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## **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**Without aim: perception and naming**

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**Without an Aim: Perception and Naming**

Michael Horwood

A poetry collection and critical study submitted to Bangor University, School  
of English as a dissertation for the degree of PhD

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## Abstract

This study is in two parts: a collection of poetry with a commentary, followed by a critical dissertation. The dissertation examines how language can be used to represent our experience of the perceptions derived via our senses; how to ‘tell the truth about things’ (Randall Jarrell). This in turn forces the poet to identify what those ‘things’ mean to the observer: the nature of our perceptions and the status of objects in the external world. My own poetry explores how I understand my own sense perceptions, what relation I find between my experience of those perceptions and the world from which they are derived, and how I can represent this knowledge in poetry.

This issue relates to the same concerns surrounding the dispute between the Movement and counter-culture poets and the poetry wars of the 1970s. A brief survey of this period reveals an interesting paradox related to the notion of origins, authenticity and transcendence in the work of J. H. Prynne. I take this paradox as the starting point for my examination of the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Roy Fisher and Paul Muldoon’s collection, *Why Brownlee Left*.

My study reveals the role that imagination plays, in combination with sense perceptions, in fashioning the worldview of these poets. Factual or scientific information alone will not provide the means to achieve this. Imagination, operating through the exercise of choice, creates meaning and presence in the poetic text, which is not a reflection of the world but a new object existing within it. This conclusion coincides very closely with William Carlos Williams’s observations on imagination and creativity. In addition, my

examination reveals the extent to which ecocritical thinking regarding the inter-relatedness of human and non-human worlds is relevant to these issues. My findings apply to all three poets in this study, as well as to Prynne, but with differences in the form in which this imaginative exercise of choice is manifested.

**Key words:** perception, imagination, representation, origins, authenticity, transcendence, ecocriticism.

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## **Without An Aim**

## Lapidary

Riverside Drive was looking like a mistake:  
nothing but concrete, cars, asphalt.  
The day was sultry, curtains  
mostly drawn.

My shirt was slightly soiled  
and stuck to my back  
but after two hours and  
four cardboard mugs of coffee  
I'd got one of those Jap  
sports cars in my sights.  
It was sporting my lucky number.

Simple as tagging along;  
nothing to it.  
We drift into a car park;  
no more than a patch of grass, really.

Outside, I'm getting smells  
like green stuff and water.  
I reckon, what dazzles me,  
dazzles others, too.

Under the bridge, where shade  
looks almost as solid as stone,  
I search for the cracks  
between *Joe loves Fran*,  
where seed might fall,  
shoots cling and thrive.

If I'd scratched my own motto  
there it would read:

*He was always in spaces.*

## Departure

In the children's encyclopedia  
a door-to-door salesman talked my dad  
into buying when I'd just started school,  
there was a series of simple, line drawings  
to illustrate the curve of the earth's surface.

A ship steamed out of harbour, diminishing  
as it neared the horizon, then dropped  
out of sight: first just the funnels visible;  
finally, nothing but a trail of smoke.

My dad didn't want me to miss the boat  
for lack of information.

I was left regretting that departure, unsure  
if it was the passengers' homesickness I sensed  
or my own loneliness,  
standing on the quay,  
gazing out to sea  
with the peppery smell  
of the book's binding  
lingering  
in the air.

## Origins

Beneath the foundations, for me, of the word *holiday*  
lies Swanage, my first remembered beach;  
*holiday's* Jurassic level, on which  
all other resorts and cities worth a visit  
rest. So waves rib the tidal sands  
beneath Prague and Gstaad.

And behind the word *beach*, the chalk cliff  
barrier of the northern headland rears up  
like the hump back of some prehistoric beast.  
Rollers gnaw at its base and crunch pebbles.  
The deserted, desolate end of Swanage  
drew my wandering steps as close as I dared go.

Back at the family base of towels and deckchairs,  
I gazed past the high-tide line of dried out bladderwrack,  
over wet sand and dazzle of sun rays  
cast off the moving sea, to the distant cape,  
remote as the li-lo I was never allowed  
because it might carry me too far out.

## **Boats**

Three small boys on the seashore  
sailed their model boats.

They balanced on the rocks in the shallows;  
one crouched down, wavering, and reached out to prod  
a boat with a stick  
and guide it the way he wanted.

They stepped from stone to stone  
and leapt across the wider gaps,  
shouting orders about route and direction.

On a smaller rock, one would teeter,  
toes curled to grip the sloping sides.

Another might wobble and hesitate when his base  
shifted under his weight, choosing  
the moment to hop off.

A container ship crossed the gulf  
on its way to the port along the coast  
but the boys had their backs to it,  
intent on their own game.



## Arrival In Finland

That day I got lost in Hampton Court maze,  
the tall hedges leaned closer above me  
as I retraced my footsteps, revised  
my turnings, and suddenly ran  
into my aunt's arms. It all came back to me

when we entered Finland by ferry  
from Stockholm, passing Åland,  
which the English invaded in 1854,  
with the unlikely consequence  
of guaranteeing the Finns their own coinage.

As we approached,  
Finland rose piecemeal out of the water,  
starting with scattered reefs,  
bare rocks just breaking the surface,  
skerries with patches of sea grass,  
a stunted tree, a string of small islands,  
then larger ones, close-packed and wooded.

The sea contracted to a network of channels  
weaving in and out of encroaching stone and forest.  
Impossible to separate archipelago  
from mainland; Finland stepping forward  
to greet us with outspread arms.

## Two Crabs

Onto a shelf of rock  
cracked and tilted  
by the ages;  
a step up, a step down;

each slap, suck  
and gurgle  
will drain a little lower  
for the next 37 minutes;

a pause to peer  
at a ruched, emerald curtain –  
delicate as silk – that sways and lifts  
where pincers strain to snap a leg;

then skirting an inlet,  
its surface solid  
with yellow-brown weed  
like a water-logged carpet –

to the outermost edge,  
a few inches above  
the waving kelp, and sheen  
of the cold Easter sea.

### Points Of Reference

While the high ridge of the island  
thirty miles to the south  
just hangs there  
like something that happened long ago,  
the tree is being buried  
deeper in the creeper's leaves  
with each year that passes  
and the gnats in the forest  
remain as insignificant  
as my daily self-deceptions,  
except when they bite.

And having watched the sun  
set off the cape, accelerating  
as the gap between it and the sea closes,  
firing the scattered clouds  
with shifting reds and orange,  
I turn to face the other way  
to see rose-pink cumulus  
slowly lose their colour  
as the earth's shadow rides higher up the sky  
and a ship balanced on the horizon  
is lacking one dimension.

**Seashell**

Venus is about to set behind the hill;  
dusk closing in. Dark blue,  
it's the colour of her eyes.

Waves suck at the shoreline with a *shush*;  
the shallows are greenish  
and speckled with foam.

Online, I search for dishes with shellfish,  
ginger and chilli. It's hard to stop  
watching her. The screen glows

as the room darkens and inside the seashell  
the rush of my blood through the veins  
echoes with a far-off roar.

## **Home Boy**

There can't have been much traffic  
on the seaways off Swanage  
because I never saw a real ship on the horizon  
and my thoughts of voyaging  
were limited to the end-point  
of the northern headland.

But during an out-of-season visit  
to Lulworth Cove, the boom  
of blank-fire from naval manoeuvres  
had me ducking and scrambling  
over the rocks, heading for our car  
and safety, longing for home.

## Out There

... and that air is always redder than it should be,  
 flowing through a slit between the trees  
 where several birches have been cut down in a line.  
 Looking through the opening, into a glowing distance,  
 feels like setting an eye to the crack between door  
 and jamb, squinting, lips puckered up  
 in the effort to get whatever it is,  
 out there, into some kind of focus.

But I'm readier now than I'll ever be,  
 pumped up and flushed,  
 set to take the forest path at a lick.  
 The same trees that flash by on either side

sway their tops late at night  
 black against the aftermath of city light.

.....

... or then air is always bluer than it should be,  
 giving cliffs of chalk the shade that prompts a sighed,  
*ethereal*, on board ships approaching harbour  
 in the morning, from the south.  
 An hour, or 90 minutes, later and docked,  
 those same voyagers stare into glassy water,  
 noting how the silkweed seems more solid  
 than the shimmering quayside granite it coats.

But today the weather's blowier than usual.  
 It's 5 p.m., March in Finland

and I'm in no mood to confuse what I see  
with the medium I see it through.

Don't give me that disembodied tone.  
Give me air, cold as ice. Give me stone.

## A Deep Breath

On page 49 of my autobiography  
there's a list of names:  
all the people whose influence  
has been important to me;

and later, a reference to my habit  
of singing *2,000 light years*  
*from home* in my head  
while running the stony forest paths –

on a lung trip, I call it.  
It can be very lonely.

The expression 'a retirement home'  
should be quite clear.  
It appears on page four hundred and something  
but I haven't got there yet

so thinking about it  
gives me a feeling of absence.  
Or do I mean, of something *being* absent?  
Is that it?



## Night And Day

The night sky is a diagram  
of hectic attraction and absence.  
I've tracked these heavenly bodies  
across bleak space,

until day breaks with a fleck of red  
that expands. Below my ribs  
cells flutter like sand grains  
tumbled in a current.

The borderline along which we've folded  
our lives in half  
slides further round the Earth.

The woodland brightens,  
gilded beech trunks sleek as skin.

I feel desire in the empty spaces  
between the trees  
where sunlight daubs the forest floor,  
blotched by the swaying shadows of leaves;  
light and dark constantly  
trying to enter each other.

**Liminal**

Lying on shingle that sloped into the sea,  
I wanted to find the exact point  
where my body weight held me

at rest in the trough  
but the dying pulse  
of the incoming crest

would be just enough to support me  
for one half of the beat  
of my heart.

## Dedication

He was well known the length of the beach  
and all over town as a daft old codger.  
At least once a week you'd see him, stumbling  
over the shingle and stones, bent almost double.

I've met people who collect small stones  
with attractive markings. They polish them  
and use them in self-made jewellery.  
The first time, I thought that's what he was at,

but he was empty-handed when we spoke  
and explained he was looking for one particular  
pebble. I thought he must be soft in the head  
and the thought must've shown on my face

because he gave me the story behind his search.  
As a lad, he said, he'd found this stone,  
a delicate pink, veined with a vivid crimson oval  
that had a jet black centre.

'Unusual,' I remarked, for something to say  
and to humour him. 'Gorgeous,'  
he replied. 'I wanted to keep it,  
but my friends were calling from the sea

and having no pocket in my trunks, I placed it  
on a large flat stone, where I'd find it again.  
But our games and swimming took us along the beach.  
I lost my bearings and I lost my stone.'

And that's it. For thirty years he's been sliding  
about on the piles of shingle tossed up

by the sea, a pointless task in search  
of the pebble he once had in his hand and then lost.

### **The New Sisyphus**

Each day I take a stone with me  
wherever I go: from home to work,  
around the town, to shops, on bus or train.  
Each morning I begin the round again.

I'm conscious of its tap against my thigh  
as I walk. My fingers touch  
its cool surface when I rummage  
in my pocket after keys or change.

Carried by ice age glaciers that crushed  
mountain ranges and left the outcrops  
on the hills, smoothed by the rubbing  
of sands and the action of running

water, it's just contained  
inside my clenched hand.  
If I squeeze, the pressure  
bruises the tendons in my palm,

leaving a dull ache the next day,  
that feels like a solid presence  
as if the pebble has permanently  
lodged in my flesh.

### **This Neck Of The Woods**

suggests a scrawny sparseness  
that doesn't fit the bill.  
Something fuller and fatter is needed,  
with more weight and density.  
The wood's burgeoning thigh?  
Its bulging flank? Truly,  
branches and foliage overhang  
its border like Falstaff's gut,  
altogether ungoverned, trying to  
burst across the field,

while I'm getting my breath back and letting  
my mind weave its way through medieval forests –  
*wild boar crash through the undergrowth;*  
*a deer lifts its head in the gloom, swivels an ear.*

But I shouldn't have come up that hill  
so fast, setting off my bad knee  
and the heart pumping blood  
through thin wrists. Below my jaw  
there's a tender spot, but hard, like a pebble,  
that I dab with a fingertip.

### Talking To Edith Södergran

This is as much as I can manage:  
three quarters of the way up a hill in Karelia  
where, from an outcrop of rock,  
I look to the distant ridgeback,  
across a stretch of silvery water  
that must be an inlet of a lake to the east;  
the illusion that one stride  
could carry me over to the other side.

My instinct is to find an explanation  
in my elevation, perspective,  
some vagary of human perception.  
Yours, Edith, was to see your *body is a mystery*,  
leading you on the path to *the land that is not*  
where your *beloved walks with sparkling crown*.  
*Destiny*, you say – and promptly

step out of it; at the same time proclaiming  
it's *written on your forehead* –  
a sign from the gods.

It's as much as I can manage to wonder  
'if', 'what', 'but then',  
while you're *the human child, all certainty*  
*stretching its arms higher than heaven*.

### **At The Photograph Exhibition**

I felt diminished  
by that shot of a piece of stone  
that from a distance  
I'd taken to be palm-sized:  
zoom-lensed, blown up – every nick, line  
and blotch on its surface larger than life.

Close-to I was peering at six guys  
roped together across a rock-face.  
Those hairline cracks were gaping fissures.  
One fair head, the size of a salt crystal.  
Me, towering over the canyon landscape.



## Canoe Trip

The force on blades fighting the rapids  
and the burn in stomach muscles,  
shoulders, forearms. Events are

current, rocks, gravel banks,  
only these exist in the moments  
the stream rushes us towards them,

cease to exist as we tumble past  
intent on steering the safe course ahead.  
Speech is white foam flecking the surface.

At our riverside camp I recognise  
a pine sapling with a kink at the top:  
the same that two summers earlier had been

keeling over in too-soft earth  
so I'd propped it up  
with a forked stick.

### **Without An Aim**

The bed was a chaos of tangled  
roots, rocks and fallen branches.

The surface used to ripple and splash  
over the shallows, run smooth and black  
through the deep pools.

I knew its underground stretches  
where the air would be damp and cold  
as a clammy hand.

I'd grown as familiar with its ways – its rises  
and falls in different seasons –  
as I was with the flow of my own blood  
through my own veins;  
until the morning I turned up to find  
its course diverted and those black rocks,  
rotting branches, gravel and muck exposed;  
dry banks winding aimlessly through the trees.

For days I was casting about aimlessly  
then washed up here;  
I almost said 'found myself' but  
I don't want to exaggerate.

I keep wondering if I should've  
heard something in the water's voice,  
seen something in its reflection:  
some sign emerging from its surroundings.

### **Comparative Studies**

Even with its beak crammed  
with worms collected to feed  
its young, the thrush is able  
to produce its ratchet-like call,

while I'm able to use my teeth  
so delicately I can bite the skin  
inside my mouth one cell deep  
and tease a piece off.

I plan to devote my middle years  
to wildlife research, camp  
in the woods, live on berries  
and whatnot, record the first  
known case of an animal  
urging itself on with a willow switch.

## Learning To Fly

I'd like to chart an airbourne course  
between the trunks and boughs  
to represent unimpeded progress.  
The birds can do it, gliding  
and veering without making  
contact, only the draught  
leaves a rocking in their wake.

My best attempt takes me  
as far as the sixth tree in,  
then traps me in a tangle  
of branches without exit space,  
grateful my flight is virtual  
and finally aware that success  
depends on how fast  
we get the world in focus.

**Sweeney**

I've been sitting in this tree for some time now,  
observing the arrangement of house roofs,  
the pattern of surrounding streets.

Houses are flatter than I remember

from the time before I was able to fly,  
their walls occupy less of my attention  
but, as I glide in a smooth arc,  
holding my arms straight and slightly wide

of my body, pulling my shoulders back  
and my head up to achieve the lift that carries me clear,  
I judge the area each building covers  
by the extent of its roof.

Steady rain covers the neighbourhood with pools and streams;  
the glint leads me to wild watercress and sedge.

The residents don't recognise the return of the bog  
they don't know their homes are built on.

And though my hopping on this branch lacks grace,  
I feel the birds have come to accept me.  
I haven't decided yet  
what to do when winter arrives.

## Sanctuary

The pile of branches I'd cut  
from the overgrown silver willow  
has become a refuge for beetles, woodlice  
and worms that surface where soil remains damp.

All day the sun shines.  
Leaves on the shrubs tremble  
but the blue tits ignore the untidy  
stack in the shade.

Not so the hedgehog that's found out the pile.  
Each evening he trundles over the grass,  
little warrior, circles and detours,  
but always with the one goal;  
bent on surprising the hard-shelled  
and soft-skinned at home.

## The Mud Poems

### 1. Close Up

With my eye on the level  
of a seeded bald patch in the lawn  
I'm considering mud, close up.  
There's the smell of peat and chicken shit  
and damp air chill on my cheek.  
Newly sprouted grass is fine as hair.

