorphism."[120]

However, the freedom of the animal in *Otters and Martens* is never a straightforward or reductive evasion of cultural or linguistic frameworks. Simms's poems on otters (and gyrfalcons, in *Gyrfalcon Poems*) are also deeply embedded in and mediated by a specific linguistic, literary and cultural matrix rooted in Northern England. Through his use of Geordie and Cleveland dialects, combined with his expanded and archipelagic conception of Northumbria—which incorporates linguistic and literary influences from Scots, Frisian, Old Norse, Westrobothnian and Icelandic—Simms engages in a self-reflexive effort to reconcile the animal with the linguistic, philological and poetic traditions of its locale. In *Otters and Martens*, these linguistic and allusive choices do not seek to confine or define the otter, but to emplace it within a cultural, geographic and historical continuum. Simms employs words and phrases which evoke both the linguistic and dialectal traditions of the immediate Northern English landscapes he writes from as well as their deep historical ties to other Northern European territories and cultural traditions. He combines his own idiosyncratic, archipelagic sense of Northumbria (which enfolds Greater Scandinavia) with an emphasis on the indivisible alterity of his otter subjects to describe them in a way that is attuned to both their locational particularity and their resistance to reductive perceptual and epistemological frameworks. Just as otters traverse the modern borders and geophysical changes which have fragmented territories across both human and deep time, making homes in cognate habitats across Northern Europe, so too does Simms constellate Northern European linguistic palettes and literary modes to reflect the deep interconnection and shared heritage of these landscapes. In his poems on otters, the landscapes of the North East of England speak through the otter, inasmuch as the otter speaks through the landscapes of the North East of England.

[120] John Kerrigan, "Otters and Others: Ted Hughes to John Kinsella" in *The Review of English*, 74:315 (2023), pp.532-550 (p.534).

The poetic forms Simms employs in these poems deepen this complex negotiation. His use of Old English alliterative verse, often divided into two hemistichs, evokes the orality of a poetic voice which hews to the spoken dialects these poems draw from. It also reflects Basil Bunting's increasing influence at this later stage in Simms's career. Bunting himself saw alliterative verse as a way of bringing poetry closer to music, by tapping into language's latent sonorous materiality: what he referred to in his essay "Thumps" as "the primitive dance".[121] On the one hand, Simms's use of these forms (which also run prosodically and visually counter to the expansive, open field research poetry which typified the American sequences) enacts the immediacy and vitality of the observed animal, ostensibly returning us to what Marshall McLuhan called "the magical world of the ear".[122] On the other, Simms also uses these forms to emphasise the constructed nature of both his own poetry and the perceptual modes it encodes. In *Otters and Martens*, Simms's use of kennings, his repeated allusions to beading and braiding, and his presentation of the otter as a shifting, mercurial entity, at once enveloped by and transgressing beyond water, in a manner redolent of "The Seafarer" or "The Wanderer"—"this one braids and beads, surfs and lines | Swale to Tees defines and defies", as one poem (discussed in more detail below) asserts—suggests an allusive recourse to Old English which runs far deeper than the recuperation of "the primitive dance".[123] Simms's otter subjects are agents who re-make territories and dissolve the boundaries between land and sea, through bodies which are porous and permeable: "this otter – makes – water of grass", the same poem tells us.[124] These qualities are only enhanced by a prosody which self-consciously enacts a sense of language coalescing around a dynamic, 'doing' subject. John Kerrigan highlights the accretive, 'forming' nature of Simms's language in his otter poems, emphasising its "crunchy and collective" texture and the "internal, alliterative energies" of his quasi-"medieval verse".[125] Likewise, kennings like "otter – makes – water" bracket off a distinct

[121] Basil Bunting, "Thumps" in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, ed. by Peter Makin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), pp.19-32 (p.19).
[122] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p.124.
[123] Colin Simms, *Otters and Martens* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2004), p.14. I typographically reproduce the *lacunae* in Simms's otter poems throughout my citations.
[124] *ibid.*
[125] Kerrigan, "Otters and Others", p.537.

compound of actor and action from the taxonomic stasis implied by merely naming the creature. Simms also emphasises the mutable, transgressive and mysterious qualities of the otter through a poetic voice which simultaneously obscures and reveals: in these poems, the otter emerges vividly into our vision, in all its vibrant particularity, only to recede again into obscurity, leaving behind only the scents, spraints and other ephemeral traces through which its presence is indirectly apprehended.

By emphasising language and poetic form's role in constituting the encounter, Simms's animal poems frame and count a perceiving and interpreting subject within the poem. In so doing, they register that subject's hermeneutic processes as constitutive parts of the poem's structure and meaning (especially when those processes fail to capture the nonhuman subject in all its indivisible 'isness'). In *Otters and Martens*, the otter both eludes human systems of knowledge and control—such as the forms of taxonomic and economic dominance over landscape, humans and nonhumans described in *No North Western Passage*—while also being fully situated within a nexus of English poetic and dialectal traditions. This paradox is constitutive of Simms's later work, wherein the animal encounter becomes a site of mutual perceptual exchange and an acknowledgment of radical alterity, but also a space wherein language and poetic form strain to bridge the gap between human and nonhuman without instrumentalising or subsuming the latter. Each poem in *Otters and Martens* acknowledges the nonhuman subject's resistance to the perceptual enclosures Simms self-consciously evokes. The animal always defies Simms's presentation of "the encounter […] *as* the [perceiver's] desire to fix or shape the encounter", as Leo Mellor puts it.[126]

Simms's work on animals has not always been read this way, and the tensions in existing accounts of his later poetry are illuminating for my argument. Before his death in 1995, Eric Mottram prepared a prose piece on Simms's *Goshawk Lives* (published that year by Form Books) entitled "Essential Elements in the Calculation". The unabridged typescript, contained in the Mottram Collection, is worth quoting at length, as a preface to Simms's

[126] Leo Mellor, "The Unburied Past: Walking with Ghosts of the 1940s" in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, pp.57-76 (p.60).

presentation of the nonhuman encounter in *Otters and Martens*, not least because *Goshawk Lives* was published so close to 1994's *Shots at Otters*, a key sequence within Simms's collection:

> Goshawk [Lives] is masterly in its kinaesthetic language—all senses interactive as they are in our lives, especially freed from the manmade enclosures of the settlement. It is the language for the basis of knowledge, and the usage is happily free from nostalgia, the blight of the wordsworthian [sic]. The poetry exhilarates in its invitation to participate in the verbal presentation of so much care for fact, and care for the maintenance of fact [...] The sudden focus on galls and the goshawk young in part 1, section 3 is Simms's 'news that stays news', a disturbance of that commonplace of bland sensibility trained to believe that the words 'nature' and 'natural' are placid and static, and that urban and city existence is prior value.[127]

Pound's dictum that 'good' literature is forged at the cutting edge of human experience and intuition is here repurposed by Mottram to describe Simms's poetics of animal-encounter.[128] In the process, it maintains all its constitutive contradictions. Does Simms *actually* seek to free his writing on nonhuman animals "from the manmade enclosures of the settlement"? If so, how does this align with Mottram's claim that Simms's prosody also contains "the basis of knowledge" and "care for fact", given that knowledge and fact are to some extent contingent on such "manmade enclosures"? Is Simms's animal poetry *really* "happily free from nostalgia, the blight of the [W]ordsworthian"? As I have argued thus far, Simms is not so naïve as to believe his prosody can enact the alterity of the other, outside of the boundaries of human culture, knowledge and perception. A reading of *Otters and Martens* reveals that Simms persists in leveraging a significant amount of archival material in this late work. There are plenty of moments of nostalgic recourse to Western art music and literature in the sequence—in the poem "Otters in the Kirk Field Burn", a pair of mating otters are described as moving in a way which recalls "Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death*"—as well as to Simms's usual

[127] Eric Mottram, "Essential Elements in the Calculation", no date, Mottram 5/220/1-5. MCKCL.
[128] Pound's full formulation is that "[l]iterature is news that STAYS news." Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p.29.

biogeographic and naturalist frameworks.[129] Moreover, as I have argued so far, Simms's engagement with Anglo-Saxon and Northern European poetic and linguistic textures in these poems contradicts any sense of total liberation from "manmade enclosures". However, it is more helpful to read Mottram's negative invocation of "nostalgia" and "the blight of the [W]ordsworthian" as a means of demarcating between different degrees and forms of Englishness. Even if the medieval and Anglo-Saxon prosodies Simms recruits in these poems risk becoming objects of nostalgia, they nonetheless exist outside of or anterior to a Romantic understanding of the perceiving and cogitating subject's relationship to the natural world. This Romantic framework sentimentalises and instrumentalises nature, seeing it as emphatically *for* us as a universal source of phenomenological meaning, as when Wordsworth's speaker in "The Tables Turned" implores Matthew to "quit [his] books" and "[l]et Nature be [his] teacher."[130] Simms also resists using Romantic lyric as a corollary to mediated being and perception, an impulse evident to varying degrees in the poetry of Riley, Langley, and Prynne.

In ostensible contradiction to Mottram's claim that Simms's writing on animals is defined by its "[kinaesthesia]", *Otters and Martens* opens with an image of a static, recently-deceased otter. Its murder is explicitly signalled in the poem's title, "Otter Dead in Water (Drowned by 'keeper) 1984":

Watter had vitalled
that wettens now
blood leif to leave
treasured and swelled
as taints in current
air over the river
so they grow green-ness
by the same stones marked
moon
blood leased by leeches
long passion decides
length and strength

nourished, gi'en blood
wattles and muddied
of its pressure
smells … unhurried
spraints meshed and measured
arrested even stones
as his muzzle will, heedless
where the flood reached the

stone-loaches the otter ett
where floodwater subsides
and tides[131]

[129] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.50.
[130] Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, p.377.
[131] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.13.

Here, the division of the poem into two hemistichs evokes the a/b structure characteristic of Anglo-Saxon or Old Norse alliterative verse. This structure accentuates the poem's central sense of rupture, disintegration and re-integration, enacting the fragmented and decaying state of the otter's body. The 'openness' of Simms's syntax across the line breaks (for example, in lines 6-7, the ambiguous causal relationship implied by "so" between the "green-ness" of the stones and the otter's muzzle) combines with the 'openness' of an intrinsically cleaved form to produce a grid of relational linguistic, syntactic and sonic elements. Just as the otter lies dead and secreting in his medium (the "[w]atter" which once "vitalled" and "nourished" him), so too is the poem formally ruptured, its language bleeding across horizontal and vertical margins in a way which mimes the disintegrative processes by which the otter's carcass becomes porous and then composite with the landscape (the river is "wattled and muddied" by "blood leased by leeches", "his muzzle" "[grows] green-ness" with moss).

In a highly technical reading of *Otters and Martens*, Leo Mellor stresses the centrality of Bunting's *Briggflatts* to Simms's alliterative prosody. He argues that Simms's sound-patterning (like Bunting's) is apparently mimetic of the "enveloping totality" and "musicality" of the landscape and its nonhuman occupants, in a way which largely hinges on the sonorous materiality of poetic language.[132] "Otter Dead in Water" makes use of many of the "enveloping" sonic techniques Mellor describes. Each hemistich is either in iambic dimeter or constitutes half a line of iambic pentameter, while interlocking rhymes, assonances and consonances create vertical and horizontal resonances across the poem's grid of language. Many of these resonances can only be detected when the poem is read aloud (highlighting the orality of Simms's prosody throughout the collection). The net effect of these sonic resonances is to present the perceiving speaker and the otter as enmeshed in an areal scene internally in check with itself. "[N]ou**rished**" finds a quick, thumping resolution in "**blood**", and echoes "**had**" in the first hemistich; "**blood**" then chimes with "**mudd**ied" directly beneath it, before resolving into the perfect, anaclastic repetition of "**blood**" which begins line 3. "[**P**]**ressure**", at

[132] Mellor, "The Unburied Past", pp.59-60.

the end of line 3, is immediately answered by "**treasure**d" at the start of line 4: its end-stop resonates with the other preterites distributed both above and below it in the poem. Simms's recruitment of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse here creates a sense of perceptual simultaneity, presenting the otter as dispersed and perpetually present within its environing landscape. Even in death, it resists becoming "placid or static" through decomposition, ultimately attesting Mottram's evaluation of the later writing as "masterly in its kinaesthetic language".[133]

Yet, beyond the apparently mimetic qualities Mellor locates in Simms's late prosody, *Otters and Martens* also engages a deeper layer of meaning, one rooted in linguistically and geographically situated systems of knowledge. Here, the common resources of a specific Northern European culture—its geographies, its histories, its myths and its linguistic traditions—speak through the presentation of the otter. This layer of meaning is in part derived from Simms's allusive use of Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse and Old Icelandic sources in the collection. We have already examined how alliterative verse in "Otter Dead in Water" offers a formal correlative for a form of perceptual simultaneity, as well as a sense of the dead otter's re-integration with the surrounding landscape. In another poem (untitled, but a subtitle situates and locates it at "Bowes, 1970"), an otter is observed moving fluidly between land, ice and water:[134]

> Aggregate melt-water remembered in him his territory this dog-otter
> *Scarlutra*, Scargill Beck otter bigger, as hill fox is bigger
> the same as only a few thousand years back to impermanent ice
> may it be. Many a bitter winter since. This one skates ice like Skarp-Heðin
> this otter – makes – water of grass.[135]

The otter's perceived morphological stasis (it is "the same as only a few thousand years back", when it ran across glacial ice) gives way to a comparison to the Icelandic mythological hero of

[133] Mottram, "Essential Elements in the Calculation". MCKCL.

[134] It is worth noting that while Simms's subtitles and locational/temporal anchors in *Otters and Martens* sometimes date back to the 1960s and 1970s, this primarily reflects when the observational and biogeographic research underpinning the poems was conducted. Many of these poems, despite their earlier timestamps, were not published until 1994's *Shots at Otters*, reflecting Simms's broader practice of integrating and encoding earlier scientific research into his later poetry. See Colin Simms, *Shots at Otters* (Reading: RWC, 1994).

[135] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.14.

the *Njáls Saga*, Skarp-Heðin, a comparison framed by the kind of deixis one might expect in a gloss of an Anglo-Saxon text ("[t]his one"). In one sense, the cultural resources of Northern Europe are here being mobilised as a framework to foreclose the otter, or to make comment on its perceived 'ancientness', and amphibian-like capacity to dissolve the margins between land and water.

Yet, the poem can also be read as an exercise in allowing an ancient, expanded conception of the North—defined by its geographies, its myths and its languages—to speak directly through the otter, attesting to the poem's opening assertion that "his territory" is "remembered in him". As John Kerrigan observes,

> [a]s the [poem's] words slip and chime, they detonate meanings beyond English. If the 'scar' of Scargill Beck derives from Old Norse, so do 'gill' (rocky cleft) and 'Beck' (brook, rivulet) […] After the glaciers retreated, waves of migrants and then Vikings came. This exposed landscape, now in England, was once part of Greater Scandinavia. The Scargill otter helps us hear that.[136]

As Simms's otter skates across "impermanent ice" and "makes – water of grass", it allows the speaker to apprehend the processes (both geomorphic and anthropological) by which territories are transformed and reconstituted. Its presence here is evocative of a deep time stretching back to before the European glacial ice retreated and land bridges like Doggerland (which linked Scandinavia with the North East of Britain) were submerged, as well as a more recent human timeframe, encompassing the exploits and questing of saga heroes like Skarp-Heðin across Greater Scandinavia and the dispersal of Teutonic languages across Northern Europe.

Returning to "Otter Dead in Water" in light of "Bowes, 1970"'s sense of territory being "remembered" and re-formed "in" the otter and the language which attends it, we can better understand how the poem frames the otter's death and re-integration with the landscape through the lens of Northern European linguistic and cultural traditions. "Watter", the word which opens the poem and the entire volume (and which also echoes the emphatically oral

[136] Kerrigan, "Otters and Others", p.538.