The drainpipe drips. The garden's drenched  
and half in shade. Along its border  
sunlight shines on rich blades plump  
with rain, crushed and trampled  
into soft, dark earth.

## **2. Sinking**

Nothing but bubbles in brown water  
where Venice once was;  
gilded palaces and golden dinner plates  
all sucked down into the ooze.



### 3. Underwater

The sun is out and the Thames looks blue  
but I'm deep below its surface  
in the slime with bent bicycle wheels,  
prams and blackened cans.

When river mud squeezes between toes  
broken glass slits white flesh,  
blood beads and spreads across skin in threads.

#### **4. Bird's Eye View**

From the air, the Somme battlefield's  
a brown scar only two miles wide  
snaking across a green land.

Soldiers slip and splash  
in the trenches like homunculi,  
driven by a force they cannot know.

They don't see the faint day moon  
because they don't look up.

**Moon**

A not-quite-full moon,  
its lop-sided shape implying  
the wholeness it lacks.

For thirty minutes it moves  
across the space between the church wall  
and colonnade;  
the stone of the piazza  
faintly reflects its silver.

It inches behind the building,  
taking its deficiency with it.

## **In Front Of A Large Department Store**

Pigeons are more aerobatic than you might think  
watching them on a pavement  
in front of a large department store  
where people pass in and out  
continuously,  
ride the silver escalators  
up and down;  
gather in a cluster  
round a glass counter,  
then move apart and squeeze past  
the next knot that blocks the shining aisle,  
or bind with it.

The assistants are adept at appearing  
by the side of potential buyers,  
coaxing those who are wavering.  
They avoid stepping on toes  
or having their own stepped on.  
The job requires delicacy.

At the sliding doors the pigeons scuttle away  
as if they just manage to escape  
being trodden on,  
but it's with the same fine judgement  
that they'll skim your shoulder or hair.  
They'll drop from a roof, twist  
below a third floor ledge  
and settle their claws beside a mate  
who isn't, who jabs an unwelcoming beak  
so they fall back, flick round, swing about,  
skim your hair and land  
right in front of your shoe

as if nothing had happened,  
nothing at all.

### **On Doing Jig-Saw Puzzles**

I tip the open box;  
the puzzle tumbles onto the mat.  
I glide my palm across the pile  
and back. The shiny surfaces slide over  
each other, or lodge together  
in a lump that's oddly satisfying  
to the touch. It yields to a little pressure.

Spread out, the variegated colours  
look like the scarves and jackets  
of a football crowd seen from a distance,  
their wearers waiting to be recognised;  
or the pieces of a smashed mirror, each  
magically retaining its last reflected image.

The most trying I ever completed  
was a picture of a stone wall: five hundred  
fragments of rock stared at me.  
Precious little to distinguish  
one piece from any other.

## How To Grow A Crystal

So these particles are whizzing about  
in their solution, the way planets do in space,  
or memory does in time, only you can't see them.

When particles collide they stick together  
in a Bravais lattice to form a sub-unit  
but, only if each particle is correctly positioned

and oriented. At this point nucleation begins.  
Now, your sub-unit is bigger than a particle;  
you still can't see it but it's hooking up

with more particles and growing.  
You've got a metastable situation  
where your nucleus crystal is submersed

in its environment. The structure  
would be flawless, but at this rate  
it'll take an age to form.

Instead, imperfections start to occur,  
and so the process accelerates. That  
which you couldn't see before has crystalized

and suddenly falls out of the solution.

This is called the fallout.

Some crystals are so hard they're called rocks.

## **Antiquities**

It's easy to think that this collection  
of relics from the past – Roman coins,  
rococo china, silver snuff box  
and nineteenth-century prints –  
has arrived at its own destination  
here in our present, like time travellers  
that have materialised  
out of the mists of antiquity.  
Easy to believe that reality  
is conferred on them by our eyes.

In fact, our present is just a railway station  
these pieces are rushing through  
and our faces, half glimpsed on the platform,  
will soon be history, as the Roman coins,  
rococo china, silver snuff box  
and nineteenth-century prints  
disembark in some other future.



### Three Clementines

Against the skins of the clementines  
the dining room table's wood looks muddy.  
The clash has done something  
to the clementines, too.

On their pile in the shop, they glowed  
like coals in a barbecue when the lid's ajar  
and my mouth at the crack blows up  
a deep orange in the dark interior.

The brown wood's smothered their fire  
to a dull, lifeless tone that's somehow  
synthetic, like a colour  
fabricated in a chemical plant,

not one that's been nourished by rain, soil and sun,  
through the roots and leaves of the tree  
they grew on, in a line of trees,  
on a hillside turning its face to a blue sky.

There's the farm worker with a sack  
of fertilizer and canister of insecticide spray  
who walked beneath the branch,  
looked up and saw my clementines

and sunlight falling through leaves,  
then went home to a white-washed house  
with a well in the garden, ditches  
carrying water to a few rows of vegetables.

Small windows in the white walls  
show nothing of the interior,

just darkness, like the darkness  
under the barbecue lid.

## Oranges

James McAlpine lives  
ten streets in and six floors up  
on the Hollywell Estate,  
beside the tower blocks  
and motorway across  
a nameless conurbation.

Each morning James focuses  
attention on maintaining  
his grip on the knife that spreads  
orange marmalade on hot toast.  
And as he lets the melt  
ooze salt and sweet  
across his tongue,  
thinks of the leap the tree must make  
to fruit the neighbouring flats.

If there ever was a man  
I'd put my arm around  
to ease the moment his eyes closed  
the last time and help him think  
of God and peaceful scenes,  
it's James McAlpine,  
struggling with the jar lid  
between the cupboard and coffin.

**Bobby Shaftoe**

Is it the triviality of silver buckles  
as the detail that desire focuses on,  
or her confidence that he will fulfil  
his promise of marriage,  
or the belief they share  
in the certainty of his return  
that lends the plangent tone  
an intensity I can't forget?

The boy's vanity?  
Her gullibility?  
Or a more pervasive innocence  
and the way it always gets used?

**Attack**

Today, for the first time in my life  
I watched a life being extinguished.

Four thrushes dive-bombed the magpie.

I've squashed ants and fruit flies  
but I've never watched them die.  
I've used those spray cans of fly killer.  
Theirs were casual deaths.

The swooping thrushes almost hit the window.  
They made a noise like a ratchet running.  
Air strikes are not precision events.

There were the familiar fruit trees,  
garden furniture, neat lawn.  
On the kitchen table, the front page  
reported blue on blue in Kandahar.

The juvenile thrush lay on its breast  
on the neat lawn.  
Each time it raised its head  
it strained its beak wide three times,  
soundlessly. Its head dropped,  
then lifted;  
again, beak open three times,  
as if gasping,  
and its head dropped.

**Footnote**

*Friendly fire*'s a failed euphemism,  
too easily converted to irony.

*Blue on blue*, being code  
and essentially meaningless,  
serves the purpose better.

## Foreign Aid

... and in these pictures we see local troops who will fight beside our own against the common enemy, ours and theirs.

You will notice their uniforms are new, supplied by us. The design is simple, the material cheap, but you should have seen what they wore before.

They carry their own equipment, mainly weapons of somewhat antiquated make but in good working order. I'd like to stress that.

For several weeks these soldiers were trained by us in special camps. We've given them the basic skills; nothing hi-tech, you understand, just enough to make a fighting force.

Being native, these men have knowledge, vital to us, of the local terrain and conditions.

I should add, they sustain casualties at a somewhat higher rate.

**Answering William Carlos Williams**

So little depends  
upon

that wheelbarrow  
those chickens

so much  
upon

where you live  
where you were born



## Speechless

There are different kinds of wordlessness:  
the *click* and *tap* of knife and fork,  
the *clack* of cutlery laid on the plate  
punctuating the silence;

or wordlessness that is clamped  
tight in a vice to be worked over,  
and over; or when words get locked  
in a chest and buried deep in the sand.

There are different kinds of last meal, too,  
as there are partings that follow them.

Distracted at the airport the next day,  
that late dinner weighed heavily.  
The muscles round my lips tensed  
with the stress of retention.

And then I was off across the shining tiles  
like someone walking on ice,  
confident I'd let nothing slip.

## **At The Airport**

I was flying to Heathrow that day  
and followed him through the security check.  
I'd noticed him earlier – observed him,  
I should say, in my habitual way –  
in the check-in hall.

His girlfriend or wife had come to see him off  
and I'd watched as they waited together,  
seen how his attention was always  
elsewhere, on information display screens,  
or passengers milling through the hall,  
or focused on something he had in his mind,  
while she touched his arm, brushed  
a speck from his shirt and spoke softly.

Through security, I saw her behind the glass partition,  
saw him step over and put his lips to glass  
like a mirror, his reflection hiding her face  
so he seemed to kiss himself.

He turned away, glancing along the partition  
and for an instant I think our eyes may have met.

## Her Son

A whole afternoon at the retirement home,  
followed by the congested drive back  
in the heat of the declining sun,  
the side-on glare knifing my eye.

Home at last, to sit on the parched grass,  
glass of wine on the garden table at my elbow,  
while overhead the jets are queuing up  
for their landing slot at Heathrow

like the wasps that arrive in a constant stream each evening  
to disappear under the roof of the tool shed  
where they must have built a nest, reminding me  
I should poison them.

**Monologue**

I live on a quiet street. Small children  
play in sunlit front gardens.

The pavements are so clean  
they look like they've been washed.

The rooms in my home are airy.  
There are parquet floors because  
they are dust-free, bright mats,  
and plants in the living room

which do well because of the light.

I have to consider concealment.

In the kitchen basil and thyme  
grow in pots on the window sill.

The walls are painted pale cream throughout.

I have said some dreadful things.

The cupboards are overflowing with shoes,  
few of them mine. Most are unworn.

I can always find a clean shirt.

I visit my billiards club often;  
a game that requires space  
and suitable attire.

The kitchen is fitted with new marble worktops.

I like to watch birds in my garden  
while drinking my morning tea.

Or take it outside in summer.

I have always been squeamish  
and cannot watch someone chewing

with an open mouth, gathering  
the bolus on a purplish tongue.

**Seed**

I'm standing in shadow, invisible,  
I think, with the sunglare behind me.

My neighbour across the street is out  
in his Italia football shirt, shorts,

fluorescent green clogs, cleaning his car.  
He's over seventy but stout,

considering his heart condition. He felled  
and cut up the overgrown elm in our garden

and has promised to extract the stump –  
like a rotten tooth – when the weather's right.

The land rises on his side. The windows  
of his living room look directly

into the room occupied by the daughter  
of the previous owners of our place.

## **The Bog Fire**

The peat's surface showed no sign  
but deep in its heart  
the peat bog smouldered,  
intense heat creeping ever deeper  
and spreading wider.

Winter snow and the spring melt  
couldn't deaden the bog fire.  
Rain and storms came and went.  
The bog fire outlasted  
the seasons and the years.

There came a day one autumn  
when the air looked hazy,  
odour of charred wood on the wind  
that stung my eyes  
until they watered.

**Cold Isn't It**

The lamp emits a constant stream  
of *light light light*  
Each word breaks like an egg  
as it hits the wall,  
spilling its contents  
in an unbroken stain.

Outside, the landscape lies buried,  
as if snowflakes were letters  
and every letter that ever was  
had fallen from the sky,  
sticking together on branches,  
on twigs, in drifts, on roofs,  
with a tenacity,  
as if they knew what they did  
and meant something by it.

And what they mean must lie  
contained within the lumps  
and bumps that mark  
the presence of the thing itself.

Bursting out of the sauna,  
slippery with sweat,  
I plunge my arms into the snow,  
scoop handfuls to rub  
over shoulders and chest.  
I don't have a word for how this feels;  
*cold* isn't it.

Back in the hot room,  
when steam hits my skin,



it says *sunburn*.

### **The Winter Gardens In Summer**

Snow now is no more than a memory,  
like an image of perfection.

A name is not enough to halt the seasons  
but the nights are almost as light as day  
and offer a refuge from our fears.

An owl glides between the trees  
in silent search of dusk and prey.

A hundred years of pain are on the palace walls  
but near the ornamental waters  
the statue of a nymph stands inviolate,  
surrounded by tall elms.

The moon is nearly full, and faint  
among the shattered clouds.

It's June but the lovers are nowhere in sight.

**Broken Villanelle**

Farewell, my one and only villanelle,  
your words mean more to me than I can say.  
Though our paths must part, yet I love you well.

Your first draft lacked some facts I didn't tell.  
Once you knew all you could go your own way.  
Farewell, my one and only villanelle;

you understand the reasons that compel  
me now to stand and watch you drift away.  
Though our paths must part, yet I love you well.

And since this final version's where I spell  
out truths I used to shy from in dismay  
it means farewell, my only villanelle.

I won't moralise about the past or dwell  
on hopes and wishes or regrets this day,  
for our paths must part, though I love you well

and trust that other readers' breath will swell  
your words and let your lilting rhythms play.  
Farewell.

## Courtly Love

Like a shot, I'd accept that vassalage  
that in days gone by could firmly knit  
lover to mistress, perform sweet homage  
on bended knee. To please, I'd submit  
and be meek. No prob. I'd gladly do the chores,  
follow your orders to the letter and show  
the world – including me mates – that yours  
is the word I must obey; bestow  
it like a gift. I'd study ways of moving  
you to look with firm yet kindly aspect  
on the pain I'd suffer in my loving,  
and not give a toss about self-respect.

We moderns think such bargains cannot be,  
but desire would make a willing slave of me.

### Not Reading In My Garden

The last drips of last night's rain  
drop from the end of the drainpipe  
into the water butt. They've been doing  
this for hours. I know because I've watched.

Ripples catch the light each time  
a new drip falls. The barrel is brimful  
and the concrete half-pipe that conducts  
the overflow sparkles where it meets  
the grass. The sun is gaining heat  
but in the shade the wet ground  
chills the air that moves across my skin.

I laid my book on the garden table  
while I considered possible reasons  
for that continued dripping  
so long after the rain had stopped  
but I've decided to simply accept it  
and go back to my reading.

The trunk of the silver birch is reflecting  
the sunlight, its leaves shine yellow-green.  
Is it the bark and leaves I'm seeing,  
or sunshine, or some third thing  
that has no name?

We recently put grass seeds over a bare  
patch where we dug up a shrub.  
Many have sprouted, fine as fishing line.  
Some shoots are so delicate I only see them  
with my face close to the earth.  
Last night's rain has done them good.

The smell of moist peat has merged  
with dung. Fecundity smells like this.

Water is beautiful. Water in  
sunlight. The barrel below the eaves  
stands in the sun. I could give  
that new grass some more water,  
keep that nurturing dirt wet.

### **On A Country Road In Finland**

It was after turning at the Mihari junction  
and heading for the main road from Hämeenkyrö  
to Ylöjärvi that the most unlikely  
police car in southern Finland pulled us up.

The beat-up Volvo I was driving  
had all its lights burning and doors shut,  
thanks to Jukka's firm hand on the off-side rear.  
Still, we looked suspect, apparently.

One officer approached my open window.  
His mate stood at a distance, arms akimbo.  
I had a driving licence and showed it;  
I knew the registration number and told it.

He relaxed a bit and directed his torch over  
my shoulder. A bale of hay sat in the hollow  
where the back seat had once been,  
Jukka beside it on an upturned beer crate.

Jukka didn't make eye contact. Good  
body language. The beam flicked through  
the scented air. We waited in silence. 'Okay,'  
said the one with the light, 'saat mennä.'

**Strange Food**

Twenty years I've watched the swans  
migrate in pairs each winter,  
consumed the primitive plants  
this land produces  
and its coloured fish  
without gaining weight,  
without losing appetite.



### Having Nothing To Do With Figs

When he wears his famous *figgy coat*  
he becomes a magician  
who sees what happens  
in places he's left:

the hand that plumps cushions  
on the sofa; innocent chairs  
moved into a new arrangement;  
curtains stirred by the breeze  
from a closing door.

In his famous *figgy coat*,  
embroidered with bunny  
and tied round the middle,  
he's the backwards boy.  
He can catch himself unawares  
from behind, can see himself  
as others see him.

It makes him shriek and almost collapse  
with the hilarity of it all.

**Falstaff's Gut**

*Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.*

This man consumes the world,  
digests it and transforms it  
into flesh and blood and senses.  
He heaves his belly into position,  
braces his legs, locks his knees.  
This gut, trussed up in kersey  
and strong stitching, needs no simile  
to assert its undeniable existence.

The dimpled, pock-marked skin's  
the colour of cheddar, and clammy;  
drops of sweat trickle from folds in fat,  
darken clothing where the fit is tightest.

A gut that sags earthwards, dragged  
down by its own weight,  
like clay that longs to return to its source.

It's like the globe  
suspended on strands of plasticine.  
It's like the ocean  
scooped up into a rubber balloon.  
It's like nothing you've ever seen.