"Hwæt!" that begins *Beowulf*) is the Scots for 'water', and, like its English counterpart, derives from the Proto-Germanic *watōr*, which (through an ultimate root in the Proto-Indo-European **wed-*) is also closely related to 'otter'.[137] Indeed, if "[w]atter" is read aloud in the Scots pronunciation, this morphological link with 'otter' can be heard more resolutely, underscoring the importance of the oral dimension to Simms's text. As we move through the poem, the reliance on Teutonic languages is cemented further. Line 3's "leif" is an Icelandic word for 'remains', ultimately coming from Old Norse, while line 9's "ett" is the Westrobothnian for 'kin', another derivation from Old Norse. Simms deliberately embeds our perception of the otter within a highly particularised nexus of Northern European languages, a strategy which paradoxically deepens the otter's rootedness in the specific Northumbrian locality he is writing from while simultaneously dissolving its borders, recasting the North of England as part of a wider archipelago—one which enfolds Scotland, Iceland and Sweden among other places—and unifying the perception of the otter across linguistic and geographic lines. To paraphrase Kerrigan, the otter (even in death) helps us perceive this deeper, more expanded conception of the North.[138]

Simms's unpublished statements on the dialects of the North of England are extremely pertinent here. Writing to fellow poet, Anglo-Saxonist and researcher in Northern dialects Bill Griffiths in November 1994, Simms proudly attests his fluency in the dialects of "Swaledale […] Teesside […] Geordie, North Dales/Cumbria […] West Yorkshire", among others.[139] More significant, however, is a letter to Griffiths from 28 July 2000. In this letter, Simms critiques the limitations of the draft research that would go on to inform Griffiths' book-length studies of North Eastern dialect, *North East Dialect: Survey and Word List* (2002), *A Dictionary of North East Dialect* (2004) and *Pitmatic: The Talk of the North East Coalfield* (2007):

> … As I may have said to you before—a big element, to my mind, missing from your dialect survey and analysis is the Scottish 'spectrum'.

[137] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.13.
[138] Kerrigan, "Otters and Others", p.538.
[139] Colin Simms, letter to Bill Griffiths, 5 November 1994, GB/1975/BG/9/1. BGA.

> This has always been very important to me—no doubt I am rather influenced by having Scots speaking recent ancestors, and having spent plenty of time in the Borders. You can get a very good deal from the Lallans dictionaries, but hearing the 'doric' is, of course, better.
>
> So I have [attached] a few pages of some ('50s & '60s, basically) old studies of mine:
>
> — apparent links Northern dialect with Gaelic
>
> — ditto with Scots/Lallans "[140]

Ultimately, Griffiths' studies in their published form *do* make a strong case for the influence of both Scots and the Goidelic languages on the dialects of the North East of England. Indeed, the prefaces to *North East Dialect* and the *Dictionary* repeatedly emphasise the importance of a complex of languages beyond English in shaping the Geordie, Mackem and Cleveland dialects. The *Dictionary* argues that "maritime contact between Tynesiders and the Dutch" in the context of whaling, herring fishing and "cloth export to the Baltic" decisively changed the vocabularies of seafaring communities on either side of the North Sea, while *North East Dialect* argues that Old Norse and the "power and culture" of the Vikings created "a Common Northern pool of vocabulary" which stretched far beyond the borders of England.[141] Yet what matters for Simms in his letter is not only a reconceptualisation of the linguistic influences that shaped Northern dialects, but a broader understanding of these languages as a "'spectrum'". Equally significant for my analysis of the sonorous qualities of Simms's language in *Otters and Martens* is Simms's emphasis here on direct immersion in the acoustic properties of language, of "hearing" rather than thumbing through "the […] dictionaries". At the same time, we must remain wary of any of Simms's claims that meaning somehow inheres in these dialects. Simms's sequence consistently asks the reader to conduct research into this nexus of Teutonic languages, drawing out their deep etymological structures to fully apprehend the specific nuances of the language in question.

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[140] Simms, letter to Griffiths, 28 July 2000, GB/1975/BG/9/1. BGA.

[141] Bill Griffiths, *A Dictionary of North East Dialect* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2004), p.xv. Bill Griffiths, *North East Dialect: Survey and Word-List* (Newcastle upon Tyne: The Centre for Northern Studies, 2002), pp.8-9.

In another untitled poem, an otter is seen hesitating on the banks of the Tyne as the river's currents surge "sou'wester": the water is elsewhere described as "'hasting-doon'" and "'lish'", a Geordie dialect word derived from the Old Norse *lioshe*.[142] The language here is emphatically Tyneside, and the quotation marks Simms places around these latter two adjectives suggest an embodied and emplaced orality. The perceiving and speaking subject enters into and becomes enmeshed within the scene through the dialect in which they cast the poem. At the same time, the perceptual scene (including the otter) becomes indivisible from the dialect which now enacts it and through which it can resonate against other landscapes shaped by the same linguistic and cultural community Simms's sequence repeatedly invokes. Here, Geordie vocabulary is not an inert descriptive tool but a living archive, actively preserved within the otter and the landscape through which it moves: it at once registers an emplaced perceptual immediacy as well as the influence of an ancient, international speaking community. More than just a medium of perception, dialect in *Otters and Martens* serves as a means of situating the perceiver within Simms's expanded nexus of Northern linguistic, geographic and cultural identity.

Language in *Otters and Martens* is thus a crucial means of registering the subject's presence within the act of perception itself. Beyond the self-conscious use of dialect, the sequence repeatedly underscores how encounters with the nonhuman foreground the reflexivity of perception, wherein the observer becomes aware of their own interpretive and perceptual claim to the otherness of the animal while the animal in turn reciprocates their gaze. This dynamic produces a moment of mutual perceptual exchange which dissolves the boundary between observer and observed. A poem situated and dated at "The River Derwent, Yorkshire, 1975" exemplifies this interplay:

> may-flies living mere hours with man the air shared
> above the river surface mingling wind and water
> quiet turning of willow leaves on its is
> smile on the face of the fisherman's young daughter

[142] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.43. Griffiths' *North East Dialect* suggests the Old Norse *lioshe* as a possible root for "lish", via 'lisk' (a man's groin), but does not offer any more detail. Simms's poem also describes the Tyne as "jerking-off froth", perhaps tacitly evoking the phallocentrism of the Norse root (again, through 'lisk'). Griffiths, *North East Dialect*, p.95.

caught in and made by the reflection, as of the leaves
have to be perceived together, alternative routes to the otter
are the roots of the otter and all other otters in their turn
take turn here, the dragonfly, even the sulky fish
it is for them only the beginning of their spontaneity[143]

The speaker and "the fisherman's young daughter" are emplaced in an intersubjective and interspecies field of mutual perception, cohabiting a space where "air [is] shared" with "may-flies living mere hours", an otter and "even the sulky fish". Each of these beings affirms the others' existence through their reciprocal perception. The fisherman's daughter is both a literal figure in the scene and a symbolic point of convergence between self and landscape. Her smile, "*caught in* and *made by* the reflection" in the river, emphasises human imbrication in the world as a phenomenon that the world both passively reflects and actively forges (my emphasis). Meanwhile, the sighting of the otter is not immediate but emerges through a process of mosaic-like aggregation. In Simms's poem, each fragmentary perception sums to the construction of the "roots of the otter", a fact formally underscored through the accretion of impressions across the enjambement. This otter is not only an individuated animal but an archetype ("all other otters in their turn"), emphasising how cultural forms emerge from perceptual details which amass over time and across cultures and linguistic communities, in a manner which illuminates the sequence's use of Teutonic languages to highlight the dispersal of experiential and perceptual detail across Northern Europe. Even though the poem accounts for the production of the archetypal otter, the final lines emphasise the "spontaneity" and emergent qualities of this particular interconnected landscape. The dragonfly and the fish, like the otter, are ultimately participants in a shared moment of becoming, even if this moment cannot be bracketed off from the cultural and linguistic systems which mediate it and make it archetypal.

In terms of the precise nature of the intersubjectivity it describes, Simms's sequence can be productively read against emerging disciplines like biosemiotics. Recent scholarship in this field argues for the extent to which encounters with nonhuman animals not only reveal

[143] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.18.

our own animality but also illuminate how human cognition is structured by the impulse to interpret animals as systems of signs. Wendy Wheeler writes that,

> Biosemiotics […] argues that biological information must be properly understood as […] the action of signs, and communication and interpretation of *all* living things […] This means that what we understand by 'mind' and 'knowledge' must necessarily shake off its purely anthropocentric connotations […] [L]iving organisms are much more than information-carrying mechanistic channels; they are bearers of purpose and readers of meaning.[144]

This assertion—that "living organisms" are not "information-carrying mechanistic channels", but are instead "bearers of purpose and readers of meaning"—aligns closely with Simms's framing of humans, otters, insects and fish as mutually interpreting and interpolating one another via the "routes" of perception in the above poem. At other moments, *Otters and Martens* more explicitly presents animals as semioticians in their own right. In "Seal Sands, Teesmouth 1965, 1976", the poem's primary object, the dead "old dog-otter one-foot-short reduced to a scold natter of bones and scavenge", only enters the poem in line six, and is seen only through the "salt slant eyes" of the "oiled guillemot".[145] The guillemot, in turn, reciprocates the speaker's gaze; the speaker is rendered in the poem solely through his "difficulty" in "[recognising]" the animals on the beach. The result is a concentric, layered act of observation, where perception is mediated through multiple perspectives: the observer enters the poem only via his "difficulty" in observing, and the otter can only be perceived through a leap into the perspective of another subject. Through this chain of observations, the poem enacts John Berger's reading of the moment in which the animal returns the perceiver's gaze, when the perceiver "is […] *seen* as his surroundings are seen by him."[146]

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[144] Wendy Wheeler, "'Tongues I'll Hang on Every Tree': Biosemiotics and the Book of Nature", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014), pp.121-135 (p.122). Original emphasis.

[145] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.22.

[146] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), pp.3-28 (p.5). Original emphasis.

In "bonecave, North Pennines 1969", Simms integrates the perceiving subject's epistemological inquiry into the otter within both the encounter itself and the poem's structure. The sonnet reflects what Paul Shepard calls our atavistic "tracking mentality", a form of cognition which knows that "an animal, watched long enough, gradually dissolves into signs […] [and leaves] the marks that come to represent it: footprints, urine, secretions, faeces [we might think back to the 'spraints meshed and measured' in 'Otter Dead in Water'], moulted antlers, scratchings and rubbings, gnawed stems, bones, feathers, beds, diggings, nests, tracks, and bits of fur as well as an immense range of sounds and smells available to us":[147]

dibble out a mandible tight in stalactite
badger it loose carefully prized or might-be-otter
compare osteologically to be fair
the weasel-family share some structure

concerned to discover what-comes-up-from-a-place
hard impressions to put flesh on lines-to-a-face

but we don't know individual-behaviour-same-stricture
what river-otters were *doing*
to be interred in high-ridge caves even in human burial-cysts
an accidental en-fracture
what when these high-dry hills were not
high dry hills but
so "what does it tell you what is it worth"
decent-clearing-events of small patch of an old earth.[148]

The speaker's "[concern] to discover what-comes-up-from-a-place", to determine "what river-otters were *doing* | to be interred in high-ridge caves", and to put "lines-to-a-face" (poetic lines, but also the contours of a biological illustration) becomes a reflection on how language mediates and fails to fully capture the other. Ultimately, the poem acknowledges the otter's capacity to evade linguistic and epistemological enclosure completely. The speaker's "dibble" performs physically precise work, prying the "mandible tight in stalactite" free. It is an

[147] Paul Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington: Island Press, 1996), p.24, 26.
[148] Simms, *Otters and Martens*, p.23.

instrument of scientific knowledge, but also, in one of Simms's punning transformations, a poetic tool: the final pyrrhic of "mandible". Similarly, "tight" is the final syllable of "stalactite", offering a fleeting moment when the constructed nature of language aligns with the alterity and recalcitrance of the world. That coherence is complicated a line later, with the imperative to "badger [the mandible] loose carefully", and thereby become one of the mustelids the poem seeks to excavate and understand. Simms affirms the shared creatureliness of both subject and object, while simultaneously highlighting how the nonhuman is absorbed into human metaphorical systems. The otter, even in death, is transformed into a unit of knowledge and a template for a programme of being: its traits and *qualia* are here co-opted and converted into "information-carrying mechanistic channels".[149]

The enquiry into "what river-otters were *doing* | to be interred in high-ridge caves" ultimately remains partial and incomplete. The question of what these "high-dry hills" once were is left as an unresolvable fragment, formally enacted in the unresolved, elliptical gappiness of line 12. Here, we might recall Peter Quartermain's reading of Objectivist poetry as "too conscious of the world as […] unknowable, impenetrable, and disobedient to human order […], of the incapacity of language to describe or fix".[150] Or, we might read Simms's use of *lacunae* as a retreat from written or typeset language altogether, a way of resisting what McLuhan calls "the […] visual stress of applied knowledge".[151] In either case, Simms maintains his deep preoccupation with the mediated nature of our relationship with the world. Simultaneously, however, he finds—in the alterity of the hidden forms and processes of the landscape, and in the ultimate unknowability of the animal—an otherness that cannot be brought under his poetic and scientific control.

Simms's late poetry communicates the unknowability and illegibility of the world not just through gaps in knowledge but through *lacunae* and other forms of linguistic absence, in which he finds ludic and subversive potential. J. H. Prynne also finds something ecstatic about the unknowability of the world. However, as we will see in the final chapter, he demonstrates

[149] Wheeler, "'Tongues I'll Hang on Every Tree'", p.122.
[150] Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics*, p.3.
[151] McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p.124.

this ecstasy through the sheer proliferation of historically and materially situated forms of language use, rather than through language's absence altogether.

Chapter Four

"We Do Not Return": The Inevitability of Mediation in (Very) Late J. H. Prynne

Introduction

In his 1999 travelogue written about the collapsing Yugoslavia, *Questioning While Weeping*, the Austrian writer Peter Handke describes a landscape ravaged "not only with cluster bombs and rockets but above all with 'context' and 'idea.'"[1] Elsewhere in the text, deconstructing a maxim usually attributed to Aeschylus, Handke writes: "'The first victim of war is truth'? No, it is language."[2] Through such rhetorical gestures, Handke's travelogue attempts to critique how the language through which Yugoslavia is mediated and presented to Western audiences has itself become damaged and debased. To paraphrase Handke, language has become a casualty of war, and in this compromised state, it further distorts, scars and shapes the Yugoslavian landscape and its people. In the words of one reviewer, *Questioning While Weeping* is a "quixotic attempt to present simple images in complex sentences from a country Handke believes has been deformed, misrepresented and caricatured by the world press and by Western press agents."[3]

Handke's "quixotic attempt" was met with a less laudatory response from J. H. Prynne, who, in the sixth number of Keston Sutherland's journal *QUID*, wrote a polemical response to the Austrian writer, entitled "A Quick Riposte to Handke's Dictum about War and Language". Motivated by Sutherland's own passing reference to Handke's revision of Aeschylus' maxim in *QUID* 5, Prynne's "Quick Riposte" directly challenges Handke's idealist and monolithic conception of language, "context" and 'ideas' in *Questioning While Weeping*:

> […] it is hard not to wince at what seems extreme naivety and self-righteousness. Of course it is rather easy to 'see what [Handke] means'; and the history of Europe in this century is full of those terrible events supposed to have traduced or contaminated language, along with

[1] Peter Handke, *Unter Tränen fragend* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000) pp.157-158. Own translation.
[2] *ibid*, p.23.
[3] Scott Abbott, "Peter Handke and the Former Yugoslavia: The Rhetoric of War & Peace" in *World Literature Today*, 75:1 (2001), pp.78-81 (p.80).

> those sorrowful bystanders, perched upon some peak of purity, who can bewail the loss of a model of rational, passionate and poetic discourse that would somehow resist the ruptures of historical process. But, how silly. Warfare between nations is most often waged across language-frontiers, as a fiercely linguistic event […] [T]he mounting up of a war programme, in advance of the hostilities and to justify their methods, is a concatenation of intensely linguistic processes, in which the whole identity and propensity of individual language-histories are worked into the deepest complicity. By the time that war 'breaks out' […] the cascade of positional alterations to language use has been largely completed.[4]

While Handke's text imagines that language and the ideas it encodes exist on a plane both spatially and ontologically above the material world (Yugoslavia is damaged not just by artillery "but *above all* with 'context' and 'idea'"), Prynne stresses language's deep and inextricable imbrication in the political, legal, economic and military systems of the world. He also emphasises that poets—as those most closely involved in working with language's materials—are as enmeshed in these systems as anyone else. He goes on:

> [i]t may be resisted that true poets are patriots only to an ideal kingdom, of pure language and equally pure humanity; but enquiry shews this contention to be mostly false, because such purity is itself chimerical, often substituted for less admissible alternatives. *The bread and butter that a man or woman eats (or even a poet) does not materialise like manna out of thin air.*[5]

For Prynne, neither words nor ideas—nor those who work with them—can exist outside of the complex of social and material relations from which they emerge. Language must always remain coextensive with the systems of the world, rather than straining upward to the rarefied, idealist plane imagined by Handke. It is always-already "contaminated" by and complicit in the business of war and economics, by virtue of the fact that "language-histories" and socio-cultural "linguistic processes" are the structures within which identities are forged, lives are lived, and the tribal tensions which beget military conflict emerge.