## **Symphony**

And every time the musician  
struck C minor, that chord  
desperately tried to understand  
the meaning of the music  
made by all the other notes.

**Notes**

Arrival In Finland, page 16: As a result of economic instability in the Grand Duchy of Finland caused by Russian troop movements during the Crimean War, the Czar granted Finland the right to produce its own currency in 1860.

Talking To Edith Södergran, page 30: Words in italics are adapted from poems by Edith Södergran, translated by David McDuff.

On A Country Road In Finland, page 70: 'saat mennä' is Finnish for 'you can go'.

## Chapter One

### Commentary on *Without An Aim*<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1 Introduction

I am interested in how we perceive the world around us, in the relationship between that external world and our consciousness, and in how we might represent that perception and relationship in language. These concerns are present in my writing but perhaps not in an explicit or philosophical form. As Marjorie Perloff said of Roy Fisher, I am not a poet of ideas.<sup>2</sup> And yet there is an evident interest in ideas of a philosophical nature in both my poetry and the subject of this doctoral project. The distinction that I want to make resides in the approach to the writing. Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson describe what I have in mind: ‘having too many conscious intentions at the outset [...] is likely to inhibit the spontaneous life of the text’.<sup>3</sup> However, the authors also recognise that it is ‘unlikely that we can write creatively without having any intentions at all’ and that in the case of material that emerges spontaneously, ‘intentions will emerge with it’ as the material is worked up (p. 51). I believe that this submerged intention can carry ideas which are the result of my reading of other poets and theorists and my speculations on those ideas, but without the conscious formulation that a writer of philosophy would bring to

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<sup>1</sup> In the commentary and critical section that follow all quoted italics are in the original text unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Perloff, ‘Cutting-Edge Poetics: Roy Fisher’s ‘Language Book’ in *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical Studies* ed. by John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 149-72 (p. 153).

<sup>3</sup> Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson, *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 51.

the text. This understanding of the writing process goes hand-in-hand with Hunt's and Sampson's comments on creativity: 'the creative process cannot be forced to happen. The poem will not come into being through the use of reason and intention alone' (p. 60). This describes my working method in producing the poems in this collection. I have not aimed to write poems that present ideas regarding perception and representation. I have tried to be receptive to the images my mind produces and to identify how the emerging text might reflect the interest I have in the issue of perception, representation and language. As a result of this working method these concerns form what I might call the environment of the poems. When my mind focuses on these issues it produces the image, or sense, of a gap between consciousness and external reality. I suspect that that sense is rather clichéd but I don't let that in itself make me anxious because I do not write explicitly about any such notion of separateness. Instead I try to inhabit that space, and to create poems that inhabit that space, so they are not *about* the relationship between consciousness, experience and external reality; rather, they exist within that relationship, and by their existence they reflect something of how I feel that relationship to be. I could describe the terrain the poems inhabit as a kind of 'no-man's-land', though that is not an image I use in any of the poems. However, there are images suggesting the borders associated with the idea of no man's land. 'Liminal' is a simple example of a poem that occupies a border of sorts as the narrator tries to find the point between floating and rest as the waves wash over him. This border-country idea applies not only to perceptions of physical elements in the real world but also to perceptions of time. One of the effects this environment produces in the poems is a sense of

the relativity of experience; much can depend on which side of the border one is observing from.

There is a further sense in which I feel environment, in the sense of both landscape and cultural location, to be an important element in these poems. I was born and grew up in England. I lived in England for the first twenty-five years of my life. For the last twenty-seven years I have lived in Finland. These two rather different locations both inform my writing. A few of my poems mention Finland, or Finnish towns and regions, by name, but not many. More often the landscape of a poem is recognisably Finnish, at least to me. But England, too, and English landscapes form another important layer in my consciousness, one that is associated with memory and the past. I am usually conscious of which location is informing the landscape of each poem. In a few cases, 'Out There', for example, both landscapes appear. It is perhaps this sense in which my own life experiences are largely divided between these two geographical locations that reinforces my sense of borders and divisions. Furthermore, these geographical circumstances influence the poems that have been produced from the idea of them.

I start from the belief that the notions existing in my consciousness, that are derived from the external world via my sense perceptions, are themselves representations. In the critical section of the dissertation that follows, I refer to Antony Easthope's comment that 'the real exists only at one with itself, outside representation'.<sup>4</sup> Easthope refers here to the inevitable constructedness of representations of the real world in poetry. He sees this as

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<sup>4</sup> Antony Easthope, 'Donald Davie and the Failure of Englishness' in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism* ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 17-33 (p. 22).

a problem. My approach is to recognise that the form that my knowledge of the real world takes is already a representation. I have access only to the images in my mind (representations); I do not have access directly to the things themselves.

## 1.2 A closer look at imagination

Imagination is an important concept in this understanding of the process of perception and representation. ‘Imagination’ is a word whose meaning has changed over time and it is appropriate that we briefly survey those uses of the word. Paul Dawson refers to the seventeenth-century understanding of the imagination as ‘the mental ability to reproduce images previously apprehended by the senses’.<sup>5</sup> It also referred to the mind’s ability to produce images that were outside nature and reality; imagination could cause ‘delusion by tricking the senses’ (Dawson, p. 23). Dawson points out that Thomas Hobbes explained such images as being composed of different elements from nature combined in an unnatural way. This view of the imagination represents it as a. reproductive; b. inferior to perception, since the remembered image is weaker than direct perception; and c. opposed to reason on account of its inclination to produce images that do not exist in reality. For this last reason, it was believed during the seventeenth century that the poetic use of imagination needed to be under the control of reason (pp. 23-24).

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 23. Future references to this volume are in parenthesis.



Plato and Aristotle saw art as imitation of nature. In the Renaissance that view changed to the notion of creating a world in the mind (p.25). This was called invention rather than creation and it was distinct from imagination (p.26). When the term 'creativity' came to be used it was understood as 'an internalization of divinity' (p.26). The notion of creativity led to 'speculations about original genius, as opposed to imitative talent' (p.27): 'Creative power was the capacity of a poet's imagination to mimic the divine act of Creation [...] Hence, to be creative meant to be original' (pp. 28-29). Thus imagination 'becomes liberated from its passive sensory function and is given a productive rather than merely reproductive function' (p. 29). To the Romantics, this creative imagination 'provided access to a higher truth' (p. 29). Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed this view of the imagination, not as a passive recipient of images of external objects, but as being active in the process of perception. Originality is the creation of something new as opposed to the scientific discovery of something which was always there (pp. 30-32).

Dawson thus identifies a development 'from the faculty of imagination to that of creativity' (p.22). However, he also points out that earlier senses of the word have survived into modern usage: 'I must have imagined it' can indicate that my senses were deceived; imagining can be misperceiving. Creativity, on the other hand, is not associated with the senses, sensory data or the possibility of the mind being tricked (p. 22). Furthermore, Romantic aspects of the concept have also survived, so that being imaginative can today signify something very close to Coleridge's idea of possessing original creativity and thus being active in the process of perception.

Therefore the perceptions that we experience via our senses are mediated by imagination, and the term ‘imagination’ describes the examination of the contents of consciousness, those ‘images in my mind’ referred to above. This is one explanation of why we do not have direct access to the external world via our senses and also a way of understanding how our perceptions become representations of reality. Interpretation involves this process. Consciousness, as I use the word, refers to our knowledge of the representation of the external world that is the result of sense data and the workings of imagination. It follows from this that poetry is the representation of the contents of consciousness. Roy Fisher’s *City* is not a real city, it is ‘a city of the mind’.<sup>6</sup> The use of imagination is a feature which I comment on in my examination of the work of Elizabeth Bishop and Fisher in the critical part of this study.

An example of how this idea of the space between consciousness and external objects can be dramatised appears in ‘Introit’ from Fisher’s *A Furnace*, in the passage where he portrays the narrator describing the different views to the left and right and the effects created by the differing angle of the light, but also represents the narrator as being active in the creation of that difference in perception: ‘and as if I was made | to be the knifeblade, the light-divider’<sup>7</sup>. At this point, the consciousness of the observer can itself be defined as the border between the two differing perceptions. This describes the phenomenon I have tried to explain in my definition of ‘imagination’. It also describes part of the effect that I aim for in my own poetry.

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<sup>6</sup> Roy Fisher, *Interviews Through Time and Selected Prose* (Kentisbeare: Shearsman Books, 2000), p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Roy Fisher, *The Long and the Short of It* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 51-54, (p. 51).

Memory also relies on imagination to reconstruct the experience of past sense impressions. The first drafts of most of the poems in the collection that forms the creative part of this doctorate were written at a desk, without the objects represented in the poem before my eye. This means, naturally, that imagination plays a vital part in representation and I think of this phenomenon as being connected with the idea of the gap between consciousness and external reality. It may even be appropriate to say that imagination is what creates the gap. It divorces us from a direct relationship with the real world, but it gives us freedom to operate in a space that is effectively of, and for, our own making. Anne Stevenson alludes to this aspect of perception when she remarks about Elizabeth Bishop's poem, 'Sandpiper', that it 'was doubtless begun after Bishop had observed an actual sandpiper running in and out of the surf' but that the poem later moves 'in a personal direction' until, by the end, 'the sandpiper is lost sight of'.<sup>8</sup> So although the poem began, probably, with direct observation, it has developed via the imagination operating in that space between real world and consciousness.

The evidence suggests that the same is true of Fisher's 'Introit'. He has given unusually precise information for the location and time of the poem: *12 November 1958* is the subtitle, the sun is 'lifting towards low noon', his bus is travelling to 'the Fighting Cocks | by way of Ettingshall'. Yet Fisher did not write the words of the poem whilst sitting on a bus that day with the real objects under his direct observation. *The Long and the Short of It* gives the years of composition as 1984-85. Fisher is recalling a scene

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<sup>8</sup> Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2006), p. 92-3.

from more than twenty-five years previously. The use and the power of the imagination, and its importance in trying to identify the nature of our perceptions is a lesson I have learned from these poets.

Fisher states his view of this aspect of perception directly at the end of the prose section following ‘The Wind at Night’ from *City*:

The light keeps on separating the world like a table knife: it sweeps across what I see and suggests what I do not. The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate.

*(Long and Short, p. 43)*

Here, in a nutshell, are three issues of major importance to my discussion of perception, experience and representation. The first, that ‘what I see’ can ‘suggest[ ] what I do not’, describes the impact of imagination in a manner that I can fully endorse. It is an element in several of Bishop’s poems that I draw attention to in the critical part of this dissertation. It is a feature that I have adopted in my own writing: ‘Three Clementines’ is a good example. The environment of the poem is created by the details that the imagination focuses on in the process of writing. This involves choice; what is left out, and what is included, depends on the needs of the subject of the poem. ‘Three Clementines’ began by looking at three clementines on my dining table and noticing that the way I perceived their colour had been changed by the contrast between it and the colour of the table. This is the observation with which the poem opens and it is one which identifies the relativity of

perception. The colour of the clementines had not changed, only the way that I saw it. I then began to explore how my imagination responded to that observation, what thoughts were linked to it. In other words, what associations were suggested by the way I was experiencing these sense impressions. I was not concerned any longer with the clementines on the table but with the clementines in my mind and they led me first to the different lighting conditions that could change my experience of the colour and eventually to the point where I was doing some research into the production methods of commercial fruit farming.

The other two premises: that the imaginary has the force of the real, and the remembered the force of the immediate, are more problematic. The problem, as I see it, is the according of equal status. Partly, the problematic issue comes down to definition: what exactly does Fisher mean by ‘with as much force’? His passage does not directly state that he, or the narrator of the passage, is not able to distinguish real events from imaginary ones, but on one reading, that is surely implied. If an imagined event truly had the force of a real one, then what element could there be that would enable the subject to make the distinction? And if such an element was present, if the subject could point to it and say: *it is this which enables me to identify that the experience is imaginary, not real*, then does not that also mean that the imagined experience did *not* have the force of the real, precisely on account of that distinguishing element?

If, on the other hand, ‘with as much force’ means that the real and the imagined are not distinguishable, that raises issues of the status we accord to imagined experience. It is also related to the fact of our limited sensory

perceptions and thus introduces the risk of delusion; precisely the concern that was felt in the seventeenth century about the operation of imagination. Both Fisher and Bishop enter into this area of experience. It is an issue which I have confronted, too, but in a much more modest manner.

In the critical part of this dissertation I refer to Donald Davie's placing Fisher with Philip Larkin in a tradition defined by Thomas Hardy. Fisher has several very different antecedents, but amongst English writers, I would point to William Blake as representing a tradition that seems hospitable to Fisher, partly on account of his openness to the possibility of an element in human experience that cannot be described solely by appeal to sensory data; his 'polytheism without gods' (Fisher, 2005, p.43). Blake is also known for being hostile to working from nature.<sup>9</sup> That is generally applied to his approach to painting, but the comment could refer to his poetry, too. Like Bishop and Fisher, he does not have the object in the real world before his physical eye when he represents it.

The issue of indeterminacy is another which I feel to be important in my work and one by which I can identify the influence of the poets discussed in the critical section. By avoiding categorical assertions, indeterminacy allows the poet the freedom to operate in that space between consciousness and the external world.

The title of this dissertation, and of the poetry collection which forms its creative part, points to several elements that are raised in the critical part. Firstly, there is the issue of the directedness of perception: 'without an aim' draws attention to this by ironically suggesting the absence of such a

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<sup>9</sup> See Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London: Random House, Vintage edition, 1999), p.59.

direction. The strength and vitality of the relationship we have with objects in the external world determines the quality of directedness in our perception of those objects, as Elizabeth Bishop's poem, 'Crusoe in England', demonstrates (see below p. 155). Crusoe's knife meant much more to him when he was on the island: 'it reeked of meaning'.<sup>10</sup> It is my contention that that meaning is inseparable from the directedness of Crusoe's perception of the object and that both vitalise the use of the name for the thing. In England, Crusoe remarks, 'My eyes rest on it and pass on'; I could add, 'without an aim'.

The pronunciation of those title words is virtually indistinguishable from the phrase, 'without a name'. The role of language and naming in the construction of our understanding of the external world is another issue raised in the critical part of this dissertation. The title is itself an example of indeterminacy within language use similar to that which J. H. Prynne draws attention to when he gives the poem, 'Die A Millionaire', the subtitle, '(pronounced "diamonds in the air")'.<sup>11</sup> Naming – language – is thus the vehicle by which we both understand and misunderstand the world. The point is made in another poem, 'Cold Isn't It', that language mediates experience and that the external world contains elements for which we may not have a name.

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991), p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 13.

### **1.3 The poems in *Without An Aim***

In this section I will comment on some aspects of the form, style and themes of the poems in *Without An Aim* and refer to specific poems to illustrate the points I am making.

#### **1.3.1 Dramatic monologue**

I use dramatic monologue for several of the poems as this form is suited to revealing gaps, inconsistencies and indeterminacy in the narrator's personality or attitude. As such, it is a form which is consistent with the notion of border-country that I referred to earlier. The opening poem, 'Lapidary', illustrates the manner in which dramatic monologue can be employed to achieve these effects. The nature of the narrator's activity is unclear; he does not reveal enough to indicate whether he is a police officer, private investigator or a stalker, yet the phrases he uses reflect on a possible identity - 'curtains | mostly drawn' - hints at voyeurism. The environment and oppressive atmosphere are also associated with the narrator since they are revealed in his words; the light that 'dazzles others' and the shade that is like stone both serve to conceal his actions and provide him with the possibility of evading observation. In the same way, the poem fails to reveal his motives or goals. This indeterminacy is underlined in the penultimate line where the conditional structure: 'If I'd scratched my own motto | there it would read' embodies both the narrator's and the poem's failure to communicate.



### 1.3.2 Relativity and misperception

Our experience of the passage of time is also relative, dependent on such elements as context, attitude and knowledge, by which I mean an awareness of the significance of events. The multifarious nature of this experience is reflected in several poems. 'Canoe Trip' contrasts the experience of navigating a canoe through rapids with the growth of a sapling. While shooting the rapids, the narrator's attention is focused on events that have a span of a second or two. During that brief moment these events fill the consciousness to the exclusion of every other item in the external world. As soon as they are over, they cease to exist. By contrast, the act of propping up a toppling pine sapling is visible two years later in the kink formed as the plant adjusts and readjusts to the angle at which it is growing. 'Antiquities' pursues the same theme of the relativity of time, and specifically how our perspective on time might be one-sided and misleading, while 'Night And Day' considers the border created by the existence of those two aspects of the diurnal cycle.

The fact of relativity brings with it the possibility of misperception. This is an obvious element in experience and probably not of very great significance in itself, though the consequences may be. More interesting though, might be the fact of reassessment, of revising the sense or meaning of an experience in the light of later knowledge. In some sense, this is the human equivalent of the sapling changing the direction of its growth. A simple example appears in 'At The Photograph Exhibition' where the narrator thinks,

at first glance, that a photograph shows a close-up image of a piece of stone but then realises it is actually a long-shot of a cliff-face.

The passage of time and the possibility of misperception and subsequent reappraisal is an issue that I wanted to explore in 'How To Grow A Crystal'. The particles that will form the crystal are invisible to the naked eye. The sub-unit that they form is similarly imperceptible. The formation of the crystal in its early stages is the equivalent of a situation of which the narrator is unaware; it is 'submersed in its environment'. When the process speeds up, the appearance of the crystal equates to the moment of insight when the true significance of a past event becomes apparent. The play on the words 'solution' and 'fallout' underline this aspect of the poem and draw attention to the fact that the new insight may have a radical impact on understanding. The final line hints that this process may be 'hard' and uses the play on the word 'rock'. 'Rock' is slang for a diamond as well as having the literal sense of stone, and thus, firstly, allows the introduction of the word 'hard' into the poem and secondly, introduces the theme of perception and external world conveyed in the image of stone, which I explain more fully below.

The passage of time is an underlying theme in the collection, mainly at a personal level, on the time scale of an individual life. This is why I was keen to include poems that have childhood settings or associations. However, the larger operations of history and geological time also play a part. In 'Origins' I wanted to combine those two temporal perspectives and also to introduce the role of language in how we experience our sense perceptions. The narrator's earliest experience of a holiday has imbued the word itself

with the features of the place where he experienced it. Thus ‘waves rib the tidal sands | beneath Prague and Gstaad.’

### **1.3.3 The human and non-human worlds**

There is a potential danger that writing which focuses on the role of the individual consciousness in perception and representation of reality may come to seem self-regarding. The human subject may become too much the centre of attention. I reasoned that one way to avoid this was to ensure that the role of the external world as the source of the sensory data by which that world is represented in consciousness was emphasised in the poetry. One strategy that I employed to achieve this was to locate the human body in a physical environment that is acting on it, as in ‘Liminal’. In ‘The New Sisyphus’ this strategy takes the form of the physical world, in the shape of a pebble, itself the product of geological change, metaphorically becoming lodged in the body. That image is repeated in the next poem, ‘This Neck Of The Woods’, where the narrator describes ‘a tender spot’ on his jaw that is ‘like a pebble’. The features of the wood are described in terms of the body: neck, thigh and gut, thus indicating the two-way nature of the relationship. Over several poems I aimed to build up this feeling of a continuity and interaction between the external world and consciousness via the body. For example, in the title poem, ‘Without An Aim’, the stream’s current is compared to ‘the flow of my own blood | through my own veins’. This theme is also important in the poem, ‘Falstaff’s Gut’, where the emphasis is on the

role of both the body's physical equipment for perception and the imagination in creating the representation of reality in the consciousness.

I will comment further on the relationship between the human and natural worlds later, but this is a good point to mention an image that runs through the whole collection and its function: stone, in some shape or other, appears in many of the poems. I use it partly as a linking device that enables dialogue between the poems. But more importantly, it is an image that represents, almost as an emblem or totem, the external, material world or, in the form of a kind of go-between, the relationship between the human subject and the world. Stone is ideally suited for that purpose because it is an image of the concrete, solid and heavy. I use it for various purposes in different poems, which I shall comment on specifically later.

#### **1.3.4 To leave, or to stay at home?**

The only historical event to play a part in the poems occurs in 'Arrival In Finland' where the economic consequences of troop movements during the Crimean War are seen to lead directly to the creation of Finland's own currency. At the personal level, though, the link between childhood and adult experience is much more apparent. As in Muldoon's collection, *Why Brownlee Left*, there are several poems set in childhood: 'Departure', 'Origins' and 'Boats', for example. The first of the childhood poems, 'Departure', introduces the theme of leaving home, travel, and a sense of homesickness and loss. The poem establishes a link between the broadening of knowledge about the world and travel, and therefore the need to leave

home. Not leaving, being left behind ‘standing on the quay’, may possibly result in regret and a sensation of failure or missed opportunities, but departing can also lead to regret, loneliness and the loss of the warmth and security of home. The situation is ambiguous. The narrator is pulled in two contradictory directions and the poem inhabits the space between those conflicting impulses. In its own way, the poem explores a theme similar to Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘The Imaginary Iceberg’ (see p. 136 below) and to Paul Muldoon’s treatment of leaving home in *Why Brownlee Left* (see p. 211 and section 5.5 below).

‘Origins’ extends the theme by, firstly, introducing a time perspective that encompasses prehistory in its references to Dorset’s Jurassic coast, thereby incorporating the idea that the urge to leave, to broaden experience and knowledge and discover a new place of belonging is linked to mankind’s evolutionary development. Secondly, the development of language is linked to the desire for experience, a different place in which to receive it, and a new language in which to express it. The desire to explore acquires this evolutionary aspect in the association of the goal of exploration, the distant headland, with a prehistoric beast, and the development of the language in which to express these experiences is also seen in this evolutionary context since the word ‘*holiday*’ has a Jurassic level. In its last line, ‘Origins’ hints at the contrary emotion of fear at being ‘carr[ied] too far out’. As with ‘Departure’, the poem confronts the contradictory nature of the impulse to discover new locations but also to remain in the security of the known and familiar. The title, ‘Origins’ also introduces the notion of the place we start from, a location which is our natural home and which can confer authenticity.

‘Dedication’ combines some of the themes that I have mentioned so far. The protagonist’s relationship with the external world is portrayed in his search for the pebble. That search is linked to the sense of loss and the passage of time. This poem also highlights the themes of presence and absence, which, of course, are closely connected with the notion of loss. The fact that it is the pebble that is lost, and the sense in which stone represents the external, material world, suggests that the narrator’s relationship with the world of material objects is damaged or compromised in some way. By implication, the loss entails that location where the original home is and the possibility of an authentic relationship with the external world.

### **1.3.5 Being at home in the world**

The notion of a past time, and a past existence, which was possibly ideal, or at least authentic, and which has been lost, leaving the protagonist with a diminished existence in the present, is a familiar theme from *Why Brownlee Left*. There is something of this quality in the protagonists in ‘Dedication’ and ‘Without An Aim’. The atmosphere in the opening lines of the latter poem indicates that some kind of disaster has taken place, though there is no explanation as to what that might have been. The idea of this disaster is conveyed by the image of disruption in the natural environment: the sudden and unexplained diversion of the course of the stream. The result of this is to leave the narrator with no sense of direction or purpose. The key word, ‘familiar’, appears in line 8, indicating that the conditions pertaining when the stream ran its former course represented the security and familiarity of home.

The title sounds like ‘without a name’, as if his actual identity has been undermined by this loss of his original home. It also hints at the role of language, naming, in the creation of identity and concepts of familiarity.

By equating the state of the stream’s flow with the circulation of his own blood, the narrator of ‘Without An Aim’ establishes the relationship between himself and the natural environment. The same effect was used in ‘Liminal’ where the crest of the incoming wave is described as a ‘pulse’ and the duration of its effect is measured against the narrator’s own heartbeat. The effect is achieved again at the end of ‘The New Sisyphus’, this time with the favoured image of stone in the form of a pebble. Having united the urban locations of work, town, shops, bus and train with the natural environment on a geological scale, the pebble, by being squeezed in the narrator’s hand, feels as if it has become part of his flesh. The image suggests the interdependence of the human and natural worlds, but with a disturbing element in that it is the result of bruising and an ache. The effect is more understated than the effect of Muldoon’s handling of this theme in ‘Whim’ and ‘The One Desire’ but it is comparable (see section 5.4 below).

‘Comparative Studies’ pursues this comparison of human and natural worlds. The treatment is comic but there is a serious issue at the end of the poem: how do we understand our observations of the natural world? The notion of the researcher hoping to observe an animal ‘urging itself on’ is obviously an extreme and absurd example of humans imposing their own attitudes and preconceptions in inappropriate ways. This begs the question, though, of how far it is possible to be objective, if at all. Is it not inevitable that we must always see the world through human-coloured spectacles? The

final poem, ‘Symphony’, puts this issue in dramatic form in the image of the chord of C minor trying ‘to understand | the meaning of the music | made by all the other notes’. This is really to question the possibility of objectivity and this becomes a theme of the collection.

The poems do not try to offer a solution to this dilemma, but several others explore the idea of trying to observe more clearly, or to adopt a radically altered mode of observation, a new point of view. ‘Out There’, for example, combines a naturalistic image of the narrator regarding a distant setting sun through a corridor of felled trees with the image of looking through the crack of a slightly opened door. The discrepancy between the actual size of the corridor between trees and the imagined crack in a doorway emphasises the changed mode of perception. There is a subtle allusion to Blake’s ‘doors of perception’ in the image. The poem indirectly asks what such a new perception might consist of. The word ‘*ethereal*’ hints at a mystical element which is underlined by the ‘silkweed seem[ing] more solid | than the shimmering quayside granite’. However, the poem and its narrator both know that this is due to the effect of the water, ‘the medium I see it through’. The narrator rejects the illusion and in the final line seems to desire direct contact with the external world – ‘Give me stone’ - but the poem does not comment further on that point.

‘Sweeney’ takes the idea of seeing differently in a more literal sense in the character of the mythological Sweeney, whose point of view has been transformed into that of a bird and who sees the life and houses of the humans in a different light. He also sees the reality of the environment more accurately than the dwellers in the houses. This connects the idea of seeing



differently with the theme of leaving the safety and security of home behind. Sweeney has gained a new insight in some sense but he has had to leave his old way of life behind and this gives rise to a degree of uncertainty and trepidation: 'I haven't decided yet | what to do when winter arrives.'

The use of a mythological figure is a device that allows the exploration of more esoteric ideas that it might otherwise be difficult to handle. Another way of accomplishing this is used in 'Talking To Edith Södergran' where I have introduced an actual historical character. Södergran was a nature mystic and I introduce her point of view and her perception of the natural world in the form of words from translated versions of some of her poems. In the first stanza the narrator relates the sensation experienced when being in a high place that his own body is many times greater than it is in fact. He describes the sensation that he is able to step across a valley but he is unable to believe that such an experience can be anything other than an illusion which can be explained in terms of physical laws. His attitude is contrasted with Södergran's certainty regarding a spiritual element in the relationship between consciousness and the external world. The narrator's failure to be convinced by Södergran's view of perception and experience is probably the clearest, most direct statement on this theme in the collection. However, the phrase, 'as much as I can manage', suggests that it could be a shortcoming in the narrator's powers of perception that is the reason for his doubt and that Södergran's view is valid.

It is not only the issue of perception and experience of the external world that concerns me, but also how we represent those perceptions and experiences. This obviously raises the issue of language and the role it plays

in representation. I have already referred to this in passing in relation to 'Origins', 'Without An Aim' and the ending of 'Out There' where the narrator rejects the 'disembodied tone' and wants a more direct contact with the objects in the external world. The narrator seems to be rejecting language at this point because it is divorced from objects. 'Out There' does not pursue that issue any further, but clearly, words can be used to place a specific interpretation on experience or situations. This is what happens in 'Foreign Aid' where the speaker is presenting the situation in language that carries an implicit attitude and judgement. The title itself crystallises the ambiguity created by language in this respect: does 'foreign aid' refer to the activities of the narrator's military organisation, or the help which the local soldiers are providing?

The role of language is the explicit subject of the poem, 'Cold Isn't It', where words are portrayed as coming between the objects of the external world and consciousness in the way that snow covers the landscape, obscuring the actual features of the terrain. Those features are observable only in a changed form as 'the lumps | and bumps that mark | the presence of the thing itself.' Furthermore, the poem points out that there are experiences for which the words to represent them do not exist.

In 'On Doing Jig-Saw Puzzles' I used the image of the puzzle to describe the way that we construct our own reality and that happens largely through language, of course. The jig-saw puzzle of the stone wall uses the image of stone to emphasise that this involves our perceptions of the external world and the fact that the narrator is constructing a wall, a kind of barrier, suggests that this prevents access to the thing itself.

The conflict between the urge to achieve objectivity and the subjective terms of perception leads inevitably to the role that imagination might play in trying to understand the world we inhabit. I have chosen to handle this theme without committing to a single point of view. Thus 'Out There' would appear to reject imagination as a useful route to knowledge but some other poems suggest that it might serve a beneficial purpose. In 'Learning To Fly' the virtual flight that the narrator imagines could be the beginning of a new way of understanding perception, though it results in failure on this occasion. The following poem is 'Sweeney', in which the protagonist has achieved a new point of view but under conditions that might cause the reader to be sceptical. The most successful case of exercising imagination occurs in 'Having Nothing To Do With Figs' where the protagonist acquires a degree of self-knowledge via the imaginative ability to 'see himself | as others see him'. It is the lack of this ability that leads the narrator of 'Foreign Aid' to produce his comment in the final line.

The poem, 'Falstaff's Gut', embodies one of the central concepts of the relationship between the external world and human perception of that world: that the physical structure of the body determines what the world is for us, that our concept of ourselves is determined by the place our body has within the external world, and that both of these are dependent on language if we are to be conscious of them.

The themes that have developed in the course of writing these poems include: home and a place of belonging; the urge to leave home, to travel in search of a new place of belonging; the loss of security and sense of belonging; origins and authenticity; subjectivity and the role of imagination in

forming knowledge; the constructedness of knowledge and the role of language in producing it; the possibility, or otherwise, of objective knowledge; indeterminacy, ambiguity and misperception; the relationship between the human and natural worlds. These are all themes which will be seen to be of direct concern to the poets in the critical section of this dissertation.

## Part Two: Critical Study

### Chapter Two

#### Introduction

#### 2.1 The scope of this study

This dissertation examines how language can be used to represent the experience of our perceptions of the real world. This is a double process, involving first identifying the perception and then expressing it in language. The attempt to represent our experiences involves poets in making decisions about how best to utilise language for this purpose and that in turn can lead poets to consider the conflicting demands of rhetoric and ideas of plain speaking in their attempts to represent the external world accurately in their writing. I use rhetoric here in its widest possible sense to refer to the manner and style of expression as opposed to its content. That rhetoric and plain sincerity might be understood to exist in a state of conflict derives, of course, from Plato who criticised the use the Sophists made of rhetoric to manipulate the opinions of their audience rather than to establish the truth.<sup>12</sup> For the Sophists, Plato argued, persuasion was paramount, and they readily exploited any devices, figures, verbal ploys and linguistic flourishes that would enhance their persuasiveness. This was in contradiction of the original function of

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Rowland Smith, *On Modern Poetry: From Theory to Total Criticism* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2012), pp.69-70. Future references to this volume are in parenthesis.

rhetoric as a tool of philosophical debate designed to reveal truth. According to Plato, rhetoric had become debased. Today, as Robert Rowland Smith points out, ‘Rhetoric is understood primarily in the sense of political manipulation’, an understanding that carries a degree of disapprobation (Smith, p.70). Rhetoric, in its modern form of spin, suggests a willingness to dispense with the truth, at least in so far as the truth would work against acceptance of the politically favoured opinion. However, as Smith adds, the techniques used by rhetoricians come ‘from the same dressing-up box that poetry uses to adorn itself’, with the result that the use of literary devices in modern poetry is often ‘treated with suspicion’.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, an equivocal attitude to the truth is a prevalent feature of the modern mindset. Smith comments that, ‘we believe everyone is entitled to their opinion, everything is relative, and that absolute truths do not exist’ (p. 70), opinions that Plato’s Sophists would have found quite congenial.

Yet many modern poets are committed to exploring methods of writing that ‘tell the truth about things’, as Randall Jarrell remarked of William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*, and went on to ask, ‘how can we find a language so close to the world that the world can be represented and understood in it?’<sup>14</sup> That expression, ‘find a language’, conveys the idea that the language the poet uses will not be such that is readily available and in common usage. The notion of needing to find the language implies that the form will be such that is unfamiliar to the reader. The demand that this

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<sup>13</sup> Smith, p. 69. Smith comments (p. xiii) that ‘modern’ poetry generally refers to post-1900, although that term does not then describe a homogeneous category.

<sup>14</sup> Randall Jarrell, ‘*Paterson* by William Carlos Williams’, in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. by Brad Leithauser (New York: Harper Collins Perennial edition, 2000), pp. 67-75, (p.68).

language is better suited to representing and understanding the world involves the writer in making decisions in which rhetorical devices may be felt to be at odds with plain sincerity. In addition, the writer must determine the nature of the world they represent. 'I am trying to be truthful', Carol Ann Duffy declares in 'Valentine'.<sup>15</sup> Smith comments that Duffy's foregrounding of the need to be honest 'could serve as a motto for identity moderne: the desire to convey subjective feeling in an intense fashion that nevertheless keeps poetic artifice on a tight leash in case it compromises the sincerity' (xvi).

The references here to intense subjective feeling and the need to convey or express that feeling sincerely clearly suggests lyric poetry. M. H. Abrams comments that for the expressive lyric:

The first test any poem must pass is no longer, 'Is it true to nature?' or 'Is it appropriate to the requirements either of the best judges or the generality of mankind?' but a criterion looking in a different direction; namely 'Is it sincere? Is it genuine?'<sup>16</sup>

Abrams makes a very interesting distinction here between nature and authenticity, one which is not apparent in Randall Jarrell's comment. One of the aspects I shall investigate is this separation of subjective experience and nature, or the external world.