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[4] J. H. Prynne, "A Quick Riposte to Handke's Dictum about War and Language" in *QUID*, 6 (2000), pp.23-26 (p.23).
[5] *ibid*. My emphasis.

The implications of Prynne's "Quick Riposte" for this thesis's primary subject—the possibility of establishing direct perceptual contact with the world—are clear. For Prynne, perception is always-already mediated through language and the forms of knowledge it encodes; there can be no extra-linguistic form of perception. He makes this point more emphatically in his 2014 pamphlet-length essay *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*:

> [...] perception is mediated through structure, even where this structure may not be fully conscious or systematically developed [...] Larger conceptual linkages and relational networks of individuated concepts may comprise systems of belief, codes of practice, interpretations of experience, etc; [...] sanctioned within a socially established and even regulatory order, or they may be more private within an individual mind [...], including linguistic proficiency and the memory store. But in each case the relational framework supervenes above the atomic content of "making an observation of a thing or event in the world" or even "having an idea" simply as such [...] Some conceptual schemes occur fleetingly as temporary aspects of a thought-process, and some persist as mental patterns or characteristics that can be durable, capable of being retrieved from memory, worked out and set down in discursive expression; creeds or covenants, legal jurisdictions and moral or political schemes of conduct fall into this category.[6]

For Prynne, "the atomic content" which comprise direct instances of perception are always tied to and "mediated through" a conceptual framework, be this the "[fleeting] or [temporary]" framework of an individual "thought-process" or "memory store", or systems as monolithic as "creeds or covenants" and "moral or political schemes".

Returning to the "Quick Riposte", Prynne brings an important temporal nuance to his critique by reframing Handke's nostalgic suggestion that language and thought were freer before the Yugoslav War as little more than a prelapsarian fantasy:

> Does he then somehow believe that, because he is a writer and lives in close companionship with 'free' language, unconstrained by overt pressure from acts done across distant borders by supra-national bodies [...], that the idiomatic of his innermost thoughts (Urtext) or of

[6] J. H. Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* (Cambridge: Critical Documents, 2014), p.13.

> anyone else's was somehow less damaged before the Bosnian air-raids than after them?[7]

Prynne's critique of this yearning for a time "before" and "less damaged" is nothing new in the context of his career. It is nothing new in the more local context of this thesis, either. In Chapter One, we saw how Prynne's interventions in Peter Riley's archaeological research in *The English Intelligencer* led Riley to reconceptualise his understanding of 'abstraction' entirely, leading him to conclude that "there is no no [sic] primal condition that we can choose as the nexus of quality".[8] Likewise, in Chapter Two, we briefly examined Prynne's "Pedantic Note in Two Parts" as an exercise in advancing a dialectical understanding of etymology, wherein etymology is understood as something that can both facilitate and shut down our access to both our true being and to the phenomenological world. In the "Pedantic Note", Prynne makes this case through the specific example of the Oxford Dictionary's unsuccessful analysis of the morpheme *win-*: for Prynne, poor etymological practice fails "to take us back, to the sounds of our true selves."[9] Recapitulating and refining ideas that have been central to Prynne's thinking about the contact language affords with the self's 'proper' being and the 'proper' state of the world since the 1960s, the "Quick Riposte" and *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* both emphasise that the self is always dispersed into language, and perception always unfolds within pre-existing linguistic frameworks.

But in this conception of language, perception and subjectivity as always-already fallen into complicity with overarching "[structures]", how do we account for the persistent invocations of lyric diction in Prynne's poetry? How do we account for his frequent attempts to recall through poetic language what one recent collection (2020's *Orchard*) calls the "age-old sweetest session", and to craft a "melic" poem, "ascorbic in rick curled by rhyme"?[10] One approach would be to read his appeals to the signifying systems and vocabularies of English lyric and his invocations of the "curled" (ornate but also tightly inwoven) artifice of rhyme and other lyric sound techniques as ironic. The canny reader should understand these as literary

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[7] *ibid*, p.25.
[8] Riley, "Concerning Olson's ARCHAEOLOGY OF MORNING". JHPP.
[9] Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts", p.129.
[10] J. H. Prynne, *Orchard* (Equipage: Cambridge, 2020), n.p. *ibid*, n.p.

forms which have been evacuated of meaning. Alternatively, we might ask if Prynne intends for us to view lyric and its attendant sound devices as a *different* type of "structure" entirely, and to evaluate them as a viable means of being, perceiving and making contact with the world.

This chapter argues that Prynne's 'late' poetry (i.e., the poetry he has written since his 1998 sequence, *Red D Gypsum*), and, in particular, his 'very late' poetry (i.e., the very large body of work he has produced since 2016) celebrates the fact that direct perception is always-already "mediated through structure" and enmeshed within the "[frameworks]" and "systems" described in *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* and the "Quick Riposte".[11] I find that Prynne's (very) late poetry recovers lyric and formal features like rhyme, assonance and consonance not as markers of a prelapsarian form of poetic perception and knowledge, but rather to investigate how these features are always-already dispersed in the material, social and historical systems of the world. This investigation stems from Prynne's insistence that poetic language and poetic sound are material, social and historical phenomena. His own conception of these features shows how they engage with networks of global trade, linguistic exchange, warfare and commodity production, while also revealing their embeddedness in technical and biological vocabularies which extend beyond their apparently immediate Anglophone and human contexts. A crucial facet of Prynne's recovery of lyric is his emphasis on how it continually signals both its own artificiality and its role in shaping and structuring how we perceive the world. Prynne does not see lyric cynically, as a form of language use which can be collapsed or explained away by other, more prosaic forms of language. Rather, he recuperates lyric and its attendant sound devices as constitutive of a kind of ecstatic contact with the

[11] These categories—'late' and 'very late'—are largely arbitrary. I have borrowed 'late' from the symposium on Prynne's 'late work' held at the University of Sussex on 13 February 2013, which set a window of coverage from 1998's *Red D Gypsum* to 2011's *Kazoo Dreamboats*. Keston Sutherland explains the rationale for this conception of 'late': "Prynne has been exceptionally active during this period, both as a poet and as an essayist and theoretician of poetry. However, much of his poetry from this period has received little or no critical commentary, and the contemporary response to Prynne still now tends to be focused on his early poems, and in particular the earliest of his published poetry that Prynne himself has remained willing to own and acknowledge, *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*." In "Introduction: 'Prynne's late work?' in *Hix Eros: On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Brighton: Hi Zero & Sad Press, 2014), pp.9-13 (p.11). Meanwhile, my conception of a 'very late' Prynne is predicated on the 2024 publication of *Poems, 2016-2024*, which, as the blurb summarises, covers "the most productive period of Prynne's life, with over thirty limited editions published between 2017 and 2024". J. H. Prynne, *Poems 2016-2024* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2024).

world, precisely because they enact and disclose the self's diffusion into the systems and structures that always surround it. As such, these features cultivate a kind of phenomenological intimacy: one which fully acknowledges the self as a historical subject, resonant with other selves and imbricated within material systems and structures. My argument places a close reading of one of Prynne's recent sequences—2020's *Orchard*—into dialogue with a selection of relevant earlier poems (most extendedly, 1998's *Red D Gypsum*) and Prynne's prose criticism (which, as David Antoine-Williams observes, "[sheds] considerable light on his own poetry", even when it offers less convincing readings of Prynne's perennial favourite poets like Wordsworth, Herbert or Milton).[12]

My choice of Prynne here—especially late Prynne—is both a complement and a rejoinder to the preceding chapters. The previous poets this thesis has investigated—at the stages of their career examined—repeatedly emphasised the difficulty of reconciling perception with language's mediation of the world and the other, either by fretting about the tendency for abstract thought to collapse direct perception, or by examining how specialised and technical knowledge constitutes a mediating lens between the subject and the world. In navigating these difficulties, their poetry maintains an emphasis on constructing at least partially realistic lyric subjects, whose speaking voices serve as sites for examining perception's tendency to abstract itself into mediated knowledge. In contradistinction to this, Prynne's writing—as his early interventions in the thinking of *Intelligencer* cohort make clear—has always emphasised that "we do not return" to an orginary basis for the primacy and facticity of perception.[13] For Prynne, the self always-already lives in and with language, and the conceptual frameworks it imposes on perception and being. As an early (1967) lyric, "Die a Millionaire", affirms:

> *we* are the social strand
> which is *already* past the twist-point &
> into the furnace[14]

[12] Williams, *The Life of Words*, p.138.
[13] This is from Prynne's 1969 lyric, "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform". Prynne, *Poems*, p.99.
[14] *ibid*, pp.15-16. Original emphasis.

Yet, rather than suggesting that lyric language and its attendant sound devices cannot withstand the "social" temperatures and pressures of "the furnace", Prynne's late poetry recruits them as mediums for perception which the reader can choose to activate, without the need for what he describes in a rare 2009 reading at the Centre Pompidou as the "totally misguided, misleading, untrue and false" vantage of a putatively authentic speaking subject.[15] Specialised and technical terminology abounds in Prynne's work. In just one stanza from the 1983 poem *The Oval Window*, Richard Kerridge identifies "[p]hrases from financial columns in newspapers, computer programming [and] surgery".[16] However, where figures like Colin Simms and R. F. Langley frequently invoke specialised terminology from geography, historiography and Linnaean taxonomy (among other disciplines) in order to emphasise how such discourses threaten to collapse or mediate more immediate or more lyrical forms of perception, Prynne takes a different approach. He has always insisted on situating lyric as a historical and material category of language use, predicated on historically contingent ways of perceiving and which conditions a specific way of perceiving. As *Concepts and Conceptions in Poetry* argues, poetry entails a 'double removal' from direct perception. It is first "a second-order system of higher level encoding", which places "[t]he reader [...] into temporary removal or suspension from the field of action or its direct imitation".[17] In so doing, however, poetic language offers "a much more adaptive and pliable medium than natural experience", insofar as within it, "abstraction functions not as that which is abstracted from something else but as autonomous at levels of second-order meaning and interpretation".[18] Put another way, when the lie that they can capture the primacy of perception is forgotten, poetic language and form are revealed in their true nature as symbolic and constructed, as "[mediums]" for more "pliable" forms of thinking and representation. This, I argue, allows Prynne to formulate a range of perceptual positions that reflect the actual nature of our lives on the "social strand", "past the twist-point & | into the furnace".

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[15] J. H. Prynne, talk and reading of *Refuse Collection* (Centre Pompidou, 11 February 2009). Own transcription. Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lYkh-HTOK8c> [accessed 29 August 2024].
[16] Richard Kerridge, "Reading *The Oval Window*" in J. H. Prynne, *The Oval Window: A New Annotated Edition by N. H. Reeve & Richard Kerridge* (Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2018), pp.7-33 (p.7).
[17] Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p.14.
[18] *ibid*, p.15.

For Prynne, there is an ecstasy in recognising language's inability to establish direct perceptual contact with the world in a primary sense. This recognition allows us to instead understand language as a diachronic index of shifting attitudes, perceptions, feelings and ways of being, ultimately yielding a more accurate picture of the self's contact with and immersion in the world. In a 2010 lecture delivered in Guangzhou, China, Prynne affirmed his belief that "poetic thought is brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language."[19] What Prynne identifies as "poetic thought"—the essential 'truth content' of poetry—only emerges through simultaneous resonance and tension with the entire sedimented history of a language and its linguistic community. His language and prosody always contain their own historicity, as well their own futurity: they always invoke the full depth of this temporal structure without ever subordinating past, present or future to one another.

Another dimension of this is illuminated by a 1985 letter which prefaces Peter Riley's collection *Reader*, in which Prynne states that his own poetry aspires "to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usages; and thereby with the reader's own position within this world."[20] The emphasis on "the reader" and "this world" here raises important questions: which world and which reader is Prynne interested in "[establishing] relations" with? To what extent is he making assumptions about a shared historicity and a shared pool of experience among his readership? Prynne's poetic and prose investigations into English lyric and his emphasis in the Guangzhou lecture and the preface to *Reader* on a kind of socio-etymology conducted in English risks privileging an Anglophone speaking community shaped by a highly specific set of material circumstances. This risk is further compounded by his especial interest (both allusively and in his criticism) in a narrow canon of poets including Wordsworth, Herbert, Milton and John Dowland. Though I do acknowledge that Prynne's orientation towards a particular readership necessarily causes ethical problems for his claims about the relationship between the reader and the world, I argue that Prynne uses lyric to examine its own imbrication—and the

[19] J. H. Prynne, "Poetic Thought" in *Textual Practice*, 24:4 (2010), pp.595-606 (p.598).
[20] J. H. Prynne, epigraph, in Peter Riley, *Reader* (London: self-published, 1992), n.p. Also available as J. H. Prynne, "Letter to Peter Riley, 15th September 1985" in *in lit.* (1992), n.p.

imbrication of the perceiving self—in systems which lie outside of an immediate Anglophone context and even beyond humanity itself. For example, the emphasis on the international haulage and historical cultivation of fruit in *Orchard* parallels the text's attention to the deep etymological history of the names of fruit and the complex histories of their transportation. The text tracks the dispersal of language across borders and speaking communities as commodities are produced and trafficked according to networks of global trade, colonial expansion and exploitation and ecological interdependence. Meanwhile, in *Red D Gypsum*, Prynne shows the entanglement of lyric language with technical vocabulary related to biological and agricultural systems, extending the reach of English lyric beyond the limits of human experience and into the networks of agrochemical systems and nonhuman life. In both of these texts, what appears to be a close attention to a single subject or a narrow pool of language opens up into a constellation of associations reaching far beyond the borders of Britain and the boundaries of the individuated subject. Crucially, both texts activate this constellation of associations not only through webs of semantic reference, etymological association or shifts in register, but also through the experiential medium of poetic sound, which functions (especially in Prynne's very recent work) as both a site of historical and linguistic enquiry and a dynamic, immersive process through which the reader navigates the complex interplay of abstraction and materiality.

In arguing that lyric remains central to Prynne's late poetry as a structure of perception, I am going against the grain of the critical consensus, while simultaneously extending certain aspects of it. In recent years, a healthy body of criticism on Prynne's late work has developed. Joe Luna has recently written that Prynne's poetry from the late 1990s until the present day evinces a "[decisive]" "[shift] […] from the lyric voice as even a structure of subjective signification, however self-reflexive and ethically exacting, and towards a setting, or dispersal, of the lyric impulse amongst the discourses and dictions of political, economic and ideological power."[21] As is implicit in Luna's appraisal, much of the criticism on Prynne's late poetry has been quick to judge it as dealing nearly exclusively in the 'fallen' condition of

[21] Joe Luna, "Introduction" in *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne, 1967-2000*, ed. by Joe Luna (Amsterdam & Sofia: The Last Books, 2022), p. xiii.

language presented by Prynne in the "Quick Riposte". His recent work is frequently understood as fully actualising his longstanding preoccupation with demonstrating how "futures are conceived, constructed and accomplished entirely within the ideological and economic remit of late, and latterly, of financialised capitalism", as Luna writes elsewhere.[22]

Writing about the 2002 collection *Acrylic Tips*, Timothy Thornton describes it as "a truly horrible book, violent, liverish and unpleasant to read and write about [...] garish, lurid, unsettling, and [...] full of a vivid and threatening bodily trauma."[23] In a more critically useful account, Lisa Jeschke writes that, in the 2001 sequence *Unanswering Rational Shore*, "[l]anguage [...] is not allowed to appear innocent", and that the poems in the volume "[carry] with [them] an acute sense of the history of war and capitalism, as pressed into vocabularies, phrases and sentences."[24] These local critical positions have staked themselves out within a wider body of Prynne criticism which tends to emphasise his archly-modernist reconditeness, his reputation as a present-day coterie poet writing for a restricted audience of intelligentsia, his resistance to easy intelligibility and his insistence on difficulty as an ethical imperative in poetic discourse. John Mullan hits all these beats in an oft-quoted *précis* of Prynne's career for *Guardian* readers:

> At one stage, as if fearing a lapse into intelligibility, [Prynne] actually started writing in Chinese. [His poems] [...] are all about blocking our usual ways of finding poetic meaning. Yet because they are cleverly and eruditely so, many academic specialists love them. Prynne's prophets have gone forth from Cambridge to whisper the word to the qualified few [...] Other avant-garde poets revere him. And the books of criticism are now written by those who once sat in his lectures.[25]

Where references to Prynne's lyricism *do* emerge in the criticism, they are characterised by an emphasis on the transience or instability of lyrical moments in the poems, or their tendency to

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[22] Joe Luna, *Somewhere Else in the Market: An Essay on the Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023), p.3.
[23] Timothy Thornton, "*Acrylic Tips*" in *Hix Eros*, pp.77-85 (p.77).
[24] Lisa Jeschke, "Late Early Poetry: A Commentary on J. H. Prynne's *Unanswering Rational Shore*" in *Hix Eros*, pp.61-76 (p.75).
[25] John Mullan, "Prynne's progress" in *The Guardian* (London), 24 February 2004 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/24/poetry.news> [accessed 20 May 2024]. The Chinese poem to which Mullan is referring is 1992's "Jie Ban Mi Shi Hu".

be collapsed or mediated by the 'anti-lyrical' remainder of the poem. John Kinsella writes of the "lyric *moments*" in Prynne's poem "Rich in Vitamin C".[26] Meanwhile, in their book-length study of Prynne's poetry up to 1983's *The Oval Window*, Kerridge and Reeve write that Prynne's apparently fleeting and unstable lyricism "[arrives] already implicated and mediated by a range of natural, social and economic processes external to [it]".[27] In Part I of this chapter, however, we will see how, contrary to these readings, Prynne's late poetry—particularly *Red D Gypsum* (1998)—treats lyric not as fleeting or compromised but as absolutely integral to the poem's structure. Moreover, it reveals itself as a deep historical process of language-use, which actively subtends and structures the other forms of technical diction used in the poem, without ever being collapsed or made to appear innocent or a-historical. This leads to Part II, which examines 2020's *Orchard*. Here, I explore how Prynne's very recent work condenses complex systems of mediation, abstraction and research into the immediate, sensuous properties of poetic language, transforming lyric into a site where historical, linguistic and material forces coalesce in the act of perception itself.