Furthermore, these general concerns are widespread in modern poetry. For example, in a review of J. H. Prynne's *Poems*, Michael Glover

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Robert Rowland Smith, p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.22-3.

commented that Prynne's work 'seems to strive after two things simultaneously: the need to define, and to pin down, the nature of the relationship between language and actuality and the need to let some thwarted inner sweetness flow'.<sup>17</sup> Although the terms that Glover uses are slightly different they refer to the same division between subjective lyrical expression ('inner sweetness') and an authentic representation of the external world since defining the relationship between language and actuality necessarily implies the ability to produce a representation of that world and identify the degree of its authenticity.

My investigation will raise a series of issues: origins and authenticity; concerns with identity, home and a sense of belonging; the wanderer's instinct to travel; choice, free will and predestination; nature and culture. The range of issues is so wide precisely because the implications of telling 'the truth about things' forces a consideration of what those 'things' mean to the observer. In this context, 'things' refers not just to inanimate objects but to all aspects of experience through sense perceptions, including our experience of other consciousnesses and behaviour.

These are issues that concern me both with and outside of my own writing. What do all those 'things' out there mean to me? A serious response to that question requires an objective stance toward subjectivity: a phenomenological attitude. I comment in more detail on this subject later in this introduction. Personally, I am somewhat sceptical as to how far that can be achieved, as my poem, 'Symphony', indicates, and as the findings of my

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Glover in *The Independent on Sunday*, quoted in Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.120.



research suggest, but the attempt is endlessly fascinating and even failure can be rewarding.

## **2.2 The cultural rules of representation**

An important aspect of this aim ‘to tell the truth about things’ concerns the representation in poems of objects that have an existence in the external world. However, in order to tell this truth it is necessary first to have knowledge of these objects. That in turn requires an understanding of the nature of our perceptions and the status of objects in the external world. It is this issue which I will begin to examine next.

In his essay, ‘Donald Davie and the Failure of Englishness’, Antony Easthope addresses the issue of how the real world might be represented in poetry. During the course of his argument he arrives at this point: ‘Because the real exists only at one with itself, outside representation, the real can only be represented precisely *as* representation, a human construction, and so not as itself’ (Easthope, p. 22). This would appear to be both self-evident and conclusive. A poem, in this respect, resembles a painting of a pipe, on which René Magritte inscribed, ‘This is not a pipe’. Similarly, if the word ‘iceberg’ appears in a poem then, as Elizabeth Bishop’s title indicates, it must be ‘An Imaginary Iceberg’.

This fact is described by Easthope as ‘a problem’ (p. 22). The reason it appears as a problem is that other distinctions are made in poetry regarding the manner in which objects that have an existence in the external world are treated by poets. Just before making the point quoted above, Easthope had

been examining the implications of Pound's comment, which Easthope summarises in his own words, that when a natural object acts as a symbol, 'the symbolic meaning should not *replace* a literal sense of the object as it is presented in the everyday world' (p. 21). As Easthope realises, this suggests that both symbolic representations and representations which constitute 'a literal sense of the object as it is presented in the everyday world' are possible. The 'problem', I understand, is just what the latter might consist of, given the condition already agreed, that 'the real can only be represented [...] as [...] a human construction, and so not as itself'. There would seem to be a contradiction. However, to illustrate the validity of Pound's distinction, Easthope had referred to Charles Tomlinson's poem, 'Hawks', which 'keeps moving between an assertion of the difference between hawk and human, on the one hand, and "what we share with them" on the other' (p. 21). He compares Tomlinson's poem favourably with 'the sentimental banalities of Ted Hughes's hawk poems'.

It is the symbolic value of Hughes's hawk that Easthope takes issue with, but even so, in order for Easthope's argument to have a sound basis there must be some identifiable sense in which Tomlinson's treatment of the hawk is closer to the 'literal sense of the object as it is presented in the everyday world', rather than being just another 'human construction'. Of course, it is quite reasonable to suggest that some representations are better than others but this does beg the question of how the judgement is made; on what it is based. Forming and defending judgements of quality in writing that represents objects from the everyday world may mean focusing on the skill exhibited in the use of language. Such a defence though, if it rested entirely

on language, is all about human construction. If, however, the defence is based on a claim that one description is closer to the reality of the object in the external world, as Easthope's defence of Tomlinson seems to be, then we need to know on what authority that judgement can be based.

Easthope does offer a solution, which is for the poet to produce an 'effect of the real'. He goes on to explain a 'strategy' for achieving this:

A main strategy here ... is to sustain a set of subjective meanings that are obviously derived from an objective setting alongside but askew from a rendering of the objective setting itself, so that the effect of the real comes to be represented in the gap between them, as it were.

(p. 22)

As I understand this, the 'set of subjective meanings' conforms to the condition earlier identified that all representation is a human construction, but that the 'rendering of the objective setting itself', by being 'askew', achieves a quality that is somehow different to the 'subjective meanings'. This, Easthope claims, creates the gap where the 'effect of the real' resides. The greatest problem is how the objective setting can be anything other than another subjective representation; and that being so, how it can harbour something more real, even as an effect.

It is revealing that directly after observing that 'the real can only be represented precisely *as* representation', Easthope goes on to ask: 'How then can an effect of the real be given?' The impulse to produce this effect appears to be the immediate response to the conditions of representation, indeed, a

resistance to those conditions. Easthope does not refer to Roland Barthes at this point but it is worth considering Barthes's comments in his essay, 'The Reality Effect', since his and Easthope's phrases are so similar. Barthes begins by identifying what he calls 'insignificant notation' which 'is related to description'.<sup>18</sup> He finds an origin for the practice of descriptive writing in rhetoric. Early in antiquity the epideictic genre was 'a ceremonial discourse intended to excite admiration' (Barthes, p. 143). In the second century A.D. 'there was a craze for ecphrasis, the detachable set piece ... whose object was to describe places, times, people, or works of art' (p. 143). At this time there was no demand for description to be realistic. As Barthes puts it, 'plausibility is not referential here but openly discursive: it is the generic rules of discourse which lay down the law' (p. 144). Such description served an aesthetic function that has continued into modern literature. Barthes takes the example from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* of the description of Rouen and comments that, although the modern age demands verisimilitude, the figures of rhetoric persist. Barthes concludes that the description is 'justified ... by the laws of literature: its "meaning" exists, it depends on conformity not to the model but to the cultural rules of representation' (p. 145).

However, Barthes points out that modern description 'is thoroughly mixed up with "realistic" imperatives, as if the referent's exactitude, superior or indifferent to any other function, governed and alone justified its description' (p. 145). Barthes traces the process of development to the point

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<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect' in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141- 148 (p. 143).

where ‘declaratively renouncing the constraints of the rhetorical code, realism must seek a new reason to describe’ (p. 146). He then goes on to observe that:

The irreducible residues of functional analysis have this in common: they denote what is called “concrete reality” (insignificant gestures, transitory attitudes, insignificant objects, redundant words). The pure and simple “representation” of the “real”, the naked relation of “what is” (or has been) thus appears as a resistance to meaning.

(p. 146)

Barthes thus draws attention to a division between the ‘real’ and ‘meaning’. Meaning is constructed by humans; the ‘real’ is out there, and according to modern realism, it is ‘self-sufficient’ and ‘strong enough to belie any notion of “function”’ (p. 147). Similarly, verisimilitude, which to the ancients was distinct from the ‘real’, a matter of public opinion and not an ‘absolute’, takes on the nature of the ‘real’ (p. 147). As Barthes puts it, ‘a new verisimilitude is born, which is precisely *realism* (by which we mean any discourse which accepts “speech-acts” justified by their referent alone)’ (p. 147). Barthes names this the ‘referential illusion’ (p. 148).

I would suggest that Barthes’s concerns here are rather different from those of Easthope, despite the similarity in wording, which might explain why Easthope makes no reference to Barthes. However, I will refer to the issue of the conflict between the ‘real’ and ‘meaning’ that Barthes raises when I investigate the divide between the empirical realist approach of the

Movement poets and the alternative, so-called ‘counter-culture’<sup>19</sup> poets later in this section and in the following section. We will also see that Barthes’s observations are important in relation to the issue of scientific knowledge and the limitations of scientific objectivity that will arise when I consider phenomenological aspects of the reality question (see section 2.4). In section 2.5 I consider these elements in relation to ecocritical theory.

Easthope offers a few examples to illustrate his ‘effect of the real’ in operation. In addition to Tomlinson’s and Hughes’s poems about hawks, he refers to Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Snow Man’ and ‘Montana Pastoral’ by J. V. Cunningham. In the space of one page, the word ‘sentimental’ appears twice and ‘unsentimentality’ once. All four poems are judged according to the degree to which they exhibit this quality. Easthope’s point is that ‘the sentimental cast of mind [...] seeks to co-opt object to subjectivity’ (Easthope, p. 22). By contrast, Cunningham’s unsentimental approach presents ‘an objective landscape’ of summer, grasses, dryness and wheat but ‘find[s] in this pastoral arcadia anything but happiness’ (p. 22). This could be taken two ways but presumably Easthope’s intention is not simply to debunk the pathetic fallacy here so reading his comment to mean that the wheat is not happy would probably be to mistake his meaning. More likely he is saying that the human subject has not experienced happiness through its exposure to this natural environment. There may be any number of reasons to account for this but it is difficult to see why any of them should elicit our admiration particularly, or to see why it should be ‘sentimental’ for a human being to

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<sup>19</sup> Davie’s term. See Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1972), reprinted in *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), pp. 21-170 (p. 142).

experience pleasurable sensations on a summer day without rain, surrounded by grasses and wheat.

Easthope's argument seems to become contradictory when, having congratulated Cunningham on not finding happiness in arcadia, he comments on his 'finding instead a subjective possibility expressed in images of winter' (22). I understand this to be an example of what Easthope means when he speaks of subjective meanings being askew from the objective setting: there is this kind of discrepancy. However, both the 'images of winter' and those images that constitute a representation of summer are human constructs. If combining the images of summer, wheat and grasses with happiness amounts to co-opting object to subjectivity, then surely combining images of winter ('blizzards' and 'this huddled chill') with the opposite of happiness amounts to the same. It is no defence, I think, to point to the 'objective landscape' since it is no more 'objective' than the blizzard and the chill. Easthope's argument seems to rest on the unstated assumption that the summer landscape is more genuinely present in the poem than the blizzard and the chill.

What interests me far more than the applicability of the strategy, though, is the position that Easthope feels compelled to adopt, of finding a strategy at all, of feeling a need to defend the validity of an approach to writing poetry grounded in its being closer to the literal sense of the object. I feel that this issue of the representation of things in poetry is crucial to the idea of sincerity and truth. It is therefore with a curiosity about this relationship between the objects of the external world and the representation of that world in poetry, via the perceptions and consciousness of the poet, that I have approached the poets in this study. I have asked myself the question:

How do these poets go about finding their own solution to the dilemma that Easthope identifies in this passage of his essay?

Furthermore, the point that Easthope raises here and the nature of his solution to the 'problem' is part of a larger discussion within British poetry. That discussion is deeply bound up with perceptions of reality and what is involved in producing representations of objects from the real world.

Easthope goes on to comment on the poetry of the Movement and refers to the writings of Donald Davie and Robert Conquest in terms that reveal the nature of the division between the two opposing views. In order to get a clear picture of what is involved in this division it will be helpful next to refer to Davie's comments on the work of Roy Fisher and the terms in which he formulates his judgements.

In his 1972 study, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, Donald Davie argues a case for placing Roy Fisher, along with Philip Larkin and others, in an essentialist English tradition that was dominated by the figure of Thomas Hardy. Although Davie acknowledges that Fisher 'writes in free verse and open forms' he claims that the affinities with Larkin and Hardy are more significant. His argument is based on the writers' exposure to shared 'social and political circumstances' rather than on a direct influence derived from reading the work of the earlier author.<sup>20</sup> During the course of his examination of Fisher's work Davie quotes the prose section of 'Lullaby and Exhortation for the Unwilling Hero' from *City* and comments: 'This is description at its most impressive ... One responds to it in the first place as one responds to

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<sup>20</sup> Davie, p. 142.



Larkin's 'Whitsun Weddings': this is how it is!' (p.146). Davie's response to this passage in Fisher's work is revealing of the grounds on which he makes his larger claims for an English poetic tradition headed by Thomas Hardy. It is based on a belief in the empirical, realist approach to writing poetry whereby the poem's success is judged by its truth to life and its, the poem's, ability to represent that reality. This would seem to be a perfect example of Barthes's 'referential illusion'; his account of the 'simple "representation" of the "real", the naked relation of "what is" (or has been)' is precisely the element that Davie is appealing to in his phrase: 'this is how it is!' In the terms that Abrams uses above, Davie is answering the question: 'Is it true to nature?' in the affirmative, rather than the question: 'Is it sincere?'

The terms in which I describe the basis of Davie's judgement of quality here are strikingly similar to the terms which Easthope had under consideration in his comments on the literal sense of objects. However, Easthope objects to the empirical nature of the approach employed by Davie and other of the Movement poets. In his essay on Davie, Easthope quotes Robert Conquest's introduction to his *New Lines* anthology, where Conquest writes that the poetry of the Movement 'is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. This reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience'.<sup>21</sup> Easthope comments: 'As Conquest makes clear, at issue is not just an *empirical* reliance upon facts but an empirical notion that the real exists unproblematically "out there"' (p. 28). Without in any way implying that the two positions, or the styles of poetry they endorse, are similar, the terms in which these arguments are presented both seem to

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Easthope in *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 28.

make a similar claim for their own approach. Conquest's 'reverence for the real person or event' could be understood as something very similar to Easthope's 'symbolic meaning should not *replace* a literal sense of the object as it is presented in the everyday world'. Or again, Davie's 'this is how it is!' could be taken to coincide with Easthope's 'effect of the real'.

It thus becomes clear that the ultimate goal of both sides is the same: they both aim to achieve a form of representation in writing that will reproduce the experience of the real more exactly than rival methods. The different courses they take, the differences in the style of writing they produce, derive from philosophical differences about the nature of our perceptions and their relation to the external world. As can be seen, this is a restatement of my principle question.

One indication of the differences that are at issue here is suggested by Easthope's introduction of the word 'unproblematically' into his comment. The Movement's poetics appeal to a commonsense understanding of the real. For example, and of great significance, the fact that the recognition of success in the representation of reality is presented by Davie as an instinctive reaction. The exclamation, 'this is how it is!' is self-evident and brooks no contradiction, Davie implies. He certainly does not justify it beyond making an appeal to the feelings of anyone who knows the cities of the North and Midlands. Easthope identifies this same attitude in Conquest and refutes it as a species of jingoism:

Conquest not merely advocates Englishness, he enacts its main procedures in his advocacy. To defend English national culture, he

appeals to individuals who simply experience Englishness as a direct access to the real, and this is the method of empiricism.<sup>22</sup>

By contrast, Easthope's 'strategy' for achieving 'an effect of the real' raises concerns, as I have indicated above, that might be termed 'problematic'.

### **2.3 The mainstream and counter-culture**

So despite certain similarities in the goals described by Easthope on the one hand, and by Davie, Conquest and the Movement on the other, two distinct schools of thought are in question here. They correspond to a division in British poetry that widened after the heyday of the Movement and was at its most marked in the 1970s. Davie himself refers to this division as 'literary culture and counter-culture' or 'an establishment and anti-establishment' and states that readers and critics feel persuaded to take sides.<sup>23</sup> Several of the poets belonging to the 'counter-culture' faction were published in an anthology, *A Various Art*, in 1987. In the introduction to that anthology one of the editors, Andrew Crozier, described the kind of poetry sanctioned under the 'redefinition of taste in the 1950s':

It was not to be ambitious, or to seek to articulate ambition through the complex deployment of its technical means: imagery was either suspect or merely clinched an argument; the verse line should not, by

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<sup>22</sup> Easthope, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Davie, p. 142.

the pressure of its energy or shape might exert on syntax (sic), intervene in meaning; language was always to be grounded in the presence of a legitimating voice.<sup>24</sup>

Reacting against this formula, the poets in the anthology looked outside England, and particularly to America and ‘the tradition ... of Pound and Williams’ (Crozier, p. 12). It was from the American poets writing in this tradition that the counter-culture British poets found examples that constituted an alternative way to represent the world and experiences that were relevant to them. This is directly relevant to my concerns in this study because those American poets were themselves asking the same question, as Randall Jarrell’s comment on *Paterson*, quoted earlier, illustrates. Specifically, this involved exposure to the open form promoted by Charles Olson. These techniques were sufficiently different to the British mainstream to earn them the labels ‘alternative’ and ‘experimental’.<sup>25</sup>

Davie also refers to criticism of mainstream British poetics when he refers to the allegations circulating in the 1960s ‘that writing like Larkin’s was damagingly insular and provincial’ and considers the possibility, which significantly he rejects, of using American models. The ‘medicine prescribed’, as Davie terms it, was to read ‘foreign poets in translation and [...] some Americans’ (Davie, p.77). But, Davie goes on to argue, this medicine failed ‘to cure the disease’, and the reason for this was that ‘the

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Crozier, ‘Introduction’ in *A Various Art*, ed. by Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville (London: Paladin Books, 1990), p. 12. I have followed the wording in the Paladin edition. I believe the unclear phrase should read: ‘the verse line should not, by the pressure its energy or shape might exert on syntax, intervene in meaning’.

<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Perloff, p.151.

distinctive quality and the distinctive task of poetry in Britain were defined, and are still to be defined, by the fact that Britain as a whole is the most industrialised landscape in the world'.<sup>26</sup> Davie is drawing attention here to the alignment of the British counter-culture poets with the American alternative model, and, more importantly for my thesis, he stresses the importance of the link between poetic production and the physical environment in which it is produced. Davie's final comment states that poetry is the result of perception of an external environment and that poetry's 'quality' and 'task' are determined by the poet's perception of that environment. This is Davie's version of 'telling the truth about things'.

Neither the establishment poets nor the counter-culture poets formed a homogeneous group with an agreed and fixed programme. Individual writers had their own approaches and there could be some inconsistency in their methods. For example, Edward Larrissy points out that '[Veronica] Forrest-Thomson's theories are more radical than her poems' and goes on to find in those poems 'the kind of easy naturalization that is expressly denigrated in her critical theories.'<sup>27</sup> However, we do have a situation where the two sides were both attempting to find a way of writing that best satisfied their desire to achieve either an 'effect of the real' or the response 'this is how it is' and that this led to two divergent practices with two essentially divergent ontologies.

One of the main differences in those ontologies involved the issue of representing objects from the real world. The orthodox establishment view

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<sup>26</sup> Davie, p.77.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Larrissy, 'Poets of *A Various Art*: J. H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Andrew Crozier', in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York, 1996), pp. 63-79, (p. 71).

was empirical and sought to reproduce the perceived reality ('this is how it is!'). The counter-culture emphasised the constructedness of perception but wanted to render the experience of that perception as truly as possible. This involved those poets in a struggle to identify the true nature of perception and find a way to convey that in language. In both cases there is an identifiable urge towards a writing that is closer to actual experience. This process sometimes brings these poets very close to speculation about the nature of the reality they are perceiving. Perhaps that is quite natural. It is in no way surprising that their interest should have been awoken. One might even say that it is inevitable that when examining the nature of one's perceptions the qualities of the things perceived also come into the equation. Thus we find J. H. Prynne making the statement: 'The first essential is to take knowledge | back to the springs.'<sup>28</sup> As Larrissy comments, this is partly 'about capturing the process of the formation of knowledge in the individual mind' (Larrissy, p. 66). There is also a sense of achieving authenticity here, though. Larrissy recognises this and goes on to compare Prynne's lines with Martin Heidegger's comments from *Being and Time*:

For the latter [Prynne], Heidegger's insistence both on the importance of language, and on the time-bound character of interpretation, seems more apt, especially because he is nonetheless wedded to a return to "those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being." Heidegger also espouses the

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<sup>28</sup> J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 13.

critique and “destruction” of inauthentic language.

(p. 66)

The issue of authenticity, grounded on origin, is one which will recur during the course of this investigation.

The perceptions and understanding that are involved here can still be constructed. One construction may coincide more closely with perceived reality (in other words, tell the truth about things more effectively), but Larrissy also identifies ‘a certain doubleness in Prynne’ of which this ‘seeking origins’ is an example (p. 66). Furthermore, there are occasions when this ‘doubleness’ takes on a contradictory quality. Larrissy refers to the ‘chains of imagery that might begin to assert themselves with an air of inscrutable self-evidence’ and that patterning of this nature can ‘exhibit that doubtful drift toward coherent views’, concluding that ‘the desire for the transcendent persists in a world that cannot believe in it’ (pp. 67-8). Larrissy goes on to enlarge on the paradox:

in the process we lose our appreciation of the actual and the momentary. Nor can we really get back to an innocent origin. Yet, paradoxically, it seems that we need the idea that we can do so in order to go forward in our track through the world.

(p. 69)

It is, indeed, a paradox, and a fascinating one. It impinges directly on my main question which I can now modify: How do my chosen poets go

about finding their own solution to the dilemma of representing the external world with Easthope's 'effect of the real' when all representation is a human construction, and do their strategies involve anything similar to the Prynne-paradox, as identified by Larrissy?

## 2.4 The relevance of phenomenology to this study

In addition to literary critical analysis and my experiences as a practising poet, I also refer at some points to phenomenology as a way of investigating a poet's point of view or creative process. A useful definition of phenomenology is provided by Robert C. Solomon:

The object of phenomenological description was to get to the essences or ideas (eidos) that presented themselves to experience, to go beyond the various 'facts' of experience and the relativity of theories and practices to those features of experience which are 'absolutely given in immediate intuition'. As opposed to [René] Descartes and [Immanuel] Kant [...] [Edmund] Husserl's phenomenology is an appeal not to deduction or dialect but directly to 'evidence', not the evidence of the senses but of the consciousness as such, 'apodeictic' evidence that can be directly intuited, with a specially trained method of philosophical investigation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 131. Solomon is referring to Edmund Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* but does not supply a page reference for the quotes used here.



Clearly, the concerns of phenomenology are directly relevant to the area that I am investigating.

In its early development under Husserl phenomenological theory asserts a manifold of appearances in the object which allows the observer to intuit an identity. Both of these aspects, manifold of appearances and identity, are separate. Thus the essence of the object is not accessible to physical observation; empirical investigation will not reveal it, imagination and intuiting must play a role. A distrust of physical senses can thus be deduced in this theory. Robert Sokolowski refers to phenomenology's 'struggle against psychologism' in the 'activity of achieving meaning, truth and logical reasoning': 'Meaning and truth also have their empirical dimensions, but they are more than just empirical things. To treat them as simply psychological is to leave out something important.'<sup>30</sup> These aspects of phenomenological theory will be seen to play a part in my investigation of the poets under consideration.

Later philosophers, for example, Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, deny this separation of appearances and essence.<sup>31</sup> The philosophers, in fact, are in dispute about similar elements in experience and perception as the poets. Husserl maintained that objects and consciousness of them were separate and that it was possible to 'bracket' the world and its objects in order to examine the activity of the ego or consciousness (Sokolowski, pp. 59-60). Heidegger rejects this bracketing and 'reinterprets the phenomenon as "the showing-itself-in-itself" without

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 115.

<sup>31</sup> See Solomon pp. 174, 176.

implying any distinction between phenomenon and thing in itself' (Solomon, p.157). Solomon continues:

For Heidegger it is Being itself rather than the existence of beings that is in question, and our understanding of Being is not derivative of our knowledge of particular beings [...] Heidegger makes it clear that it cannot be an ego that constitutes the world. (p. 157)

Heidegger emphasises that Being does not consist in the traits or qualities an object bears, nor in the information that the senses receive about an object:

a thing never reaches that position [of the greatest possible proximity to us] as long as we assign as its thingly feature what is perceived by the senses. [...] The thing itself must be allowed to remain in its self-containment.<sup>32</sup>

An important element in the phenomenological attitude is the distinction between a thing and its appearance. Sokolowski comments that without the phenomenological attitude we 'will be likely either to posit appearances as barriers between us and things, or to make things into mere ideas' (Sokolowski, p. 51). This leads to phenomenology's critique of the scientific approach:

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<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p.

So long as a science is merely objective, it is lost in positivity. We have truth about things but we have no truth about our possession of these things. We forget ourselves and lose ourselves even as we are fascinated by the things we know. The scientific truths are left floating and unpossessed. They seem to be nobody's truth. (p. 52)

Merleau-Ponty also addresses this issue of the limitations of scientific objectivity. He emphasises that scientific knowledge is important but goes on to ask

whether science does, or ever could, present us with a picture of the world which is complete, self-sufficient and somehow closed in upon itself, such that there could no longer be any meaningful questions outside this picture.<sup>33</sup>

What is important in these general definitions is the notion of a way of observing that achieves a fuller and more accurate knowledge of the real world than the everyday 'natural attitude'. This coincides with the aims, and claims, that we found amongst the poets and critics of the post-50s era and the poetry wars. The terminology used to describe the phenomenological stance is perhaps more suggestive of the counter-culture poets from that period. These issues also constitute an important aspect of the work of the poets that I will examine in detail in this study.

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<sup>33</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 34.

## 2.5 The relevance of ecocriticism to this study

The terms in which Jarrell defines Williams's project in *Paterson* bring two elements into a kind of confrontation: 'truth' and 'things', which are later expressed as 'language' and 'the world'. These two pairs are really different terms for the same concepts: truth is expressed through language; the world is composed of the things it contains. Furthermore, these terms are, in fact, a way of expressing the well-known dichotomy between culture and nature, between the human and non-human and, as such, they relate to Barthes's distinction, mentioned earlier (2.2), between 'meaning' (human) and 'the real' (non-human). Consequently, my investigations have constantly led me into issues that are also the focus of ecocriticism since ecocriticism examines the relationship between the human and non-human. Ecocriticism is deeply concerned with the impact that our industrial and post-industrial society has had, and is continuing to have, on the environment. There is a history of such concern which goes back a good deal further than the beginnings of ecocriticism. The Romantics saw a conflict between society and nature and sought various routes by which to return to a natural state and a natural way of life. In some forms those routes relied on imagination to create an 'interior state of nature'.<sup>34</sup> Even the ancient Greeks had their Golden Age. Nature in these contexts carries the association of origins, authenticity and a genuine, unspoiled state of existence. Bate comments:

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<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p.41.

The myth of the natural life which exposes the ills of our own condition is as old as Eden and Arcadia [...] All human communities have myths of origin, stories which serve both to invent a past which is necessary to make sense of the present and to establish a narrative of humankind's uniqueness and apartness from the rest of nature.

(Bate, p.26)

These myths, then, are ways of understanding the relationship between the human and the non-human. They are, in fact, earlier ways of 'telling the truth about things'. In the course of my examination of the poets in this study, I find that the same concerns that Bate describes as being traditionally involved in myths of origin appear again. Ecocritical thinking highlights these connections between earlier and modern ways of understanding these issues, as well as revealing the inevitable differences. Ecocriticism, however, is not a single concept with a unified theoretical base. There are different types of ecocriticism and there are ecocritics with differing views, focuses and approaches. Scott Slovic comments: 'There is no single, dominant world-view guiding ecocritical practice', and a little later: 'ecocriticism has no central, dominant doctrine or theoretical apparatus'.<sup>35</sup>

One of the issues that ecocriticism raises and which I feel to be important in relation to my study concerns independence and interdependence with regard to elements in the external world. Some ecocritics

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<sup>35</sup> Scott Slovic, 'Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine', in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. by Laurence Coupe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), pp. 160-162 (pp. 160, 161).

emphasise the Otherness of the natural world, its non-human quality. They use this concept as a way of countering the view that ‘because mountains and waters are human at the point of delivery, they exist only as signified within human culture’.<sup>36</sup> This then becomes a ground for demanding that the human world and the activities it engages in should show respect for the Other.

Coupe continues: ‘As Bill McKibben puts it in his lament over the subordination of the non-human world by the human: “Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us”’.<sup>37</sup> But this approach can encourage a dualism that other ecocritics believe can be self-defeating; if the human and non-human worlds appear to be divorced in this way, it can offer a justification to some minds for the commercial exploitation of the environment.

The counter-argument, then, is to insist on the inter-dependence of the human and non-human and effectively to deny the division into separate categories. Gary Snyder, who ‘seeks to refute the nature–culture split’ is a good example (Coupe, p.121). However, such an emphasis on one-ness is open to the accusation of Romantic delusion and transcendentalism. A further example of inter-dependence is proposed by Donna Haraway; when she writes that ‘one pole of a dualism cannot exist without the other’,<sup>38</sup> she is making an ‘attempt to subvert the categories of culture and nature’ (Coupe, p. 121).

Timothy Morton offers a third view on this issue. Morton argues that the idea of ‘Nature’ obscures our understanding of the environment: ‘Putting

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<sup>36</sup> Laurence Coupe, ‘General Introduction’ in *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 1-8 (p.2).

<sup>37</sup> Coupe, p. 2. Coupe cites Bill Kibben, *The End of Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1990, p. 54.

<sup>38</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘The Dualism of Primatology’ in *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 144-47 (p. 145).

something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of the woman'.<sup>39</sup> His approach leads Morton to question writing about nature and also criticism of that writing. He comments: 'I consider the literary criticism of environmental literature itself to be an example of environmental art' (p. 3). Morton sees ecocriticism as influenced, and indeed, tied, by misconceptions of 'nature', which he terms, 'the ideological baggage it is lumbered with' (p. 5) and consequently aims to 'challenge the assumptions that ground ecocriticism' (p.9).

Morton draws attention to the contradictory elements in the notion of the term: 'Nature, a transcendental term in a material mask' (p. 14). Nature, he comments, is the blanket term for all the items that can be subsumed under it, but, 'Nature wavers in between the divine and the material [...] nature hovers over things like a ghost' (p.14). Morton points out that this ambivalence in the quality of nature allows it to appear as 'something that exists in between polarized terms such as God and matter, this and that, subject and object' (p.15). He goes on to relate this to art, and specifically to 'nature writing' which has consistently promoted this misleading use of the term through its attempts to create the illusion of the presence of a natural environment in writing:

Art gives what is nonconceptual an illusive appearance of form. This is the aim of environmental literature: to encapsulate a utopian image

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<sup>39</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, paperback edition, 2009), p. 5.

of nature which does not really exist – we have destroyed it.

(p. 24)

Morton relates this aspect of aesthetics to distance, and thus to concepts of space and dimension:

*Dimension*, like the aesthetic itself, sits somewhere between an objective notion (in mathematics, for instance) and a subjective experience. Many of the writers this study encounters treat the aesthetic and nature as if they comprised a single, unified dimension. But [...] a dimension is something we are in – or not – and this assumes a dichotomy between inside and outside, the very thing that has yet to be established. (p. 25)

This is an interesting comment from my point of view because it relates to my notion, mentioned above in section 1.1, of the gap between objects in the external world and the images I receive in my consciousness through sensory perception. Morton's analysis indicates that further thought is needed on how far my conceptualisation is valid.

Morton pursues his argument to the point of concluding that 'Nature writing partly militates against ecology rather than for it. By setting up nature as an object "over there" – a pristine wilderness beyond all trace of human contact – it re-establishes the very separation it seeks to abolish' (p. 125). Morton therefore suggests that 'one of the targets of genuine critique would be the very (eco)critical languages – the constant elegy for a lost unalienated



state, the resort to the aesthetic dimension' (p. 23). It is my contention that the poets in this study share the same concern: they critique the notion of that 'lost unalienated state', the origin and home that could underwrite authenticity.

I have also referred in several places to Jonathan Bate, a thinker whose approach to ecocritical ideas is quite different to Morton's. Bate is more concerned with how art, and especially poetry, functions; he asks what poetry is for. Bate states his purpose clearly quite early on in *The Song of the Earth* when he writes:

I want to consider the possibility that other works of art, mostly poems, may create for the mind the same kind of re-creational space that a park creates for the body [...] to see what happens when we regard poems as imaginary parks in which we may breathe an air that is not toxic and accommodate ourselves to a mode of dwelling that is not alienated.

(Bate, p.64)

The role of imagination and creativity is acknowledged here, especially in the use of the hyphen in 're-creational'. There is a potential lack of clarity in this construction, though, since the prefix 're' suggests the creation again of something that already has, or has had, an existence. I am not entirely clear whether Bate means to imply this or not. He does write about the 'myth of the lost idyll' in which 'there is no restless division between internal and external worlds' (p. 74), and then goes on to consider whether poetry can construct this original state: 'Ecopoetics asks in what respects a poem may be a making

(Greek poiesis) of the dwelling-place' (p.75), though this dwelling-place may exist only in consciousness. Near the end of his book, Bate comments that

works of art can themselves be imaginary states of nature, imaginary ideal ecosystems, and by reading them, by inhabiting them, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth.

(pp. 250-51)

The tenor of this element in Bate's argument indicates a division between the human world and consciousness, on one hand, and the natural world on the other. Bate makes it quite clear that he accepts that representations of ways of being in nature are precisely that: representations (p. 20). His interest is in 'the way in which an imaginative entry into [...] fictive worlds' may encourage 'an attunement to both words and the world' and the acknowledgement that 'we do not live apart from the world' (p.23). The reader might well wonder whether Bate is offering a form of escapism here but there is a pragmatic side to Bate's position: 'it is we who have the power to determine whether the earth will sing or be silent', which Bate offers in the form of a question, but which connotes responsibility for the environment (p. 282). Bate hopes that poetry will influence human behavior. But there is also a sense that poetry will be the imaginary resting place for what mankind has destroyed.