I – "The offered gift | met by the purest sound": Prynne's lyric process and *Red D Gypsum* (1998)

As I stated in the introduction, the idea that poetic language is inextricably and complexly entwined with the world has been a constant in Prynne's career, emerging in various modified forms since the late 1960s. This section examines how Prynne develops lyric as a mode of perception, knowledge and utterance that attunes readers to material, human and nonhuman conditions, while also emphasising that it is a mediated and historical process requiring activation within the text. I begin by exploring Prynne's conception of lyric as an abstracted form, predicated on "names" which are removed from the substance of the world, yet set apart

[26] John Kinsella, "Commentary on the Poem 'Rich in Vitamin C' by J. H. Prynne" in *Jacket*, 6 (1999) <http://jacketmagazine.com/06/pryn-kins.html> [accessed 22 May 2024].
[27] N. H. Reeve & Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), p.37.

from other forms of language through its capacity to render experience through "the purest sound" (from the 1969 poem "Mouth Open").[28] Drawing on Prynne's critical exegesis of George Herbert, I then examine how Prynne interrogates the historicity of lyric language, so that even terms like 'sweetness' and 'purest' are made subject to historical and critical pressure. Prynne reveals how lyrical terminology, often understood as frozen, universal and timeless, is in fact deeply embedded in historical and material contexts. Finally, I turn to Prynne's 1998 work *Red D Gypsum* to demonstrate how Prynne's late lyric, far from being a transparent medium of direct perception, is instead a *process* the reader must engage with in the text. The reader must choose to activate the lyrical sediment buried within the poem's technical language and attend to how the use of rhyme and other forms of acoustic play in the poem partake in a historically and culturally contingent idea of "purest sound". By examining how *Red D Gypsum* embeds lyric language and prosody into the technical systems and vocabularies of the agricultural and vegetal worlds with which the poem is preoccupied, I argue that Prynne extends English lyric into the nonhuman world so as to expand its remit beyond the confines of an Anglophone speaking community, and as a means of mirroring the poem's depiction of humanity as deeply imbricated in nature through agricultural practices.

To begin, here is the poem to which I referred above, "Mouth Open", from *The White Stones*:

> To set a name to it, hold them
> down and ask merely
> are they shouting, with both feet
> planted and leaning towards me
>
> > the note forming no con-
> > sequence, they gulp the
> > landscape before them
>
> Alert, to the name of an occasion
> which is theirs as I take
> it from them, the offered gift
> met by the purest sound

[28] Prynne, *Poems*, p.61.

I cannot hold this
it is a name: shouting
or leaning, on the single

earth which is below them, each one[29]

The poem invokes the same fraught relationship between the world and the perceiving, cogitating and speaking subject—and the mediation of that relationship through language—as we have seen elsewhere in this thesis, from the jaded encounters with Neolithic cave art in Peter Riley's *The Linear Journal*, to R. F. Langley's anxieties about the power of his book-learning to collapse or facilitate his perception, to Colin Simms's presentation of the landscape as fully constituted by maps and other geographic and historiographical sources. In Prynne's poem, 'names'—the arbitrary signifiers we "set" onto things, as we rush to "gulp the | landscape before [us]" and bring its forms within our comprehension—proliferate. The word occurs thrice in a poem of just 80 words, making it the most common word beyond articles, prepositions and conjunctions. Meanwhile, "the single || earth" rests "below" language as a unified, indivisible fundament, forever resisting our complete control. Prynne formally accentuates the "single || earth"'s bracketing off from 'names', by setting it in its own single-line stanza visually beneath the poem's other material.

"Mouth Open" alerts us to the violence inherent in our imposition of language onto the world, and in our dwelling within the structures of language. "[Holding] […] | down" the "shouting" other to accord it a name suggests an aggressive violation. Meanwhile, Prynne's choice to split "the note forming no con- | sequence" across a line-break creates a punning space in which the morphemes "con-" and "sequence" separately signify the falsehood of language. Writing on another poem in *The White Stones*, "Questions for the Time Being", Alex Latter writes that Prynne's splitting of 'con- | dition' across a line-break foregrounds the 'con' or "false position" implicit in both language and poetry, as they try to convince us of their

[29] *ibid.*

purchase on reality.[30] In "Mouth Open", "sequence" adds another dimension to this, suggesting that the entire system of language is little more than the sequential arrangement of these confidence tricks. The idea of language as an agent which acts upon us, structuring and limiting our perception and our understanding, resonates across *The White Stones*. In "Song in Sight of the World", Prynne writes, "[t]he Battle of Maldon binds | our feet: we tread | only with that weight", emphasising how a distinctly English literary and historical past (of which the Battle of Maldon and the anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem chronicling it is a crucial part) shapes and structures not only the modern subject's extension into the world—her "tread"—but also the prosodic feet she deploys.[31]

However, "Mouth Open" also presents an alternative model of language and its relation to the world and our perception of it. By the fourth stanza, "a name" is precisely what "cannot" be held. "[S]houting" just like the other to which it was first ascribed, the word itself has become an excess of signification and an entity in its own right, ontologically separate to the wholeness of "the single || earth" (but still "leaning" upon it). At another moment in the third stanza, the 'name' is framed not as something stolen from the world, or projected onto it, but as "the offered gift | met by the purest sound". Here, the world offers itself up and discloses itself to the perceiver, whose language comes forth to "[meet]" it in an act of reciprocal exchange. That the name "is theirs as I take | it from them" does not explicitly suggest theft, or a transfer of ownership, but rather an extension of ownership, or something as simple as handing over a belonging for a friend to handle or inspect. These alternative characterisations of names and naming point to a conception of language as something which enters into the world as a real, perceivable object in its own right, even if, as a poem from 1968's *Kitchen Poems* reminds us, "[w]e choose | to believe in the flotsam" of language, when it is obvious that "the | names are *necessarily* false".[32] They also suggest the possibility of a form of language with a more ethical, mutually enriching orientation towards the world: still "*necessarily* false" and

[30] Alex Latter, "'Scheming for the possible world': J. H. Prynne's *The White Stones* and *The English Intelligencer*" in *Intercapillary Space* (2010) <http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2010/04/scheming-for-possible-world-j.html> [accessed 22 May 2024].
[31] Prynne, *Poems*, p.76.
[32] *ibid*, p.19. Original emphasis.

invariably abstracted, but nonetheless the "purest sound" in a broader spectrum of signification.

"[P]urest sound"—alongside other terms which resonate throughout his corpus like sweetness, light, love, stars, dreams, gold, pastoral and desire—partakes in Prynne's frequent recourse to a conventionally English lyric diction. Ultimately, Prynne sees lyric as the "purest sound" which the perceiver can bring forth in language to "[meet]" with the world in its own terms, all while remaining cognisant of what Latter calls language's "false position" in relation to reality.[33] As I emphasised in the introduction of this chapter, Prynne's invocation of lyrical discourse is never an attempt to invoke a space for language and perception to flourish outside of history or the material relations of modern capitalism. Nor does he deploy lyric's "purest sound" to create an oasis in a desert of otherwise un-lyrical language, for the sole purpose of foiling or collapsing that oasis with the hermeneutic impenetrability surrounding it. Rather, as Mia Gaudern writes, Prynne's use of lyric is always a means of charting "the historicity of its language".[34] As *Kitchen Poems*' "Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self" insists, "the *names*, | […] are just | the tricks we | trust, which | we choose".[35] For Prynne, language, be it lyrical, prosaic, or technical, is only ever a mediator we have "[chosen]" to "trust" in at a given moment and under a given set of circumstances.

Where *The English Intelligencer* sought to foster 'trust in risk' through a fraternal endeavour to produce poetry capable of reproducing phenomenological perception, Prynne has carried this position forward into his late poetry in an altered form. He emphasises the contingency of our trust in language and that trust's shifting constitution according to the material conditions of both the human and the nonhuman world. A stanza in the 1998 sequence *Red D Gypsum* begins with the following couplet: "[l]eaf paris green strikes a vein in the room dropped | beneath attention rode out fume trusted with layers".[36] Any pastoral vibrancy of the "leaf paris green" is complicated by our understanding of "paris green" as an

[33] Latter, "'Scheming for the possible world'".
[34] Mia Gaudern, *The Etymological Poetry of W. H. Auden, J. H. Prynne and Paul Muldoon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), p.140.
[35] Prynne, *Poems*, p.20.
[36] *ibid*, p.439.

arsenic-based pigment. First used extensively by 19th-century Impressionists and post-Impressionists (including Seurat, Monet and Van Gogh), it was later employed in American agriculture as the world's first widespread chemical insecticide, before a greater understanding of its toxicity led to its discontinuation in both contexts.[37] Just as the reader's "[trust]" in the poem's pastoral language moves "in layers" according to her choice to dig deeper into the shifting historical contexts of that language, so too does the poem record the "layers" of our historic trust in materials—like "paris green"—used to mimetically reproduce the world (in the "layers" of paint applied to canvases by the (post-)Impressionists), and to intervene in and alter it, like pesticides. Here, poetic language does not stand apart from history: rather, it functions as an index of the shifting material conditions in which it operates.

Through this emphasis on its historicity, Prynne presents lyric as just one instance of how language has been used, continues to be used and will continue to be used in the future. In his criticism, he has consistently produced 'vertical' readings of individual lyrical words he uses in his poetry, interrogating their full range of valences and underscoring their status as historically and materially situated linguistic objects or events (just as I have done with a couplet from *Red D Gypsum*). This approach stands in contrast to the conventional wisdom that lyric diction and the perceptual positions it asks us to adopt are somehow timeless and universally applicable. To take the examples of 'sweetness', 'sweetly' and 'sweet' (words which appear a total of 30 times in the third edition of the *Poems*), Prynne offers the following reading of George Herbert's use of "sweetly" in his commentary on "Love [III]":

> […] sweet brings tacitly into the exchange the anticipation of something to be tasted, as pleasant to be eaten: the small repast on the (implied) table and the larger sacrament foreshadowed […] In this poem as elsewhere the sweetness of the moment is both fragrance of incense and taste of sacramental bread and wine, and also an intense felicity of closeness with God; this fusing of two natures (secular and sacred) is specifically incarnational […] And yet there is also the potential for a slight sting of irony […] in sense 3b, "ironically" (OED

[37] See "Emerald Green and Scheele's Green" in *Artists' Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, vol. III, ed. by Elizabeth West Fitzhugh (London: Archetype Publications, 2012), pp.219-272 (pp.223-224).

> 2,s.v.), implying possibly here a demure and very indirect critique of the guest's motives, thus further sounding him out.[38]

Ultimately, Prynne concludes that Herbert's use of "sweetly" must preclude the direct invocation of the 'ironic', critical sense he invokes above, because the surrounding context establishes that "[n]one of this instrumental sweetness is on display to the poem's reader."[39] Nonetheless, for Prynne, Herbert's "sweetly" must be properly contextualised, and understood as evoking not only the 'sweetness' of the meeting between Love and his guest, but also shadow senses of the material or worldly correlative of that sweetness in "the small repast on the (implied) table" and even the possibility of its own negation through "a slight sting of irony [...] a demure and very indirect critique". Even if, ultimately, the poem must delimit the full range of interpretive and linguistic possibility latent in its component words for the sake of coherence, what matters for Prynne is maintaining the *potential* that these shadow etymological and interpretive depths might come to bear on the poem. Doing so allows the poem's language and the forms of perception and knowledge it encodes to be actively re-constituted by the reader as she uncovers new etymological layers or shades of meaning on repeated readings, a practice tacitly endorsed through the format of Prynne's exacting commentaries. Prynne's view of poetry and lyric thus seems directly influenced by Adorno, whose text *Negative Dialectics* Prynne described as "[having] meant a lot to [him]".[40] In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno characterises the relationship between history and art as follows:

> What appears in the artwork is its own inner time; the explosion of appearance blasts open the continuity of this inner temporality. The artwork is mediated to real history by its monadological nucleus. History is the content of artworks. To analyse artworks means no less than to become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them.[41]

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[38] J. H. Prynne, *George Herbert, 'Love [III]': A Discursive Commentary* (Cambridge: self-published, 2011), pp.26-27.

[39] *ibid*, p.27.

[40] Interview with J. H. Prynne, "The Art of Poetry No. 101" in *Paris Review*, 218 (2016), pp.174-207 (p.188).

[41] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), p.85.

Prynne's gloss on "sweetly" enacts this principle, activating the full range of meaning "sedimented" within that word. The entirety of this diachronic history is potentially made available to any reader who subjects the poem to a scrupulous reading. As *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* puts it, "[a] reader may have a demanding task to interpret these 'rules', but the process may be exhilarating enough to carry the reader forward with strenuous delight".[42] In a word, then, Prynne's lyric—and the forms of thinking, speaking and perceiving it entails—is *process*, bound up with "[tasks]" and "rules" which the reader is free to pursue as far as she likes, in pursuit of an ecstatic recognition of the self's embeddedness in linguistic and historical structures (a "strenuous delight").

I wish to demonstrate how this understanding of lyric as a dialectical and historical process manifests itself in Prynne's late poetry with further reference to *Red D Gypsum*. I have chosen *Red D Gypsum* because it is characteristic of a particular mode of Prynne's late style: it moves between technical diction—itself drawn from Prynne's research into a range of non-poetic disciplines—and lofty, lyrical speech, while keeping the connective tissue between these registers somewhat exposed. This is in contradistinction to the very late mode of a text like 2020's *Orchard*, which buries that connective tissue and the depth of its research beneath a taut, musical structure. My reading here is indebted to Mia Gaudern's excellent point that, because of the historicity of Prynne's lyric, "it should be read with the same scrupulousness as scientific diction is in poetry".[43] Accordingly, I will place *Red D Gypsum*'s lyrical language into dialogue with "shifted but recognisable" layers of medical, economic, agricultural and scientific meaning that certain words within the poem have accrued, in a manner directly influenced by Prynne's commentary on "Love [III]":[44]

> Omission park to pack, sweet water pluck sweet wood may
> dent fortune's cavity to lie low or insert the crafted
> picnic trocar: too hot to grasp a spindle linking the bank.
> Silent pads slide to the front, merely insinuate afresh
> these alarm touches, lees in rack. Tame steaming flip
> ataraxy debates on rewind panurge, hot gluten never so

[42] Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p.15.
[43] Gaudern, *The Etymological Poetry of W. H. Auden, J. H. Prynne and Paul Muldoon*, p.139.
[44] Prynne, epigraph in Riley, *Reader*, n.p.