A final point that I want to make with regard to this topic concerns the expression 'nature writing'. This term is often used in relation to texts that are approached from an ecocritical perspective. I understand it to be the

equivalent of pastoral, but my concern is not with niceties of definition. Rather, I want to state that I do not think of my own writing as ‘nature writing’ in the sense of pastoral. Words that refer to various items that may be found in the natural world occur in my poems; my interest is in the relationship between my perceiving consciousness and the external world and how that might lead to the production of poetry. The field of interest overlaps with the concerns of ecocritics but I feel that the distinction that I seek to make here is important.

## **2.6 The poets in this study**

The poets that I have selected for my study are Elizabeth Bishop, Roy Fisher and Paul Muldoon. In the case of the first two, I examine poems from across their whole oeuvre. In the case of Muldoon, I restrict my examination to one collection, *Why Brownlee Left*. This is partly because Muldoon’s work is already so extensive and varied as to be unmanageable for my purposes, and because *Why Brownlee Left* exhibits the characteristics I am looking for. I selected Roy Fisher partly because he is famous for his representations of the city and he is claimed by both the establishment and counter-culture sides as representing their own values,<sup>40</sup> which makes him an especially interesting and relevant case. Elizabeth Bishop has a reputation as a highly accomplished observer and describer of the objects in the external world and this makes her poetry ideal for my analysis.

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<sup>40</sup> See below, pp. 162-163.

Furthermore, although these poets produce very different kinds of poetry that sometimes reveal sharp contrasts, there are some elements which they have in common and which offer the prospect of interesting and enlightening comparison. Elizabeth Bishop travelled widely as a young woman, after an unsettled childhood that involved not only moving home but living in different families. As an adult she spent extensive periods in Europe and Florida before settling in Brazil for fifteen years. The subject of travel and foreign locations appears frequently in her poems and the continuing presence of early experiences is a theme in both her poems and short stories. Roy Fisher, by contrast had never spent a night out of England until he was fifty years old and set *The Ship's Orchestra* on a ship precisely because he had never been on one.<sup>41</sup> Muldoon's collection shares with Bishop's work an interest in origins and authenticity, and like her, he examines the difference between travelling or staying at home. In addition to these three, I will refer to the work of J. H. Prynne because it provides a useful means, by way of comparison, of linking my comments on the other three poets.

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<sup>41</sup> See Roy Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, p. 56.

## Chapter Three

### Elizabeth Bishop

In this chapter I want to consider Elizabeth Bishop's representation of the external world in her poetry, and the relationship between that external world and the observing consciousness. Bishop's poetry is often characterised as being precise and truthful, of consisting of accurate and detailed observation of the physical world.<sup>42</sup> Anne Stevenson refers to an occasion when Bishop expressed her belief that the contents of a poem under discussion were 'literally true'. Stevenson goes on to comment that for Bishop 'poems can and should tell the truth' and that first and foremost this required the ability and inclination to observe accurately (Stevenson, p.16). This raises the issue of representation and the real world outlined in my introduction. Is the 'literal truth' that Bishop was in search of the truth about the thing itself, or the truth about the impression it made on her consciousness?

I will argue in this chapter that Elizabeth Bishop's early work is more concerned with the relationship between mind and the external world; that this gives rise to poems that employ surrealism and metaphysical conceits and that the function of the objects that appear in these poems is to concretise the ideas produced by her examination of that relationship. I shall identify a middle stage where she focuses on and examines the contents of consciousness in a process that suggests the phenomenological reduction and

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<sup>42</sup> Randall Jarrell commented that her poems 'are quiet, truthful [...] They are honest, modest, minutely observant, masterly'. Randall Jarrell (2000), p. 276.

I shall go on to argue that her later work exhibits a concentration on the external world that removes the self from the picture in a Heideggerian focus on Being. Furthermore, I shall argue that the phenomenological stance that Bishop adopts is linked to a way of understanding perception and reality that has both Romantic and existential elements.

Several of Bishop's early poems that concern the relationship between the external world and the imagination also show art being generated out of the contemplation of that relationship. This gives rise to an interest in the act of creation itself, as it happens in the process of writing the poem. Two early poems that illustrate the process I have in mind are 'The Map' and 'The Imaginary Iceberg'.

The opening line of 'The Imaginary Iceberg' introduces two objects, the iceberg and the ship, and places them in a kind of opposition.<sup>43</sup> One is preferred over the other; the necessity of choosing between them is implied. The notion that 'we' – the pronoun assumes the reader shares the poet's judgement – will prefer the iceberg over the ship, prompts the reader to wonder what these two objects might represent beyond themselves. That they *do* represent something seems to be the inevitable conclusion from this opening, there being no necessity to choose between them in the ordinary course of events. And in the extraordinary course, where the necessity of choosing really was forced on us, it is difficult to believe that the outcome would be so much a foregone conclusion. The title, of course, has already alerted us to the fact that the iceberg under consideration is imaginary, whilst

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<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991) p. 4. All future references are to this volume.

the language of the poem is rooted in the physical world of things: sails, snow, water, sailors, as well as the ship and iceberg. Thus we begin to perceive that this poem is concerned with the relationship between these two fields: the mind's function of imagination and the external world.

As an image, or symbol even, an iceberg suggests the magnificence, beauty and power of nature, also nature's alienness to humanity. Its existence in locations that are among the most hostile to mankind, and its well-known threat to shipping, underline the potential danger in the concept of *iceberg*. A ship, on the other hand, is a human construction and provides safety to its occupants in otherwise inhospitable locations on the oceans. In addition to the division between mind and external world, the poem thus sets up a further division between nature and humanity. The two pairs are linked, of course: humans possess minds (and build ships), nature and the external world are in one sense synonymous (and contain icebergs). Thus we see that although the language of the poem is rooted in concrete objects it uses those objects as emblems, an approach on the part of the poet that removes the poem, and the reader's experience of it, one step further from the real world. When, as reader, I notice that the poet is drawing my attention to the artifice of her poem, I begin to alter my way of reading it. The imaginariness of the iceberg is emphasised. Furthermore, being imaginary, the iceberg is the product of human minds: the poet's as she wrote and all the readers' as they read. It is also part of another product of the human mind: the poem itself. It has no existence outside of that verbal construct. So rather than being emblematic of the external world of nature, the iceberg now appears to be emblematic of the imaginative functioning of the human mind. Now the choice between the ship

and the iceberg assumes a new character. Anne Stevenson calls it a choice between imagination and life: ‘This iceberg, the coldest possible embodiment of the imagination, is preferred to the ship of comfortable, messy life’ (Stevenson, p. 44).

As I read further in the poem, I sometimes try to see the iceberg as an image of nature, but also as an emblem of an austere imagination, an artist’s imagination, perhaps, committed to sacrifice in the name of art in preference to the hum-drum, everyday existence on the ship. As an image, the iceberg has a dual character, an example of what Stevenson refers to as the ‘variety of interpretations’ and ‘indeterminacy’ of the poem (p. 43). However, I cannot retain both readings in my mind simultaneously. If I understand the iceberg as a natural phenomenon, I am not thinking of imagination. If I understand the iceberg as an emblem of the imagination, I am not focusing on it as a phenomenon in nature. The case is similar to the well-known drawing from Gestalt psychology that can be seen as a duck or a rabbit, but never as both at the same time. The same is true of the iceberg.

This dual quality in a single object, and the perception of each quality being dependent on how the observer looks, coincides with the way that phenomenologists understand the nature of perception: the observer is active in the creation of meaning, has a choice in what they perceive. Philip Mairet puts it like this:

Perception depends upon this pre-existent element of choice, which determines the form in which we perceive not only all the varieties of geometrical figures but every phenomenon of which we become



aware. What is perceived is not the reflection of something objective which the mind duplicates within itself; it is the result of that something and of the mind's percipient activity<sup>44</sup>

Perception, then, is inescapably subjective. We need now to examine how far this theory is applicable to Bishop's poetry.

When I read the first two lines of 'The Imaginary Iceberg' in the light of the elements I have noticed so far, I find they suggest a range of possibilities to me. Choosing the iceberg before the ship, 'although it meant the end of travel' can refer, at the literal level, to the iceberg sinking the ship. It can also suggest, again in a quite literal sense, that the imagination can replace the need to travel physically: faraway places can be visited in the imagination. Or I might understand it to express a preference for nature (the iceberg) over technology, commerce, tourism (the ship); what might today be called a green or ecocritical reading. Or I can interpret 'travel' in the way Stevenson does 'ship' as referring to everyday life. The lines can then indicate that the life of the mind and imagination requires a renunciation of the more ordinary blessings of a simple life represented by the familiar image of life as a journey: finding a partner, establishing a home, starting a family and so on.

Interpretations multiply; indeterminacy is intensified. In the second stanza there is a transformation in the diction, effected by the sliding of the word 'boards' (Bishop, p. 4, line 16) out of its nautical application and into a

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Mairet, 'Introduction' in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 5-19 (p. 13).

theatrical sense, which triggers a series of associated images involving the curtain rising, wits sparring and the iceberg itself on ‘a shifting stage’ (p. 4, line 22). This is preceded by the apparent contradiction of the sailor who is so keen to see the scene that he would ‘give his eyes for’ it (p. 4, line 12). The contradiction is removed, however, if the scene is understood to exist solely in the mind, physical eyes being then unnecessary. This thought, I believe, occurs to readers even though they recognise the idiomatic sense of ‘give his eyes for’. The poem enables the reader to perceive these variant readings in a similar fashion as the Gestalt drawing can be variously perceived.

The reader never was in any doubt that the poem did not originate in the careful and accurate scrutiny of an iceberg in the ocean; we always knew it was imaginary from the title. But from the treatment of the poetic material, as here described, we understand that the poem is concerned more with the actions of the mind as it adapts the objects it has selected for its own purposes of reflecting on art, creativity, perception and imagination than with a true depiction of external objects.

‘The Map’ starts on a more concrete level.<sup>45</sup> Anne Stevenson mentions that the poem was written about a real map that Bishop once owned (Stevenson, p. 44). The poem opens by describing the land and sea areas and the colouring of the map. We can imagine that the poet had the object before her as she wrote. The context and the style would seem to be quite different to that of ‘The Imaginary Iceberg’ but in fact the map performs a similar function in its poem as the word ‘imaginary’ in the title of that poem because it allows Bishop to employ the vocabulary of geography and landscape in a

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<sup>45</sup> Bishop (1991), p. 3.

context where it is obviously not what she is describing. The land, sea, ‘long sea-weeded ledges | where weeds hang’, the ‘sandy shelf’ and ‘lovely bays’: none of these elements of the landscape are there, either before the poet as she writes, or in the setting of the poem (Bishop, p.3, lines 3-11)). The map acts as a prompt to allow her imagination to speculate, often whimsically – ‘Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, | drawing it unperturbed around itself?’ (lines 5-6) - on those features that are represented on the map. So although the diction is loaded with geographical terms, they are as far removed from their referents in the external world as was the nautical terminology of ‘The Imaginary Iceberg’.

There is a sense, I feel, in which the map stands between the poet-observer and the reader, on the one hand, and the landscape of the external world on the other and thus serves as an image for the way appearances are sometimes felt to get between the observing consciousness and the thing itself in the external world of objects. It is this confusion between appearances and thing that the phenomenological reduction seeks to avoid and which Bishop seeks to utilise here as a poetic device. In another sense, the map could suggest the mediation of experience by language. The map represents an attempt to bridge the gap between the observing consciousness and the objects it surveys and emphasises the role of consciousness and mind in the act of perception and the creation of human representations of that external world: art, language, poems, maps. There is an image in the second stanza of the poem which duplicates this sense of removed consciousness: ‘We can stroke these lovely bays, | under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, | or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish’ (p. 3, lines 11-13). Here the

glass performs the same function with regard to the map as the map performs with regard to the landscape in the external world: it comes between, acting as a barrier but allowing perception via its own medium. The ‘invisible fish’ are unseen, but in our imagination we have faith that they exist below the surface of the actual bay. The effect echoes the sailor who ‘gave his eyes’ to see the scene. In this state of removed consciousness, the mind speculates and reflects on its own functions, inventing conceits – perhaps the glass allows the bays ‘to blossom’ like a greenhouse, or is a tank intended to contain ‘invisible fish’ - and creating art in the process.

These two early poems show Elizabeth Bishop writing poems that focus on the activities of her own imagination; the objects of the external world provide the stimulation that sets her mind and imagination working. There seems to be a clear privileging of the mind over the world of objects. ‘Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance’ extends this theme.<sup>46</sup> The poem reveals how the reality of foreign travel failed to live up to the imaginary travels inspired by looking at the illustrations. As such, it repeats the idea of travels in the imagination being preferable to travels in fact that we found in ‘The Imaginary Iceberg’. It can also be read as regret for the loss of religious faith. The final, vibrant image of the Nativity scene:

- the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light,  
 an undisturbed, unbreathing flame,  
 colorless, sparkless, freely fed on straw,      (p. 58-9)

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<sup>46</sup> Bishop (1991), pp. 57-59.

contrasts with the sordid and decaying ‘holy grave’ they actually saw:

An open, gritty, marble trough, carved solid  
 with exhortation, yellowed  
 as scattered cattle-teeth;  
 half-filled with dust. (p. 58)

The eyes that see ‘the rocks breaking with light’ are those of the child Elizabeth, as the childish designation of ‘a family with pets’ and the reference to ‘infant’ indicate. The final line concludes: ‘- and looked and looked our infant sight away.’ This is a rather ambiguous line. Anne Stevenson lists several possible readings. After mentioning that the passage as a whole, while voicing a regret for the loss of simple faith, resolves that issue ‘by escaping into art’, Stevenson finds in the final line a ‘Wordsworthian sense’ of the value of ‘infant sight’ but wonders why the poet wants to look it away (Stevenson, p. 40). One explanation, she suggests, could be that it is necessary to rid ourselves of childish beliefs; another that since ‘infant sight’ will disappear inevitably it is better to use it all up by looking while we have it. This latter seems a little contrived to me.

Stevenson then goes on to speculate that the ‘truth’ revealed to ‘infant sight’ might be accessible to the adult observer, if only they could look in the right way:

Suppose she were to look and look, harder and harder, at ‘God’s spreading fingerprint’ in the book of life? Suppose she let her eyes

drop 'weighted' through those 'ripples above the sand' and through the storms of her own dreamy imagination until it freed her into an intimation of knowledge? (p. 41)

The terminology here suggests the possibility of access to a transcendental reality beyond that available to everyday vision. Stevenson is suggesting that Bishop might believe the 'infant sight' was more authentic, that the reality it perceived contained a greater truth than the contents of an adult consciousness can claim. Such a reading raises the issue of the authority which might be able to underwrite the notions of *more authentic* and *greater truth*. It is possible that Bishop might refer here to something equivalent to the phenomenological reduction; that the 'infant sight' is an image for the neutralisation of the intentionality of perception. It is based on physical observation but everything rests, I understand, on the role and function of the imagination in this process and the sources which imagination is tapping. It is a bold speculation, and one that will need further evidence before much can be made of it, but it is intriguing.

A final comment on this point: it is a common usage to add the word 'away' immediately after a verb to express the idea of the action being performed without obstruction or restriction. Someone wishes to ask me some questions: 'Fire away,' I reply, to indicate that he is free to ask whatever he wishes. It is true that this is not exactly the construction that Bishop uses, but Stevenson comments that 'Bishop herself probably could not have explained what she meant by "look and look our infant sight away"' (p. 41). I would suggest that this common usage might be buried in her phrase and if so, it

would be in harmony with Stevenson's notion of accessing the 'truth' of 'infant sight', though I do not suggest that it is anything like proof.

The distinction that we have observed between looking outward to the external world or inward to the consciousness corresponds to the division David Kalstone identifies in Bishop's work between observation and interiorisation.<sup>47</sup> He goes on to mention her admiration of Gerard Manley Hopkins and refers to her notebook writings where, Kalstone comments, 'what engages her attention is the mysterious relation between the observed and what it "spiritually" signifies' (p. 15). Kalstone is referring specifically to Bishop's early work here and comments on the frequency of dream-like states of semi-consciousness which allow her protagonists to escape 'into a prized state of withdrawal' (Kalstone, p. 16). Comments such as these indicate a conflict between outward observation and the contents of imagination which is dramatised in the poem, 'Squatter's Children', where the children, and even their house, are described as 'specklike' because of the distance between them and the observer, yet later a detail is added which it would clearly have been impossible to see: 'one of their father's tools, | a mattock with a broken haft' (Bishop, p. 95). So Bishop's imagination is supplying the truth that her consciousness wants to find in the scene but which is not accessible to physical vision. Something similar occurs in 'The Fish' where the intense observation and description of the fish includes 'the course white flesh | packed like feathers', 'the little bones', the 'shiny entrails' and 'the pink swim-bladder', none of which would have been available to eyesight (Bishop, 1991, p. 42). The description could be read as dramatising the notion of going

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<sup>47</sup> David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), p.12.

beyond the mere surface of things, and although in 'The Fish' these details are prefaced with 'I thought of', in 'Squatter's Children' the details are presented as if actually observed. It is, of course, perfectly possible to direct attention towards objects that are not present, what are called 'empty intentions' in phenomenology,<sup>48</sup> but we also need to know what significance Bishop accords them.