> picky, get resoled on redemption. Greeting announcers
> touch up the fender hardly, poorly provided in benison.[45]

As Matthew Hall writes, *Red D Gypsum* is set within "overlaying matrices of economic, geomorphologic and nomadic references", and the poem's preoccupation with "[t]he commodification of nature […] adds connotations that may seem to suggest the denial of pastoral modes, but the further we progress through the poem the more strongly resurgent the pastoral themes become."[46] Though Hall's reading focusses on Prynne's late poetry's epic qualities, the same gathering dependence on the pastoral can clearly be detected through the lyrical qualities of *Red D Gypsum* as well. The poem dramatises a tension between its lyrical language and the agrochemical, pharmaceutical, technological and economic systems of modern capitalism which threaten to (but cannot) overwhelm or collapse it. As I have emphasised so far, lyric, in Prynne's formulation, does not vanish completely under the pressure of these forces but persists, insistently, as a mode of being that can be selectively recuperated or "[plucked]" out of the linguistic debris. Here, it is pushed out into the margins of the poem, where it is the reader's task to recuperate and reactivate it as a structure for perceiving, thinking and uttering.

If the stanza quoted above begins with the invocation of a pastoral space wherein lyric contemplation and utterance can unfold—in a "sweet wood", amid fresh, "sweet water"—this is immediately challenged by the "[denting]" of "fortune's cavity" by "the crafted | picnic trocar", in a violent image of medical incursion. Cavities carry with them a specific anatomical or dental valence, and a "trocar" is a surgical tool for inserting cannulas. Throughout *Red D Gypsum*, Prynne is preoccupied with the penetration of both technologies and scientific modes of understanding into nature. The first stanza, for example, describes "a flawless glucose shimmered sky".[47] Another opens with the somewhat obvious formulation "[f]ailing pasture", while one particularly narrative stanza offers a prospect across what appears to be a large piece of agricultural apparatus, which "slants back now, across the field, cladded over | its

[45] Prynne, *Poems*, p.440.
[46] Matthew Hall, "J. H. Prynne and the Late-Modern Epic" in *Cordite Poetry Review* (2009), <http://cordite.org.au/essays/matthew-hall-j-h-prynne-and-the-late-modern-epic/4/> [accessed 19 May 2024].
[47] Prynne, *Poems*, p.435.

adverse retentive slipper feeding."[48] Even "park to pack" in the above stanza suggests the sectionalisation and commodification of nature, shifting briskly from "park" (a cultivated space historically oriented towards aristocratic leisure, though perhaps not yet reduced to pure product) to its being "[packed]": compartmentalised, mass produced and prepared for sale and transport.

Given the range of references to industrial agricultural practices in the poem—even the "*Gypsum*" of its title refers to a sulphate mineral used in fertiliser—it is easy to connect it with the immediate context of British agriculture at the time of its publication. In 1996, the Department of Health and Social Care finally publicly linked the BSE epidemic with the outbreak in Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease that had been ongoing since 1994. The crisis was precipitated in no small part by "the deregulation of the feedstuffs industry", most notably emblematised in the fact that "[t]here were no regulations covering the recycling of sheep remains to cattle-feed until [...] 1989."[49] Elsewhere, the increasingly widespread use of pesticides, herbicides, growth hormones and fertilisers (such as those based on gypsum) had, over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, led to widespread concerns among environmentalists and toxicologists that the UK government had "subordinated the health and well-being of consumers to the economic interests of farmers, the agricultural supply trade, and to the food processing and retail industries."[50] Both of these phenomena share a common origin in Thatcherite and Majorite Britain's preoccupation with deregulation, and both entail the state's legitimisation of the modification of and intervention in natural processes for the sake of maximising profits and prioritising private sector relationships over public health, soil health and biodiversity. These decisions ultimately led to the disintegration of boundaries between industrialised nature and human health and the violent re-entry of nature, corrupted by human intervention, into human physiology. With these intra- and extratextual paradigms for

[48] *ibid*, p.443, 439.

[49] Martin McKee, Tim Lang & Jennifer A Roberts, "Deregulating health: policy lessons from the BSE affair" in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 89 (1996), pp.424-426 (p.424).

[50] Patrick van Zwanenberg & Erik Millstone, *BSE: risk, science and governance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198525813.003.0003> [accessed 14 May 2024]. The UK government's controversial decision not to ban the plant growth regulator Alar despite its being outlawed in the US for its alleged carcinogenic properties is one key instance of the "[subordination]" of consumers' health and well-being at the expense of private interests described by van Zwanenberg and Millstone.

reading the poem in mind, the trocar's "[insertion]" or "[denting]" can be understood as a metaphor for these same disastrous incursions into natural processes. The fact that the trocar is "crafted"—artificial, technical and specialised—underscores its role as an instrument of human intervention. That it is described as a "*picnic* trocar" complicates this reading further, implicating human pastoral recreation within the range of incursions the poem records.

Carrying this awareness forward into the stanza, we might retroactively recast the 'sweetness' of the water and the wood as a worldly, material effect of these incursions. Just as Prynne's reading of Herbert's "sweet" in "Love [III]" acknowledges multiple shadow senses—the actual 'sweetness' "to be tasted" at the meal with Love, as well as "a demure and very indirect critique the guest's motives"—so too might we reinterpret the "sweet water" not as a site of lyric contemplation, nor even as water that is not brackish or saline, but as water affected by chemical run-off from the same fields the poem repeatedly invokes. Is its "sweet" taste a byproduct of spraying the "hot gluten" referred to in the stanza, or even a vestige of the "*Gypsum*" of the sequence's title? Reading *Red D Gypsum* with the scrupulousness Prynne applies in his critical prose reveals how its more lyrical moments carry an "indirect critique" of modern agricultural practices and the very direct effect they have on our bodies and our senses.[51] The poem facilitates this kind of reading by refusing to foreclose either a technical or a pastoral interpretation of its language, holding both equivocally.

In contrast, words like "ataraxy" and "benison" and references to "fortune's cavity" preserve lyric language as a foundation that both poem and reader can activate even when the idea of 'sweetness' has been called into question. According to the OED, "ataraxy" entered the English language in 1603, presumably as a humanist recuperation of the Epicurean and Stoic concept of *ἀταραξία* (indifference or imperturbability), and was used in a less specialised way to emphasise a state of tranquillity, outside of the "disturbance of mind or passion".[52] Though

[51] Prynne, *George Herbert, 'Love [III]'*, pp.26-27.

[52] "Ataraxy" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ataraxy_n?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use> [accessed 14 May 2024]. In his 1603 English translation of Montaigne's *Essays*, Giovanni Florio offers the following translation of a line from "An Apology for Raymond Sebond": "Ataraxie […] is the condition of a quiet and setled [sic] life, exempted from the agitations which we receive by the impression of the opinion and knowledge we imagine to have of things". In Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. by J. Florio (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1893), pp.254-255.

not specifically a word we might find in a lyric poem, it nonetheless suggests the psychological and material conditions within which we might expect lyric utterance to unfold: it is most obviously redolent of Wordsworth's definition of poetic thought as "[taking] it origins from emotion recollected in *tranquillity*".[53] More recently, the term has been absorbed into pharmacological discourse, as an alternative name for tranquilisers. One medical writer sketches the pharmacological history of the term thus:

> The word ataraxy became a psychiatric term in 1955 when [neurologist Howard] Fabing [...] named chlorpromazine-like psychotropic drugs "ataraxics" and their action "ataractic" — derived from the Greek adjective *ataraktos* meaning "not disturbed, not excited, without confusion, steady, calm" or from the verb *ataraktein* "to keep calm."[54]

Taken in its pharmacological sense, the word resonates with other medical references throughout *Red D Gypsum*: most immediately, to the "trocar" probing "fortune's cavity". Yet, because it occurs in such proximity to the spaces in which we might expect a lyric subject's "ataraxy" to occur—a "sweet wood" or by "sweet water"—the word cannot shake its more ancient, shadow meaning described above. Indeed, in Book IV of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth's return from Cambridge to the "sweet Valley" of Cockermouth is an integral movement towards his own ataraxic realisation that it is only when "by [...] hindrances | Unthwarted" that we experience "[c]onformity as just that of old | To the end and written spirit of God's works".[55] By tacitly invoking the potential for tranquillity's reification and commodification under capitalism, particularly through privatised pharmaceutical channels, Prynne's poem recalls the central thesis of Adorno's 1957 lecture "On Lyric Poetry and Society". Adorno asserts that "even the solitariness of lyrical language itself is prescribed by an individualistic and ultimately atomistic society."[56] The lecture argues that the more lyric expression insists on

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[53] William Wordsworth, "Wordsworth's Prefaces of 1800 and 1802" in Wordsworth & Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, pp.233-258 (p.251). My emphasis.
[54] Anne E. Caldwell, *Origins of Psychopharmacology: From CPZ to LSD* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1970), pp.150-152.
[55] William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p.422, 430.
[56] Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society" in *Notes to Literature*, vol. I, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen, pp.37-54 (p.38).

its tranquillity, its "having escaped from the weight of material existence […] [and] the coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation", the more it dialectically "becomes a measure of what is false and bad" in that same commodified society.[57] Prynne's invocation of the language of lyric tranquillity throughout *Red D Gypsum* both preserves the lyric fantasy of an existence uncoerced by the mechanisms of capital while revealing that such fantasies are always-already implicated in and mediated by the systems they critique. He compresses the entire spectrum of lyric's complicity with capital into the poem's individual words and phrases.

Returning to the stanza, the image of "fortune's cavity" evokes, in one prosaic sense, a hollowed-out space in the pastoral landscape for the purpose of economic exploitation and the generation of "fortune": a mine, for example, or an irrigation system (in keeping with the text's preoccupation with industrial-scale farming). Re-engaging both the lyric and the medical lexis of the text, it also simultaneously conjures the personified avatar of luck and prosperity, Fortuna (whose name lies behind the English "fortune"), either wounded or being operated upon. In invoking this Boethian figure, however temporarily, *Red D Gypsum* partakes in the lyric practice of conjuring a personification of an emotion or concept from whom the lyric speaker can learn some important lesson about themselves or the world.[58] Throughout *Red D Gypsum*, Prynne maintains the potential of stock lyric forms and tropes, which populate the poem and offer vectors of lyric energy, even if they can only exist in fleeting, compromised or debased states, or are elsewhere reified into commodities or other forms of economic value.

This stanza is not anomalous. *Red D Gypsum* consistently invokes specialised terminology which originates in lyric diction. One stanza refers to "Broca's lumen", which, as Jay Basu observes in his commentary on the poem, refers to "one of the two brain sections which deal with language", and constitutes one of the "physiological structures and processes over which we have little or no conscious control [yet which form] the conditions for the existence of […] 'consciousness' or the imagination" which the poem explores.[59] In anatomy,

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[57] *ibid*, pp.39-40.

[58] To take an immanent example, Herbert's "Love [III]" also deploys this technique

[59] Prynne, *Poems*, p.445. Jay Basu, "The Red Shift: Trekking J. H. Prynne's *Red D Gypsum*" in *Cambridge Quarterly*, 30:1 (2001), pp.19-36 (p.28).

lumens are any of the body's tubular cavities, including those which provide vascular flow to the brain. Yet the Latin *lumen* is divine or poetic light, whose ray- or tuber-like conception in both the classical world and the Renaissance provides the basis for its invocation in the 'lumens' of medical discourse. This same analogy also provides the basis for the use of lumen in botany to refer to the bounded cavity within the walls of a plant cell. *Red D Gypsum* is saturated with such botanical lumens, like the "stolon rising" in the stanza before this one or the "two-way lignin threads" which "coalesce" later on.[60] Prynne's use of "lumen" in the poem offers an instance in which the history of a language and the webs of semantic and metaphorical reference upon which it depends are collapsed into one word, in a manner redolent of Adorno's argument that works of art ask us to "become conscious of the history immanently sedimented in them."[61] It also constitutes a moment where poetic language becomes a point of convergence between the human body and the nonhuman world of plant biology, emphasising how lyric offers a means of sympathetic identification which transcends the narrow confines of both individual subjectivity and humanity, albeit one mediated through human knowledge and perception. One medical article explains that the Broca's area of the brain is responsible for "mediating abstract word acquisition, storage and access".[62] Prynne's invocation of its "lumen", a feature whose name has come into currency through the complex chain of metaphorical analogies given above, offers a snapshot of the "mediating" linguistic processes immanent to the Broca's area itself and through which we arrive at specialist knowledge by way of analogy with the lyrical and poetic.

Far from presenting lyric language and lyric recollection as subordinated to the technical, Prynne's lexical choices in *Red D Gypsum* are often lyrical *before* they are technical. His language illuminates how the abstracted, specialised language of both financialised capitalism and modern science (and the forms of knowledge which attend them) draws its signifying power from the latent potential of lyric, thereby revealing how lyric and poetic

[60] Prynne, *Poems*, p.439, 443.
[61] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p.85.
[62] Daria Gnedykh et al., "Broca's area involvement in abstract and concrete word acquisition: tDCS evidence" in *Neurobiology of Learning and Memory*, 192 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nlm.2022.107622> [accessed 15 May 2024].

artifice more generally structure and condition our perception. For Prynne, lyric provides a bedrock that stabilises other, more specialised modes of thinking, speaking or seeing. Through this stabilising process, the lyric bedrock is then allowed to re-signify, informing our perception of the world even at some temporal distance. This process enacts Prynne's stated desire to "establish relations […] with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usages" by enshrining within individual words their diachronic history, so that we see, hear and *recognise* the 1603 conception of "ataraxy" in the poem, even when its surrounding context impels us to consider its modern medical usage.[63] As in 1969's "Mouth Open", lyric's "purest sound" remains bracketed off from the fundament of "the single || earth" (it is unable to offer direct perceptual access to it), but it is still ontologically separate from the other 'names' which seek to dominate and instrumentalise the particularity of the world and the other.[64]

Lyric's "purest sound" manifests not only in its ability to resonate across the historical matrix of language, but also in its capacity to structure our perceiving of the world according to a culturally conditioned acoustic framework. I will deal with Prynne's idiosyncratic theory of poetic sound more thoroughly in the next section, but for now I wish to explicate how the stanza above engages with our conditioned expectations of lyric's sonic beauty to shape how we experience the poem's world. Just as Prynne emphasises the semantic and etymological properties of language as channels through which the world is disclosed to us, so too does he emphasise the *sound* of poetic language as an optic in its own right. This presentation of poetic sound is part of what Alex Latter calls Prynne's presentation of poetry's "false position" in relation to the world.[65] Even if poetry's acoustic play is merely a case of "[touching] up the fender hardly" (that is, it is superficially cosmetic), it is nonetheless fundamental to how we perceive the poem and the material it contains. Basu writes of *Red D Gypsum*'s "immediate *affective* quality", the product of "the sheer beauty of the strings of vocables […] the music of the words […] the persistent undercurrent of play with near-echo and internal rhyme in the

[63] Prynne, epigraph in Riley, *Reader*, n.p.
[64] Prynne, *Poems*, p.61.
[65] Latter, "'Scheming for the possible world'".

poem."[66] Looking at the stanza above, "[s]ilent pads slide to the front, merely insinuate afresh | these alarm touches, lees in rack" suggests in part the movement of a piece of agricultural machinery, complete with a "rack" and equipped with "pads" revolving on some sort of conveyor system. However, the strongly sibilant character of the lines combines with the dense patterning of open vowels and the internal rhyming of "merely […] | […] these […] lees" to render what would otherwise be an exceedingly banal (or, in light of Britain's deleterious agricultural practices in the 1980s and 1990s, exceedingly dangerous) process in terms that are self-consciously musical.

In another stanza, the "play with near-echo" Basu traces in *Red D Gypsum* emerges deeply embedded within an especially beautiful "string of vocables":

> Failing pasture water mallows mostly override a view
> in parted stipules by allowance freshly done. Flow
> flow my phloem dear ones, fibre life thickens limpid
> blue aglets to mind your step or stop to look notable
> avernus lee-side of a post.[67]

As Prynne wrote in a letter to fellow poet Douglas Oliver on 30 November 1987:

> There is still a shimmer about the durable latency of common rhymes,
> after so much has been done and undone, as if providence itself
> resided within these hazards of phonetic accident.[68]

The lines quoted above are saturated with "these hazards of phonetic accident" and the "providence" which might reside within them, from the double repetition of "[f]low" and its recurrence in the first syllable of "phloem" (the vascular tissue in plants responsible for distributing glucose—another *lumen* recorded by the text), to the echo of "mallows" in "allowance" and "done" in "ones". "Flow | flow my phloem" directly invokes the accompanying madrigal to John Dowland's lute ayre, "Flow my teares" ("[f]low my teares fall from your springs | Exilde for euer: Let mee morne").[69] However, it relocates Dowland's musical

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[66] Basu, "The Red Shift", p.21. Original emphasis.
[67] Prynne, *Poems*, p.443.
[68] J. H. Prynne, letter to Douglas Oliver, 30 November 1987, in *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne*, p.113.
[69] John Dowland, *The second booke of Songs and Ayres, of 2.4 and 5. parts: With Tableture for the Lute or Orpherian, with the Violl de Gamba* (London: Thomas Este, the assigne of Thomas Morley, 1600), p.4.

expression of melancholic subjectivity to the imagined consciousness of a plant commanding its phloem to distribute nutrients; Prynne patterns this command according to our prosodic expectations of an Elizabethan song.[70] At this point in the poem, Prynne posits the lyric voice as a vehicle for imaginative perceptual extension into the agricultural and biological systems the poem is preoccupied with: here, poetic language offers a means of sympathetic identification outside of the boundaries of the human.

The acoustic elements I have just examined are all part of what Prynne calls the "shimmer" of lyric language. Even Prynne, resolutely materialist and at times deeply cynical in his critiques and analyses of poetic language, wishes to show us how the beguiling and "[hazardous]" 'sweetness' of the lyric as a structure for perceiving and writing about the world affects him, and leads him to believe (however momentarily) in rhyme and other acoustic features in poetry as a form of linguistic destiny: as if they were always meant to occur, rather than being mere "phonetic [accidents]" which a common literary culture has invested with meaning. Read by Prynne as a "shimmer", rhyme is delicate and transient, an instance of resonance wherein language becomes "a mythic likeness resting on the earth", as Prynne wrote in an early review of Olson's *Maximus* in 1968.[71] Like the "glucose shimmered sky" of *Red D Gypsum*, rhyme is a moment in which a conceptual framework we have developed for understanding some aspect of the world comes forth to make us perceive something as beautiful or 'lyrical'.[72] Much like the agricultural processes the sequence describes, it

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[70] Prynne's engagement with Dowland has been sustained. Most recently, a 2020 pamphlet, *Aquatic Hocquets*, begins with an epigraph taken from *The second booke of Songs and Ayres*: "Though all my wares bee trash | the hart is true". J. H. Prynne, *Aquatic Hocquets* (Cambridge: Face Press, 2020), n.p. More significant for our purposes is Prynne's 2017 commentary on Dowland's "I Saw My Lady Weepe", in which he argues that the reportage in the lyric speaker's address ("I saw my lady weep | And Sorrow proud to be advanced so") entails a complex equivocation between observing his subject's grief, sympathetically identifying with it and then mediating its emotional content to the reader/listener: "[T]he poet speaks *about* and finally *to* [the subject] mediation in address to us, his readers/hearers; this is, no doubt, the deliberate/intuitive complication of fictional actuality". In so doing, the speaker's subjectivity is simultaneously "closely involved in [the subject's] life experience" while also held out beyond "some outside margin", "[transferring]" a "semblance" of his subject's emotional life "into art". In *Red D Gypsum*, Prynne employs an allusion to Dowland to enact a similar strategy for the transference and mediation of subjectivity: the melancholic affect tied to human grief in "Flow my teares" is displaced onto plant biology, eroding any insular sense of emotional privacy by refracting emotional content back into the nonhuman world. J. H. Prynne, "Notes on 'I Saw My Lady Weepe'" in *Journal of Foreign Languages and Cultures*, 1:1 (2017), pp.103-108 (p.105).

[71] Prynne, "Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems* IV, V, VI", p.66.

[72] Prynne, *Poems*, p.435.

constitutes an instance of humanity's incursion into the world. It is a surface phenomenon wherein the aesthetic qualities of language suddenly step forth and ask us to pay attention to lyric as the product of deeper, historically-authenticated processes, and to attend to the power it has in shaping how we perceive the world around us, so that we are able to see and hear the 'sweetness' in the operation of farming equipment.

II – Reading and hearing *Orchard* (2020)

For Prynne, any invocation of lyric necessarily begets the question: how can it avoid indulging in the lie that it is a fully subjective expression of interiority, and instead acknowledge its material character, its connection to the "[structures]", "systems" and "[frameworks] of a given culture and society (to borrow key terms from *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*)?[73] Prynne's thinking on this topic has changed in important ways over the course of his career, from the polemical notes and letters on language and prosody in *The English Intelligencer*, through to his more recent pamphlet-length commentaries on poetry. One factor which has remained persistent across his career, as the gloss of "sweetly" in the 2011 Herbert commentary and my reading of *Red D Gypsum* suggest, is the ethical imperative for lyric language to remain attuned to the historical and material conditions of the world, be these connected with privatised agriculture, pharmaceuticals or plant biology. Crucially, however, Prynne does not believe that language emerges organically from those material conditions, as is implicit in the idealist fantasy of the *etumos logos*, or in the ideogrammic and glyphic preoccupations of Pound and Olson, where words are imagined as natural extensions of objects and forces. For Prynne, the use of "sweet" in a poem about agricultural practices is able to equivocate between its culturally-authenticated, lyrical meaning, a more worldly or material sense derived from the actual taste of organic matter treated by modern agrochemical processes, and even the negation of lyrical 'sweetness' altogether, if the reader locates an "indirect critique" buried within the historical sediment of the word.[74]

[73] Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p.14.
[74] Prynne, *George Herbert, 'Love [III]'*, p.27.

Beyond this, however, Prynne has consistently emphasised lyric's porous, equivocal and participatory nature. Multiple subjectivities, vantage points and historical positions are always dispersed within it. In his book-length commentary on Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper", *Field Notes*, Prynne argues that Wordsworth's lyric articulates the precise point or "axis" at which the self encounters the world:

> Thus [...] it may be contended that this kind of lyric poem is [...] not a generalising instrument, but is working along the axis between the individual and the universal, that primal feeling strikes most fully and deeply when unmediated by 'thick' interpretation, and that instantly to provide an explanatory context would reduce the moment to a mere symptom or record-keeping.[75]

Beyond offering an exculpation of lyric's privileged status as a form of writing that cannot be reduced by the "explanatory context" of "'thick' interpretation", Prynne's idiosyncratic reading of "The Solitary Reaper" demonstrates how the poem mediates between "the individual and the universal" through a complex, phenomenological web of lyric affect. He observes that the "mention of the melancholy in [the reaper's] song seems at once to colour [Wordsworth's] own; as if it is the cadences of what she sings and he hears that are the full source of the prevailing melancholy aspect, inferred into the theme of her song about which he can make only his fanciful guesses."[76] This web of affect involves the disintegration of the boundaries of the subject through lyric language as the 'melancholic affect' in the poem passes through a chain of mediators. In giving utterance to her melancholy, the reaper externalises it, so that it becomes a perceivable quality in its own right ("the Vale profound | Is overflowing with the sound"), to be parsed by the Wordsworthian speaker. Finally, it is then communicated to the reader, who is commanded to attend to the conjured image of the reaper, and listen to her song insofar as it can be retrieved from Wordsworth's lyric:[77]

> Behold her, single in the field,
> Yon solitary Highland Lass!
> Reaping and singing by herself;
> Stop here, or gently pass!

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[75] J. H. Prynne, *Field Notes: "The Solitary Reaper" and Others* (Cambridge: self-published, 2007), p.37.
[76] *ibid*, p.36.
[77] William Wordsworth, *Poems, in two volumes*, vol. II (London: Longman, Hurst, Beer & Orme, 1807), p.11.

> Alone she cuts, and binds the grain,
> And sings a melancholy strain;
> O listen! for Vale profound
> Is overflowing with the sound.[78]

Prynne adds an important nuance to this, though. Crucially—as the turning point in the poem's third stanza reveals ("[w]ill no one tell me what she sings?")—Wordsworth cannot understand the prose sense of the reaper's song (because it is in Gaelic). Beyond intuiting an overarching sense of its melancholy, he is left only able to make "fanciful guesses" about the precise nature of its meaningful content ("Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow | For old, unhappy, far-off things, | And battles long ago").[79] As Prynne writes elsewhere in *Field Notes*, the result of the speaker's encounter with the reaper entails his,

> [hearing] the sound of language […] but his response processing encounters faulty or absent decoding devices in his memory store [he does not know the language]. He knows this is language that he hears, as well as musical sound and human singing, but his auditory horizon falls short of the domain of signifying text […] In this fashion he hears a patterned absence of signification.[80]

It is tempting to co-opt Prynne's parsing of the reaper's song as "a patterned absence of signification" as a hermeneutic key to unlocking his late lyric sequences. Doing so entails some sleight of hand: Prynne's poetry is still in English, so (as Anglophones) we do not encounter precisely the same problems with our linguistic "memory store" that the speaker of "The Solitary Reaper" does. Nonetheless, the extent of syntactic and semantic breakage in his very late poems might be read as an attempt by Prynne to reproduce the same sort of perceptual, affective and cognitive experience within his readers. We can certainly see how the following poem, "Medlar" from 2020's *Orchard* (the sequence upon which this section focusses), stages an encounter with language which we *know* to be language (and which, through its sprung rhythm, produces a close poetic analogy of "musical sound" if we read it aloud), yet which

[78] *ibid*.
[79] *ibid*, p.12.
[80] Prynne, *Field Notes*, p.45.

"falls short of the domain of signifying text" because of the absence of grammatical and connective linkage between its component words, which are left as a paratactic assemblage:

> hold hard not to meddle better medium
> get addle larboard instead tell
> when said deal me, sold wedded
> lark flown soon apron morning
> aim led along dollar open win
> demean lament don't go innocent[81]

Beyond fragmentary cues which signal lyricism—the departed lark, the momentary incursion of a first-person subject (the "me" of line three), the mention of lament, and what reads as a (somewhat creepy) apostrophic appeal to a loved one to stay ("don't go innocent")—there is not much in this poem that may be said to bring it into the realm of a coherent, "signifying text", at least in any linear fashion. However, merely reducing a poem like this to "a patterned absence of signification" overlooks a critical aspect of Prynne's argument in *Field Notes*: that, despite his lack of access to the actual prose sense of the song, the Wordsworthian speaker is able to perceive and imaginatively reconstruct some of the inner life of the reaper (she sings of either "battles long ago" or "some more humble lay", "natural sorrow, loss, or pain") according to the dispersal of historical and material content in the *sound* of the words she sings, and *how* these impress upon his mind's ear.[82]

This section takes Prynne's reading of Wordsworth's lyric as "working along the axis between the individual and the universal" as its starting point. Through a close reading of *Orchard*, I explore how Prynne's recent poetry is a space where perceptual details and fragments of language are always displaced into multiple mediating systems. *Orchard*'s language is always in flux: it is constantly being recirculated not only into webs of its own etymological history but also into complex, international networks of trade, transit, cultivation and production. Just as Wordsworth's reaper's song, in Prynne's reading, contains and counts the cost of its own historicity and its inextricable connection to the reaper's labour, so too does *Orchard* reveal the ways in which histories of labour, migration, trade and colonial expansion

[81] Prynne, *Orchard*, n.p.
[82] Wordsworth, *Poems, in two volumes*, p.12.

are inscribed in its language. I demonstrate how *Orchard* enacts this through a variation of the same processes Prynne identified in his reading of "The Solitary Reaper". In this approach, a reader or listener, experientially attuned to the form of text, can reconstruct its material and historical context—not through the solipsistic and "fanciful guesses" of Wordsworth's speaker, but by properly historicising the text and unpacking the layers of mediation and abstraction it contains. *Orchard* extends Prynne's attempts "to establish relations […] with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usages; and thereby with the reader's own position within this world" by showing how our "shifted", historical relationships with the world are disclosed by *hearing* poetic language with what Prynne calls in a crucial late period lecture our 'mental ears'.[83] This is a critical position which involves becoming conscious of how the abstractions of etymological research, linguistic history and other forms of book-learning come into contact with those features of the poem that are ostensibly more immanently and directly perceivable, particularly sonic or 'musical' features, such as rhyme, consonance and assonance.

I have chosen *Orchard* because it is characteristic of a mode Prynne's post-2016 poetry often deploys, recently characterised by Luke Roberts as employing,

> a taut musical exuberance which [allows Prynne] to find new exploratory pathways in the holding space of language. The poems [have] no stable subject matter, but [grapple] painfully and playfully with fundamental precepts of composition: what happens when one word is placed next to another. These poems are 'difficult', sure, but they're not puzzles to solve […] They're more like acoustic arguments, mute frenzies of thought, tonal games of hide-and-seek with grammar.[84]

Roberts's analysis makes some good points, but without some qualifications, it risks reading Prynne's recent poetry as a return to the archly modernist conception of meaning as immanent to the formal or surface features of a language. We are not far here from Olson's belief that Mayan glyphs were universally and phenomenologically accessible or—more problematically—from Pound's conviction that Chinese radicals could be intuitively

[83] Prynne, epigraph, in Riley, *Reader*, n.p.
[84] Luke Roberts, "Raspberries" in *Sidecar* (2024), <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/raspberries> [accessed 3 September 2024].

understood by the 'right sort' of readers. Roberts's approach also presumes a specific Anglophone speaking community, which is privileged in its ability to decode English syntax, grammar and intonation. In contrast, I argue that while *Orchard* does consist of taut musical structures, its poems embed complex systems of research and abstraction beneath this surface. These systems often transcend the confines of Britain and can be accessed by any reader willing to engage with the sequence's own set of "'rules'" and "[processes]", to use Prynne's terminology from *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*.[85] Through my reading of *Orchard*, I will demonstrate that the "taut musical exuberance" of Prynne's recent poetry is emphatically an instrument of research, enabling etymological depths, argumentative tensions and broader connections to emerge through the act of speaking and hearing the poem. To see meaning as immanent to form in this late work would be to succumb to its "hazards of phonetic accident".[86]

First, I will establish some key details about *Orchard* that are necessary for thinking about how it enacts the mediation of perception through its language. The collection comprises 25 poems, all named after fruit, and arranged in the manner of a book of emblems, or a Victorian botany or gardening book. Prynne's collection has an especially close connection to Scottish gardener Charles McIntosh's 1839 horticultural and pomological almanac *The Orchard*: not just in name, or in range of fruit covered, but also in a shared attempt by both texts to historicise fruit, tracing the origins of their domestication and cultivation and mapping the complex networks of their trade and transit.[87]

In its attempts to develop a positivist, scientific account of the botanical history and character of fruit, McIntosh's book is implicitly in service of what Sonja Dümpelmann refers to as "imperial economic development and expansion through the scientific study and acclimatisation of plants", wherein "[b]otanists, plant hunters, explorers, and gardeners contributed to [...] imperial [projects], regardless of their varying individual motivations and

[85] Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p.15. Prynne implies that *all* poems enshrine their own set of rules, "[tasks]" and processes. He argues that reading poetry entails at least a basic willingness to accept the invitation to follow these, in pursuit of "strenuous delight". *ibid.*

[86] Prynne, letter to Douglas Oliver, 30 November 1987, in *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne*, p.113.

[87] Like Prynne's sequence, McIntosh's book is divided into chapters focussing on single fruit: both texts contain apples, cherries, currants, figs, peaches, nectarines, and several other instances of overlap.

degrees of political awareness."[88] McIntosh himself in the introduction to *The Orchard* affirms his own conception of pomology as a quest for "perfection" in cultivation: it is an "inductive science" predicated on "[selecting] the best sorts [of fruit] from the many inferior ones".[89] In invoking texts like McIntosh's *The Orchard*, Prynne is already circulating *Orchard*'s poems into a specific textual field of *motivated* perspectives on the fruit he nominally takes as his subject. These perspectives entail the instrumentalisation of fruit as a means of modifying nature, while also ratifying imperial dominance through control over fruit's cultivation and trade. In Adornian terms, some of the 'truth content' of Prynne's *Orchard* lies in its indexing of the linguistic, epistemological and material processes through which "[n]ature […] becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification" under the positivist model of perception unwittingly reproduced by individuals like McIntosh, by revealing how both botanical and horticultural knowledge disclose ideological and economic weight.[90]

Insofar as these poems adopt the direct, sensuous apprehension of fruit as a position contained in the text, this is almost always set against the displacement of that apprehension into details of *how* that fruit is trafficked to us, either literally (via haulage and trade), or figuratively (through their representations in literature, or through texts like McIntosh's). Hence, in the poem "Cherry", there is a direct appeal to the cherry's colour ("hue crimson"), and an evaluative, lyrical appeal ("heaven-sent").[91] However, these only occur after an opening reference to something (perhaps the fruit) being "ready forever to travel", suggesting the perpetual motion of a global supply chain.[92] In "Apple", the nautical aspects of that supply chain are invoked explicitly. Amid perceptual details of the apple's "russet" hue, and morphological details of its "core" and "pip", Prynne refers to "credit lax tonnage" and "freight rising".[93] As the Roman Empire expanded across Western and Northern Europe, it brought the apples it first cultivated in Syria to its colonies, a movement which paralleled the westward

[88] Sonja Dümpelmann, "Introduction" in *A Cultural History of Gardens in the Age of Empire*, ed. by Sonja Dümpelmann (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp.1-36 (p.5).
[89] Charles McIntosh, *The Orchard* (London: William S Orr & Co., 1839), p.2.
[90] Adorno & Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.6.
[91] Prynne, *Orchard*, n.p.
[92] *ibid*.
[93] *ibid*.

dispersal of Latin and the development of Vulgar Latin in the peripheries of the Empire. Hence, "Apple" is saturated with strings of Latinate English words: "peridot rebate infused | factor credit lax tonnage".[94] The OED notes that "tonnage", via 'tun', derives from the Vulgar Latin *tunna*, which in turn was cognate with a Proto-Celtic word from which the Irish and Gaelic *tunna* ('cask') derive.[95] Prynne collapses the western frontier of Roman expansion into a single word (fittingly placed at the outer limit of this particular Latinate cluster, before the Teutonic "wide"), whose etymological history reveals a time when peripheral Latin speakers interacted with Goidelic-speaking communities and subjugated Brythonic-speaking ones. "[R]uffle effect", the phrase which opens the poem's second line, is phonologically and orthographically very close to 'ripple effect' (all that separates them is an anagram of "pip", a word found elsewhere in the poem), a useful linguistic way of describing the dispersal of Latin across Europe and North Africa. The term's macroeconomic sense reflects the interconnectedness of the economic systems and supply chains *Orchard* records, emphasising how small disruptions in distribution or dips in expenditure can have disastrous effects for economies and economic subjects living downstream of these fluctuations.

Many of *Orchard*'s other poems also reference the cultivation history of the fruit they focus on.[96] "Damson" contains the formulation "mine *damask* question", linking (through a shared etymological root) the colour of the damson and its name with Damascus, the city in which the Romans first cultivated them. "Apricot" refers to the fruit's "arabic [sic]" origin. Tracing "arabic" back to its root in عرب reveals a range of meanings, including 'to state, to declare' and 'to lop, to prune; to scarify and cauterise'. Prynne engages with the full extent of this multiplicity: within "arabic", he locates the text's preoccupation with the proliferation and externalisation of language—its spread and transformation over time through repeated 'declarations'—while also tracing the origin of many of the horticultural practices that became commonplace in Western Europe during the Renaissance (such as specific methods of

[94] *ibid.*
[95] "Tun" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/tun_n1?tab=etymology&tl=true> [accessed 10 September 2024].
[96] The details of these fruits' origins are extensively documented in Charles McIntosh's *The Orchard*, too. McIntosh, *The Orchard*, p.333 (the cultivation of damsons in Damascus); pp.71-72 (the history of apricots, including the Arabic etymology of the name).

pruning and grafting) in the Arab Agricultural Revolution (particularly in texts like the 9th- or 10th-century *al-Filāḥa al-Nabaṭiyya*). Moreover, the alternative sense of عرب as 'to scarify and cauterise' invokes the horrendous bodily effects of the systematic drone-based and chemical warfare that has defined British and American military interventions in the Islamic Middle East since the Gulf War. The poem's final line includes the formulation "cutaneous espalier", which combines this medical lexis of cauterised skin (perhaps held together by a gauze) with the horticultural process of training branches along a lattice. Elsewhere in the sequence, the self's imbrication in economic systems is tacitly signalled. In the "Medlar" poem quoted above, the phrase "deal me" solicits in the mind's ear an absent 'in', suggesting the subject's entry into a poker game.[97] By specifically focussing on fruit as a vector for the self's imbrication in a complex network of consumption, production, warfare, exchange and shipping, *Orchard* deepens and extends Drew Milne's reading of Prynne's 1969 lyric "Foot and Mouth" as a poem which shows how the encounter with food always "involves participation in the manoeuvres of capital and commodity production", and that "[t]he individual stands not on a simple ground in relation to food, but feeds off the second nature of capitalism."[98] In *Orchard*, the sensuous perceptual encounter with fruit always opens outwards to a vast array of deep economic, imperial, militaristic and linguistic structures which transcend far beyond Britain's borders.

As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing argues, supply chains (such as those tacitly evoked in *Orchard*) do not just move goods: they "[translate] values produced in quite varied circumstances into capitalist inventory", whose legibility means that vendors and consumers "[are] able to ignore the labour and environmental conditions through which [...] products are made", which may very well include violence.[99] Prynne's sequence aligns closely with this: it gestures to the processes by which organic matter is converted into capitalist inventory, while its etymological excavations subtly trace the histories of violence underpinning these

[97] Prynne, *Orchard*, n.p.
[98] Drew Milne, "Speculative assertions: notes towards reading the poetry of J. H. Prynne" (2001), <https://www.academia.edu/113767856/Speculative_assertions_notes_towards_reading_the_poetry_of_J_H_Prynne> [accessed 3 September 2024], p.12. Also available as Drew Milne, "Speculative Assertions: Reading J. H. Prynne's *Poems*" in *Parataxis: Modernism & Modern Writing*, 10 (2001), pp.67-86.
[99] Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), p.64.

processes. Yet, just as Tsing argues that supply chains deliberately obscure these conditions from view, *Orchard* keeps them submerged, rendering their full extent perceptible only in fragments and linguistic residues.

But it is not only through these moments of shifted register and etymological texture that *Orchard*'s language mediates these material, historical and ideological frameworks. The sequence also asks us to 'hear' this latent content as it is encoded in the sonorous qualities of its language. To return to *Field Notes*, a crucial element of "The Solitary Reaper" for Prynne is that the *sound* of the reaper's song allows Wordsworth's subject to speculate on the material and historical conditions from which its language and melody emerged. In recent years, Prynne has developed an idiosyncratic critical position on poetic sound as a medium for conveying language's etymological history, not as something immanent to the material or formal features of language, but as something which can be 'researched' and investigated through that sound. His most important statements (and, in his words, "untested [conjectures]") on this position come from a 2009 lecture, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work".[100] For Prynne, reading with 'mental ears' is an "[intensely] hybrid" critical position.[101] It is not about analysing poetry as an exercise in "performative sonority", nor is it about merely analysing the semantic content of the poem ("the paramount abstraction of inferred ideas and beliefs"). Rather, it is about understanding poetic language as a medium which intrinsically equivocates between these poles, wherein "phonological analysis of poetic speech use may disclose base-level rule patterns and their historical evolutionary forms".[102] My own conjecture above that the "deal me" in "Medlar" solicits an absent 'in' is an example of my own mental ears responding to Prynne's poetry, wherein (as Prynne writes in the essay), a particular "pattern by varied repetition [has captured] the speech habits of interior and sociable language use, and [profiled it] into the formats of record that [has re-emerged] into a reader's [my own] vicarious experience".[103]

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[100] J. H. Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work" in *Chicago Review*, 55:1 (2010), pp.126-157 (p.134).
[101] *ibid*, p.133.
[102] *ibid*, p.133, 132.
[103] *ibid*, p.129.

In "Mental Ears", Prynne gives a detailed reading of the morphology of end-stopped words in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", concluding:

> these risky elaborations borrow formal phonological features in order to analyse […] a surmised evolutionary process in language history which gives Wordsworth's text some of its complicated sense of the past in the present and future […] These features are [… not] adventitious sound symbolism, or association of semantic values with surface features; they are within the structure and history of English as an evolved system, […] selected here for a mutually reinforcing, if latent, prominence: in other words, they are *motivated.* […] [I]f the underlying textual features exist it is because poets are tuned into their language structures to an unusual degree of linguistic susceptibility. Such features are neither invented nor discovered, they are disclosed.[104]

In this conception, "the past" is always brought forth in poetic language, even without the conscious will of the poet, because poetic language is the medium through which the various strata of language as an "evolved system" (which develop according to the linguistic practices of a speaking and writing community over time) "[disclose]" themselves in the text. As Prynne's analysis of end-stops and preterites in "Tintern Abbey" demonstrates, it is often through the discrete morphological units of individual words that such acts of historical "[disclosure]" take place. For Prynne, poetic language must always be understood as connected to the various historical forms of perception and knowledge which have fed into and undergirded "English as an evolved system". His poetry calls back to language's "layers of shifted but recognisable usages" at a morphological level, and, in so doing, it is an index of discrete but "mutually reinforcing" historical-linguistic positions which mediate the perceptual claims they resonate with in the text. For the Olson of "Projective Verse", "the syllable" was "the smallest particle of all", but it was linked inextricably and monolithically to "the sense which [it] composed".[105] For the Prynne of "Mental Ears", morphemes and other particles are indexical of multiple, equivocal senses and perspectives, ultimately derived from multiple shifting historical positions.

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[104] *ibid*, pp.137-138. Original emphasis.

[105] Olson, *Collected Prose*, p.241.

Orchard is an especially good text to read with mental ears since it seems, from its outset, to invoke an orality that is explicitly historical. The sequence's epigraph comes from an epistolary country house poem called "Ode to Master Anthony Stafford, to Hasten him into the Country", by a minor 17th-century poet, Thomas Randolph. Prynne cites only two lines from Randolph's poem: "No fruit shall 'scape | Our palates, from the damson to the grape".[106] With their promise of unrestricted consumption of fruit, but only among select individuals belonging to a particular political and social *milieu* (Randolph's epistle is motivated by a desire to draw Sir Anthony Stafford away from the "city wits that are | Almost at civil war", and back to the "old [s]implicity" of his estate), these lines clearly speak to the social and economic concerns I invoked earlier in this discussion.[107] To what extent does the indulgence of Randolph's speaker and Sir Anthony Stafford in the English countryside both draw upon and elide an exploitative network of cultivation, horticultural science and transportation that extends beyond Stafford's estate in Northamptonshire and even beyond the borders of Britain? Randolph's poem unsurprisingly spends its duration adumbrating the sensuous pleasures that await Stafford in the country, at the expense of any georgic detail relating to the systems which enable and produce those pleasures. Focussing on Ben Jonson's poem "To Penshurst", Liz Bellamy argues that country house poems emphasise "the skill and knowledge of the landowner collector in accumulating appropriate varieties [of fruit] that can extend the season, rather than the physical effort of the gardener in subjugating nature."[108] Randolph's poem emphatically celebrates "pastoral abundance", which intrinsically elides "georgic labour".[109] *Orchard* recuperates the networks of production and consumption which are submerged in poems like Randolph's or Jonson's, lyrics which have lost their connection to material reality and no longer successfully "[work] along the axis between the individual and the universal".[110]

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[106] Thomas Randolph, "Ode To Master Anthony Stafford, to hasten him into the Country" in *Specimens of the Early English Poets*, ed. by George Ellis, vol. III, pp.211-217 (p.213).
[107] *ibid*, p.211.
[108] Liz Bellamy, *The Language of Fruit: Literature and Horticulture in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), p.193.
[109] *ibid*.
[110] Prynne, *Field Notes*, p.37.

It is important to emphasise these extratextual links—including those to McIntosh's *The Orchard*—as they illuminate the extensive bodies of allusion and research underpinning the oral and auditory dimensions of Prynne's sequence. In turn, they reveal how much it relies on extratextual systems which complicate an overly formalist reading of its musical immanence. But to spend too long examining the allusive resonance of the epigraph would be to resort to what Prynne calls in "Mental Ears" the "abstraction of inferred ideas and beliefs".[111] Instead, I want to focus on how the epigraph's suggestion of a totality experienced on the "palate" connects with the sequence's preoccupation with letting no words or morphological particles "'scape" from the indexes of language embedded within each of its poems. *Orchard*'s main etymological technique is invoking the name of each poem's titular fruit in different morphological, semantic, allusive and acoustic configurations in the body of each poem. Here, for example, is the "Prune" poem in full:

> whisper birch unified run more fast incised
> dry-black syrup wisdom, prism trim
> secant prudent loose to lose dune
> unspoken acute release runic in
> prime is one rutile vigour reclaim
> bud leasehold fold lain down rain[112]

Different morphological and acoustic elements of the word "prune" are refracted, "prism"-like, throughout the poem, via fragmentation, recombination and partial anagram. To briefly divide these into three sets: "**ru**n", "**ru**nic", "**ru**tile"; "**pr**ism", "**pr**udent", "**pr**ime"; and "**un**ified", "**un**spoken". This is a technique repeated throughout *Orchard*. To return to "Medlar" (quoted in full above), "dollar", "lament", "deal me", "medium", "meddle" and "demean" all partially reconfigure the titular fruit within their constituent letters in different ways, with the latter two ultimately leading back to the Proto-Indo-European root **mey* (to exchange, interchange, or change). The root here explicitly underscores the etymological processes by which Prynne circulates language around a network of shifting derivations in the poem.[113]

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[111] Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work", p.132.
[112] Prynne, *Orchard*, n.p.
[113] *ibid.*

In another essay on poetic language and etymology, "Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words", Prynne gives a speculative reading of William Blake's use of anagram in "The Tiger", stating that,

> The burden of the tiger-poem is set out in a first line which commences the enquiry into symmetry: one shape reflecting or reflected in another so that about some median point or axis they display inverse formal matching [...] The ‹tig› of "tiger" is within the letters of "bright"; if the /r/ of "bright" is permitted to stand in its transferred context as a vocalic /r/, then the whole of "tiger" in acoustic form can be recombined from the letters of "bright [...] What joins these outer elements is the median word "burning": in one direction the action of this verb tends to bright, and in the other it tends out from, or back to, "tiger": the fearsome creature is at least half-created [...] across the axis of symmetry, from "bright" [...] This must seem at very least a desperately recondite and obscure manoeuvre of "chasing the letter", and I blush slightly to advance it.[114]

As in his letter to Douglas Oliver from 1987, with its suggestion that "providence" rests in the "durable latency of common rhymes", Prynne here is bashful about extracting so much meaning from the sheer linguistic artifice of an anagram. However, his description of how language creates a "reflecting [...] median point or axis [...] of symmetry" which shapes meaning in the poem and structures his own perception of Blake's text is instructive in relation to *Orchard*.[115] The sequence employs the sound of poetic language as a "prism" through which knowledge and material, social and linguistic histories are focalised and disclosed. Prynne uses combinations of syllables and phonetic and morphological particles to forge connections in argument and this, in turn, allows the reader to experience the abstractions of his research on her tongue and hear it in her ears, in a way which creates a sensuous and ecstatic point of contact between the realms of phenomenological immersion and mediated systems of knowledge. *Orchard* makes us aware of language's reliance on a limited set of modular units—clusters of phonemes, morphemes and letters—which originate in a diverse, branching history of linguistic development across multiple languages, including Latin, the Teutonic languages,

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[114] J. H. Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words: The William Matthews Lectures 1992 Delivered at Birkbeck College, London* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993), p.25.
[115] Prynne, *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne*, p.113.

Proto-Celtic, and Arabic, all of which have all fed into "the structure and history of English as an evolved system".[116] Simultaneously, it also brings those units directly into our mouths, so we can feel their syllables on our "palates" (as semi-abstract, linguistic substitutes for the fruit named on each page) and be surprised with just how many re-combinations are possible.

In "Prune" (quoted above), "incised", "prism" and "secant" all derive from Latin roots meaning 'to cut': *incido*, *prisma* and *seco*, respectively. Set between "prism" and "secant," the Teutonic "trim" superficially creates an etymological tautology, through a tripartite repetition of words semantically related to cutting—albeit ones that have entered English through different channels and through the influence of different speaking communities—reinforced through the phonological alignment of "prism" and "trim" (a slant rhyme). However, its historical root, the Old English **trumjan*, meaning to make "fast" (another word in the poem) or strengthen, disrupts this tautology, forming a diachronic semantic contrast with the Latinate origins of "prism" and "secant".[117] "Prune" evokes another act of cutting—this time horticultural—and rhymes with "dune" through the poem's central /un/ phonetic 'axis' (to use terminology from "Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words"). Just as the etymology of "trim" disrupted its semantic parallelism with its Latinate neighbours, "dune"'s etymology complicates its apparent symmetry with "prune". Derived from the Proto-Celtic *dūnon* (stronghold or rampart) "dune"'s history suggests gathering and fortification, which aligns it semantically with the strengthening sense of **trumjan*, while "hazards of phonetic accident" allow it to remain phonologically tied to "prune".[118]

These contrasts and reinforcements unfold diachronically across the poem. Prynne's lexical choices trace the complex, international network of historical pathways involved in the development of English, while creating a dialectical tension between cutting and reinforcing which unfolds in both the acoustic and etymological domains, a technique which Roberts

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[116] Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work", p.137.

[117] "Trim" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/trim_v?tab=etymology&tl=true> [accessed 21 December 2024]. The Old English root ultimately derives from the Proto-Germanic **trumjaną*, also meaning to 'make fast'.

[118] "Dune" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/dune_n?tab=etymology#6116266> [accessed 21 December 2024]. Prynne, letter to Douglas Oliver, 30 November 1987, in *The Letters of Douglas Oliver and J. H. Prynne*, p.113.

refers to in his recent review as Prynne's discovery of "new exploratory pathways in the holding space of language".[119] Words which appear semantically unrelated by modern meaning—like "dune" and "trim"—are revealed, through mental ears attuned to both the bookish discipline of comparative etymology and a more intuitive and ineffable sense of their phonology, to resonate along axes of analogous origin, lending one another "mutually reinforcing, if latent, prominence."[120] At the same time, they also gesture outward in ways which complicate and antagonise the words they are connected to through sound and morphological symmetry, such as how "dune"'s historical root disrupts the cutting connotations of "prune" and the "incised" qualities connoted by "runic".

The central morphological cluster 'rune'—embedded in "Prune" and partially contained within "run", as well as forming the root of "runic"—further feeds into this. As Walter Skeat (one of Prynne and R. F. Langley's perennial favourite lexicographers since the early 1960s) tells us, the original sense of rune was "'*whisper*' or murmur, hence a mystery, lastly an *incised* character, because writing was a secret known to few."[121] My own emphasis here underscores words from Skeat's entry which Prynne has directly woven into the etymological and sonic fabric of the poem. "[W]hisper", for example, is integrated into a soundscape which leads us acoustically to "wisdom" through /w/ and more loosely to "syrup", "prudent" and "prism" through /p/ and /s/. In the same way, the latent sense of securing and making "fast" underlying "trim" can only be gleaned through recourse to an etymological dictionary, but Prynne seamlessly absorbs "fast" into the soundscape of the poem, allowing its /f/ to chime with "fold" in the final line (bookending the poem with fricatives), while its central /s/ resonates with words like "unspoken". "[B]irch" connects with the same network of philological research as the atomised quotation from Skeat. As Ralph W. V. Elliott notes, in a text which Prynne used heavily in his 1967 "Pedantic Note in Two Parts" to make the point that "[t]he English rune wynn […] was the name for 'bliss'", the Gothic rune "**berkana-*, 'birch

[119] Roberts, "Raspberries".

[120] Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work", p.138.

[121] Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, p.520. For evidence of Prynne and Langley's shared use of Skeat's dictionary, see the letter from Prynne to Langley from 21 April 1961, in which he recommends using Skeat's dictionary as a supplement to Pokorny's dictionary of Proto-Indo-European roots. Prynne, letter to Langley, 21 April 1961.

twig', is clearly […] associated with fertility cults": the invocation of "birch" in "Prune" appears to anticipate the "bud" in the final line.[122] Just as "Apple" recuperated the historical interactions of Latin and Proto-Celtic in the etymological depths of individual words, the rune in "Prune" is a metonymy for historical contact between the branching linguistic pathways the poem activates. Early runic alphabets like the Elder Fuþark were likely influenced by Old Italic alphabets like Etruscan, probably transmitted through trade and military contact.[123] Prynne's poem, by sounding out similarities and contrasts between its Teutonic and Latinate words, helps us hear and read those early instances of linguistic and alphabetic exchange.

In terms of the research material he alludes to in *Orchard* (Skeat and Ralph W. V. Elliott in "Prune"), Prynne is retreading the same ground as his earliest investigations into the ways in which language mediates and structures our being and our perception. However, at this very late stage, he folds the contours and terms of those abstract arguments back into the poems' formal textures and phonological arrangements, rather than invoking them through explicit gestures, shifts in register or prosody or through the voice of a coherent speaking subject, caught between the poles of sensuous experience and mediated knowledge. Prynne's very late poetry enacts research through sound and locates sound in research. Meaning here is not at all immanently or phenomenologically available: the reader can choose how far she wishes to engage with each sequence's set of "'rules'", activating a body of extratextual knowledge and treating the poetry's language (lyric or otherwise) as materially and historically situated. But, to paraphrase *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, these mediating processes are made "exhilarating enough to carry the reader forward with strenuous delight".[124] Tensions, arguments and histories (linguistic, epistemological, economic and militaristic) are disclosed through the experiential interplay of acoustic features like rhythm, assonance, consonance and rhyme as well as through morphological anagram and recombination, in a way which mirrors how the sensuous encounter with fruit in *Orchard* always discloses material histories of cultivation, labour and trade which extend far beyond Britain's borders.

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[122] Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts", p.124. Original emphasis. Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1959), p.56.

[123] See *ibid*, pp.1-13.

[124] Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p.15.

In 1967, at the height of *The English Intelligencer*'s run, Prynne had been at pains to emphasise that, through its failure to properly historicise the p rune and define it as 'bliss', "the Oxford Etym. Dict. will do nothing to take us back, to the sounds of our proper selves."[125] In his most recent poetry, Prynne *has* found a form of etymological practice which does what the Oxford Etymological Dictionary could not do. But "the sounds of our proper selves", like our proper selves, are always-already entangled in the world: in history, in culture and in systems of material exchange and production. For Prynne, however, this is ultimately where the 'bliss' lies. This very late poetry does not chart a mournful exile from the world, but a new and different kind of phenomenological intimacy, where the sensuous and perceptual immediacy of poetic sound and form is enriched rather than diminished by its historical and systemic mediations.

[125] Prynne, "A Pedantic Note in Two Parts", p.129. Original emphasis.

Coda

"By indifferent Saeson"

A ton of white rain will overflow my self-shaped sleeping-bag of
earth
But today I love what is betrayed
by indifferent Saeson –
what will be obliterated
from the human view –

the curving horizon breathes
over the reclined anatomy of the sphere,
the open lands to the North & West
still sprawl under the windy skies beyond the cities –

& remote mountain plateaus –
Eglwysilan
where the shepherd raised his eyebrow
at the question put in English[1]

"[B]y indifferent Saeson": John James's phrase (from "Exultation", a poem in his 1967 sequence *The Welsh Poems*)—and its surrounding lines—articulates something central to this thesis while also revealing its biggest limitation. James's poem, a loose translation of the 12th century Welsh poet and King of Gwynedd Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd's "Gorhoffedd" ('Boast'), speaks to the positioning of English and England—more precisely, a specific definition of English and England—as a linguistic, literary and national hegemon within British cultural and civic identity, a phenomenon directly tied to forms of perception and the systems which mediate them.

Published by Grosseteste Press during *The English Intelligencer*'s run (James himself was a regular contributor to the *Intelligencer*), the very existence of James's poem at a time when his coevals were looking for poetic models beyond what Peter Riley called "given English/symbolic/closed modes of significance" reveals that, from the outset of this thesis's scope, there were sincere attempts by British poets to posit and recuperate other 'Britains',

[1] John James, *Collected Poems* (Perth, Australia & Cambridge: Salt, 2002), p.33.

other British prosodic templates and other ways of being and seeing that resisted the homogenising pressures of a hegemonic and narrowly defined English identity.[2] Riley, for all his reading in British Neolithic and Celtic history, may very well have been using "English" as a solecistic synonym for 'British' in the *Intelligencer*'s "Announcement," and so may not have considered James's poem—or its source material—to exist outside the "given" and "closed" modes he sought to critique. Alex Niven characterises the semantic slippage between England and Britain as the product of England's campaign "to make itself an inchoate, de-nationalised entity, capable of absorbing other localities tacitly and without democratic or romantic agitation", a campaign which reached its zenith in the imperialism of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, but which found a very early prototype in the final conquest and annexation of Wales in 1283.[3]

James's "Exultation" seems to anticipate a reading of Wales as an extension of England and which takes a particular form of Britishness as hegemonic. The very act of translating a text written by a *bardd* and King of Gwynedd (Gwynedd was arguably the most powerful early medieval kingdom within the modern boundaries of Wales) into English implicitly underscores an uneasy relationship between Welsh cultural specificity and its absorption and reduction within an English linguistic and literary framework. In contradistinction to this, James's decision to leave "Saeson" ('the English') untranslated entails a conscious refusal to fully smooth the Welsh into the English, allowing James's text to resist being wholly claimed or

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[2] Riley, "Announcement" in *Certain Prose of* The English Intelligencer, p95.
In "Exultation", John James incorporates the monorhymes characteristic of his source text (which, in turn, are characteristic of the courtly *awdl* mode ab Owain Gwynedd employs). Where the "Gorhoffedd" uses its monorhymes insistently ("mynytet", dyffrynnet" ['mountains', 'valleys'], etc.), "Exultation" deploys them more sporadically ("coal", "tail", "Vale"). Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd, "Gorhoffedd" in *The Myvyrian Archaiology of Wales: Collected Out of Ancient Manuscripts*, ed. by Owen Jones, Edward Williams & William Owen Pugh (Denbigh: Thomas Gee, 1870) pp.198-199 (p.198). James, *Collected Poems*, p.33. For more on the *awdl* mode, see John J. Parry, "The Court Poets of the Welsh Princes" in *PMLA*, 67:4 (1952), pp.511-520 (p.514).
James's deep engagement with the particularities of the *awdl* here counters Andrew Duncan's reading of the Welshness of his poetry as consisting in its "oral quality", which "[connects it] to a Welsh ideal of speech which is eloquent and yet free and easy, affable, uninsistent". These are tired and patronising tropes, reducing Welsh cultural expression to an intuitive, unstudied orality. In contrast, James engages with medieval Welsh poetry's rigorous and intricate formal demands. Andrew Duncan, "Days and Nights in the Forest: The Welsh Foreshore of John James" in *The Salt Companion to John James*, ed. by Simon Perril (London: Salt, 2010), pp.126-133 (p.129).
[3] Alex Niven, *New Model Island: How to Build a Radical Culture Beyond the Idea of England* (London: Repeater, 2019), p.55.

controlled by the cultural and linguistic perspective it implicitly frames as dominant. It forces the reader to encounter Welsh, while also essentially othering English readers by allowing them to see and hear themselves refracted through the linguistic constructions of another British language. In so doing, James tacitly displaces the assumed primacy of English on the British Isles, making it an object of perception rather than a default medium of thought. Elsewhere, the poem examines both Anglo-Norman and Scottish aristocratic impositions onto the Welsh landscape (and their afterlives in industrialised Wales) as complex structures of feeling. As part of the catalogue of features he 'loves' about Wales (borrowed from ab Owain Gwynedd's poem), James lists "fake Castell Coch with its phoney pinnacles, Disneylike in | its half-shroud of dark beech woods".[4] Finished by aristocratic Scottish industrialist the 3rd Marquess of Bute in 1891, on the site of an 11th century Norman fortification erected to subjugate the inhabitants of recently conquered Cardiff, the history of Castell Coch discloses the intersection of elite power and aestheticised control. Seen nowadays from the A470 on the drive into Pontypridd, it is hard not to appreciate the castle's fairy tale, "Disneylike" beauty, adopting a perspective which allows its formal qualities (still produced and mediated by a deep set of historical and material conditions) to step forth while letting the complex history I have just traced recede into the background.

Ultimately, the synthesis of these perspectives is what is important for me. In referencing the loss of certain aspects of Welsh identity, language or being here, or the imposition of Englishness onto Wales through the mechanisms of the UK, I am not positing Welsh or Welshness as linguistic and ontological states which are somehow purer, or more 'native' to the British Isles, nor do I believe James is. We have seen at every stage of this thesis that language is never the innocent house of being Heidegger imagined it to be: rather, as J. H. Prynne put it in the 2008 essay "Huts", "[t]here is no protection or temporary shelter from these forms of knowledge" which continually intervene in and structure our language, our being and our perception.[5] The complex view of Castell Coch in "Exultation"—of loving it despite its entanglements with history, economics and power—does not provide a shelter, but

[4] James, *Collected Poems*, p.34.
[5] Prynne, "Huts", pp.630-631.

rather exemplifies the kind of negative capability that perception has been seen to accrue over the course of this thesis, as British poets repeatedly turned to historical forms, older prosodic templates and allusive networks in spite of (and in many cases *because* of) their inextricable connection to the "forms of knowledge" Prynne identifies. As we have seen, this turn was indivisible from a conscious attempt to accurately situate the perceiving and speaking self amid the systems and structures within which it is entangled.

In making a case about the forms of perception practised in British late modernist poetry, this thesis has focussed exclusively on English poets, but (as my reading of John James shows) there are many voices and forms of perception in Britain beyond England, and many different conceptions of England within England itself. In a 1969 letter to J. H. Prynne, Peter Riley emphatically argued that "[w]hat the 'Nation' does is something no one shares in now [...] No one speaks for a nation, in any sense."[6] This thesis has shown that people *do* share in the nation insofar as the nation has the power to shape both our seeing and our sensation. To take one example, Prynne's 2020 text *Orchard* emphasises how our perception and sensuous apprehension of the world is deeply imbricated within abstract systems of production and transportation determined by nation-states. However, if the emphasis here is on "[n]o *one*", Riley is correct to reject the possibility of a singular, unifying voice capable of encapsulating the irreducibly plural spectrum of national identity. In gesturing to a British late modernism beyond England here, I have used the example of John James because of his immanence to my own conception of my national identity. Several generations ago, my family were drawn from dim agricultural prospects in West Wales for ostensibly more lucrative work in the South Wales Coalfield, where they lived not far from the shadow of Castell Coch. Some—but not all—lost their first and only language. Many other British poets active during the timescale in question could have been used to make a similar point about nationality and perception, such as the Scottish Gael Turnbull or the Anglo-Irish Tom Raworth. But even these examples would be deeply restrictive. More studies of British late modernist poetry are needed, which can fully

[6] Peter Riley, letter to J. H. Prynne, 19 May 1969 in Prynne-Riley Correspondence, MS Add. 10144, 215, 272. JHPP.

attend to how issues of race, class and gender intersect with and complicate the questions of perception and mediation this thesis has invoked.

Reading James's phrase "indifferent Saeson" with the etymological precision this thesis has applied to read poets in the tradition of Pound and Olson reveals an older, obsolete meaning behind "indifferent": not different in character, effect or incidence.[7] *Contra* this archaic sense, this thesis has found that the field of (specifically) English late modernist poetry *was* marked by substantial differences in character, effect and incidence. Riley, for instance, moved from a primitivist, atavistic conception of perception to a deep scepticism of the templates he inherited from Charles Olson, while R. F. Langley emphatically foregrounds the historicity of etymologically-charged language, while also drawing on an array of historically-situated poetic forms and speaking subjects, to emphasise how the perceiving subject authenticates herself against her knowledge and a particular English poetic tradition. Meanwhile, Colin Simms and Prynne reveal (in very different ways) how our perception of immediate realities—landscapes, animals and food, for instance—are always-already entangled in complex, mediating networks and linguistic systems which transcend the narrow borders of Britain altogether. At the same time, they emphasise that there are certain phenomena—the radical alterity of the animal (in the case of Simms) or (in the case of Prynne) the sensuous materiality of the sound of language itself—which cannot be so easily collapsed by those networks. Taken together, these differences amount to a field of poetic production marked by substantial differences, mirroring a conception of Britain that is plural, shifting and often in tension with itself. These poets foreground the mediation inherent in perception, revealing how language, history and material and social relations shape our engagement with the world, while simultaneously emphasising that these mediations ultimately constitute a direct point of contact with the world in their power to interrupt and recalibrate our being.

Where Olson's *Maximus* had imagined, through its preoccupations with the immanent relation between self and world the congruity between landmasses, a way of healing geological and civic divisions across geophysical and national borders, the British poetry which

[7] "Indifferent" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* (online), II.9 <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/indifferent_adj1?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use#693381> [accessed 20 December 2024].

responded to it first emphasised the impossibility of reconciling those divisions under the structures of modern nationhood and capitalism. Yet, within these very structures, these poets ultimately uncovered new points of interconnection with the world, and new channels through which the perceiving self is always-already diffused in it. In so doing, they forged a dynamic, open poetics attuned to the fractures and multiplicities both within Britain and beyond its shores.

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