I would suggest that there is an element of contradiction in these poems. Bishop is concerned with observing objects in the real world yet is conscious of the inevitable separation of her sense impressions from the things themselves and consequently seems to be distrustful of the evidence of her senses. She relies on the functioning of her imagination to arrive at an understanding of her relationship with the external universe but is committed to grounding that imaginative activity in physical reality, yet she goes beyond what can be physically seen in her attempt to achieve a complete knowledge of the object. This may constitute something more than the phenomenological notion of choice or directedness. There is thus a struggle to reconcile what is, ultimately, irreconcilable that gives her early work, as well as some later poems, their distinctive quality.

'A Miracle for Breakfast' takes the idea of moving beyond physical vision a step further. The important point is not whether something that can be termed a 'miracle' has taken place; the point is the way of looking and the attitude, what Kalstone describes as belonging 'to a speaker impatient for revelation. Craving signs of it everywhere' (Kalstone, p. 50). I think that Kalstone's word 'revelation' is most telling here in describing the element in

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<sup>48</sup> See Robert Sokolowski (2000), p.33.



the poem we are concerned with. And as with the mattock in ‘Squatter’s Children’ and the bones in ‘The Fish’, imagination is required to bring about the conviction of its existence.

‘At the Fishhouses’ is a poem that shows Bishop focusing more on the world of external objects and less on the functioning of mind and imagination, at least for most of its length.<sup>49</sup> The reader can almost follow her eye moving around the scene she is observing: the old man netting, the structure of the fishhouses, the prevalence of the silver fish scales, the capstan behind the fishhouses and then back to the old man. After some lines, the poet-observer’s attention moves to the water’s edge, the ramp descending into the water, the water itself: ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear’ (Bishop, p. 65).

Suddenly she breaks off, apparently distracted by the memory of a seal that she has seen several times which leads into an amusing anecdote of how she sang to him and he would regard her quizzically. Then the image of the water returns, beginning with exactly the same words: ‘Cold dark deep and absolutely clear | the clear grey icy water ...’. Again she breaks off, this time to make a rather trivial and clichéd comment that ‘a million Christmas trees stand | waiting for Christmas’ (p. 65). It is as if her consciousness is not able, or ready, to take in and understand what the water means to her. In these breaks in the flow the reader senses Bishop’s subconscious processing of the data that nature is supplying. Gradually she allows her mind to imagine what it is. Visual description – ‘The water seems suspended | above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones’ - is interspersed with the products of speculative

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<sup>49</sup> Bishop (1991), pp. 64-66.

imagination, although without the whimsicality of the speculations we noted in ‘The Map’ – ‘If you should dip your hand in, | your wrist would ache immediately’ (p. 65). The contradiction that the water being so cold would make your hand burn ‘as if the water were a transmutation of fire’ (p. 66) is both mysterious and an accurate account of the physical sensation. Finally, she arrives at the point that she has been trying to reach: ‘It is like what we imagine knowledge to be’ (p. 66).

The reader feels this to be a moment of insight. Knowledge has been gained about the world, through observation and imagination combined. But intriguingly, Bishop makes a distinction between ‘*our* knowledge’ and ‘what we *imagine* knowledge to be’ (my italics) as if there were two types of knowledge. The knowledge which is not ours, which we only imagine, is emphatically rooted in the real world: ‘drawn from the cold hard mouth | of the world, derived from the rocky breasts | forever’ (p. 66) but it would seem, from the grammar of the lines, to be a form that we cannot know, only imagine. The role of imagination in the generation of knowledge is fully acknowledged here. The final line, however, suggests an overlap between these two forms of knowledge because, ‘since | our knowledge is historical’, the imagined knowledge is both ‘flowing, and flown’ (p. 66). The line appears to say that the form of the imagined knowledge is such as to be accessible to human perception, but it is gone as soon as it is received. The implication is that this knowledge which is not ours, is not historical, but timeless and unchanging. These are qualities which are alien to human perception. We may intuit this knowledge through imagination, but at the moment of intuition our human perceptions transform that knowledge into

historical terms and it is 'flown'. This would offer some kind of explanation for the contradiction in the poem's terminology.

George Szirtes notes the paradox of the image of the sea and the notion of flowing: 'Rivers flow, the sea has tides. There are currents of course, but seas don't flow.'<sup>50</sup> I would argue, however, that this simply underlines my point that there are two types of knowledge at issue here: 'our' knowledge, which is historical, and the knowledge derived from this moment of insight, symbolized by the sea, which, as Szirtes goes on to remark and which I agree with, is 'out of time, out of the river' (p. 17). That knowledge which the sea symbolises is out of time; but the historical nature of 'our' knowledge demands that our perception of it is 'flowing, and flown'. In other words, our perception is in time though the sea-knowledge itself is out of time.

There is, admittedly, some ambiguity in these lines from 'At the Fishhouses' and my reading requires a degree of interpretation but there is a sense here of intense observation leading to a momentary perception that is more than an awareness of physical objects. This knowledge is firmly rooted in those physical objects but it is also connected with the imagination, yet it is real. Terminology is difficult in this area of thought; words like mystical, spiritual, transcendental and metaphysical suggest themselves, and they are problematic.

Bishop repeatedly presents perception in subjective terms. 'The Imaginary Iceberg', 'Arrival at Santos', 'Questions of Travel' and 'Quai d'Orleans', of which Kalstone remarks that 'we see nothing that is not already

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<sup>50</sup> George Szirtes, *Fortinbras at the Fishhouses* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), p. 16.

coloured by consciousness at the very moment of seeing' (Kalstone, p. 67) are good examples. However, she frequently seems to ask whether the 'pre-existent element of choice' (Mairet, p. 13) denies authenticity to human perceptions, and asks, moreover, whether it might be possible to circumvent that condition and arrive at a more authentic view of the external world. This is why it is so important to register that the sea-knowledge in 'At the Fishhouses' is not historical: choosing is a temporal activity; removing the temporal element restores the authenticity. This urge is Romantic and her questions remain unresolved, but the urge is present and it is interesting to see where it will finally lead her.

Several poems in the Brazil section of *Questions of Travel* continue the exploration of the relationship between the observing consciousness and the external world. The first three stanzas of 'Arrival at Santos'<sup>51</sup> focus on the scene as the poet-observer's ship arrives in harbour. The poem opens with the plainest of plain-spoken language: 'Here is a coast; here is a harbor' (p. 89). The sentence structure and rhythm are reminiscent of children's elementary readers. It is as if Bishop wants to emphasise the simplicity and unaffectedness of her observation - a disavowal of rhetoric, in fact. There will be no dressing up of the external world or attributing subjective emotions to objects. In the description that follows we are presented with several details: mountains, greenery, church and warehouses, but the tenor of the poem is quite removed from the extended, detailed description of 'At the Fishhouses'. Bishop applies some surprising adjectives to the objects in the scene. The mountains are 'self-pitying' and 'sad', the greenery 'frivolous', the palm trees

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<sup>51</sup> Bishop (1991), pp. 89-90.

‘uncertain’ and the colour of the warehouses is ‘feeble’. These adjectives, all of which describe human emotions and attitudes, clearly derive from the observing consciousness. Indeed, they largely correspond to the sensations the traveller experiences on arriving in a new and unknown country, as she reveals in the slightly self-mocking question that she puts to herself as a response to her observation of the scene:

is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world,

and a better life, and complete comprehension

of both at last [?]

(Bishop, p. 89)

There is uncertainty in the tone, possibly some sadness that shades into self-pity, though it could be read as tongue-in-cheek, and a degree of frivolity in the ‘immodest demands’. Bishop is clearly indicating here that her reception of the external world is dependent on her own state of mind as she observes. The natural world is looking back with the same characteristics with which Bishop regards it; the individual’s emotional state is very much in the forefront of this perception. Indeed, the poem reveals the directed nature of observation, making an attempt to examine how the poet-observer has directed her attention towards objects in the external world. Nerys Williams describes the process that I perceive here when she remarks of John Ashbery’s ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ that ‘the poem performs

phenomenologically, it grants us the perception of perception'.<sup>52</sup> Williams's comment that Ashbery's poem 'points to the self-reflexive intricacies of self-portraiture' and that 'the verisimilitude that we see in Parmigianino's portrait results from "his reflection, of which the portrait | Is the reflection once removed"' (p. 41) applies also to Bishop's poem where the scene acts as a mirror, reflecting the observer's characteristics which the poet reproduces in the vocabulary of her description. In other poems Bishop seeks to remove herself as much as possible from the contemplation; here, however, she does not. Instead, in a way that is comparable to the hesitations and breaks her consciousness made in the face of the cold, dark knowledge in 'At the Fishhouses', she interrupts her observation and focuses on breakfast and the practicalities of getting off ship and ashore. By the end of the poem, the impression the location has created is one of impermanence: the wasting away of soap, the slippage of postage stamps with defective glue, the departure of the tourists for a new location. The impressions supplied by the surroundings reflect the poet's own state of mind. She too is transient, passing through.

Travel is a theme that recurs in several poems and it is often seen as posing a moral question. We have already noted the uncertainty over whether it might not be better to travel in the imagination only, as suggested in 'The Imaginary Iceberg' and 'Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance'. 'Brazil, January 1, 1502' introduces a new dimension to that concern: the relationship between the traveller and the country, people and

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<sup>52</sup> Nerys Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 41.

culture that they come in contact with.<sup>53</sup> The Christian Portuguese colonists provide an example of an attitude that respects neither the environment nor the local inhabitants. Jonathan Bate points out that Bishop's stance here is eco-poetic:

Bishop's imagery always respects nature as it is and for itself, while at the same time recognizing that we can only understand nature by way of those distinctively human categories, history (the cannonball) and language (the shape of the letter 'S').<sup>54</sup>

Bishop's concern with how to observe the external world and understand the relationship between it and the observing consciousness expands in the course of this poem to take on this quite specific moral dimension. *Questions of Travel* asks these questions in their most explicit form: 'Should we have stayed at home and thought of here? [...] Is it right to be watching strangers in a play | in this strangest of theatres?' (Bishop, p. 92). The image of the theatre here accords with the traveller's sense of guilt at exploiting the foreign location and inhabitants for her own entertainment. In that respect, it amounts to a form of self-criticism. But there is the further sense in which it expresses the notion of artificiality. If everything is an act, then it is not genuine and real. However, the artificiality can only pertain to the observer's perceptions. The place and people are genuine to themselves, but the directedness of the observer's perceptions, if the phenomenological

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<sup>53</sup> Bishop (1991), pp. 91-92.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Bate, p. 65.

reduction fails or is impossible, prevents genuine knowledge of the objects in that world. Bishop here reveals the fear that she is not seeing the real world that is before her but what her imagination produces from it, that she imposes her imaginative perceptions on reality as she imposed the imaginary detail of the mattock's broken haft in 'Squatter's Children'. So the role of the imagination, which in 'At the Fishhouses' resulted in acquisition of knowledge beyond sense perception, is here seen as containing the risk of artificiality, a kind of deception, or self-deception. It is this distrust of the process of observation that David Kalstone refers to when he writes: 'Physical vision seems tied to separateness and loss, and somehow to guilt' (Kalstone, p. 17).

There is, then, a clear concern with philosophical and moral issues in Bishop's work. Anne Stevenson refers to 'the line of ontological-cum-epistemological questioning' and identifies this concern in 'In the Waiting Room', 'Questions of Travel', 'Arrival at Santos' and 'At the Fishhouses', amongst others. Stevenson points out that

It is, of course, one thing to ask 'big' questions in plain language, another to answer them [...] Nor do her poems, as a rule, provide more than signposts pointing to temporary resting places [...] They go on so long, pointing and looking so intently that, by the end, some more abstract impression has to be felt. Only rarely, however, is this abstract idea identified, and even then it is often formulated as a question or a set of questions. (Stevenson, p. 110-11)



Certainly, I am not looking for answers to these questions in the poetry. I am more interested in what they show about Bishop's way of looking and how we might categorise that way of looking now, in the light of the processes we have observed at work. It is my view that the combination of intense observation and philosophical and imaginative speculation produce what might be termed a Romantic tone.

Isaiah Berlin points out that according to Romantic and existentialist theory, 'the greatest virtue – the greatest of all – is what existentialists call authenticity, and what the romantics called sincerity.'<sup>55</sup> As we have seen, Bishop is concerned about the authenticity of her actions and perceptions in the opening poems of the Brazil section of *Questions of Travel*. She is also concerned about the possibility of free will, another major tenet of the Romantics and existentialists, as Berlin goes on to explain. The title poem explores the issue of travelling or staying at home and finds benefits on both sides, ending by reiterating the question but then introducing a note of scepticism as to the possibility of free choice: '*the choice is never wide and never free*' (Bishop, p. 94). The final line and a half extend the doubt even to the notion of home: '*Should we have stayed at home, | wherever that may be?*' So on the one hand, Bishop is seeking authenticity in her freely-willed dealings with the world, but on the other hand she is uncertain that either the freedom or the authenticity is possible. In other words, her Romantic or existentialist instincts are undermined by her own awareness of the terms of perception. Again, we find the struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable.

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<sup>55</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Pimlico, 2000), p. 139.

The moral turn that Bishop's deliberations on her perceptions, and importantly, on her actions, take in the Brazil poems raises issues that reflect Sartre's existentialist concerns. Two central tenets in that philosophy are freedom of choice and individual responsibility: 'the action presupposes that there is a plurality of possibilities, and in choosing one of these, they realise that it has value only because it is chosen' (Sartre, p. 32). Similarly, the pre-existent element of choice that phenomenology identifies in perception can be described as the attributing of 'value' to the preferred form of the perception. But whereas earlier phenomenologists sought to circumvent that subjectivity by the phenomenological reduction, Sartre relies on the project of value to confer meaning. These seem to be the ideas that Bishop is concerned with in those poems where she examines the role of consciousness in the nature of perception and whether the recognition of that role constitutes real knowledge or is an instance of inauthenticity. Choosing the quality of a perceived object – is the drawing of a rabbit or a duck? – fails to achieve full knowledge of the object. Bishop seems to be asking whether the same is true of the value ascribed to a given action. This is not a simple issue to resolve, but the notion of choice in perception involving 'value' seems a helpful alternative to terms like transcendental, spiritual and mystical that troubled us earlier.

This dilemma reflects on Bishop's sense of her self and identity, which seems to be as divided as her perception of the outside world. A sense of a stable identity, of a place called home, where one belongs in a world where we understand our perceptions is placed in conflict with fractured impressions that leave the observer uncertain and doubtful and without a sense of belonging. This world of fractured impressions appears in the early

poem, 'The Weed', where each drop of water contains an 'illuminated scene [...] (As if a river should carry all | the scenes that it had once reflected)' (Bishop, p. 21), an image that serves also to represent memory.

But perhaps the clearest expression of this sense of fragmentation is the poem 'Sandpiper'<sup>56</sup>. Stevenson remarks of this poem that it 'was doubtless begun after Bishop had observed an actual sandpiper' but that it very soon moves 'in a personal direction': 'Everything the sandpiper sees or does reminds us of the poet' (Stevenson, pp. 92-3). The terms in which Bishop describes the bird - 'preoccupied', 'obsessed', 'looking for something, something, something' - could serve as a summarised description of her writing. The world in this poem, as opposed to the figure of the bird, is presented in terms that emphasise its ambiguity, inconsistency and variableness:

[...] a sheet  
of interrupting water comes and goes  
and gazes over his dark and brittle feet  
[...]  
The world is a mist. And then the world is  
minute and vast and clear. (p. 131)

By the end the bird has disappeared and we are left with the 'millions of grains' and each contains a world. There is a feeling of desperation and of wondering how to make sense of all this.

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<sup>56</sup> Bishop (1991), p. 131.

The problem of how to feel at home in the world, and how to make a home for oneself, is a major concern of ‘Crusoe in England’<sup>57</sup>. Bishop’s poem imagines Crusoe’s life and sentiments in the period after the events related in Defoe’s novel. Back in England, Crusoe is, in a sense, back home, but he feels ‘bored’ (p. 166). His memories of life on the island are hardly easy, but they are certainly more active and dynamic. His comment, ‘Home-made, home-made! But aren’t we all?’ (p. 164), suggests that ‘we’, in other words, our self and identity, are the product of our own actions and our interaction with the environment we inhabit. This could suggest a degree of existential free will and self-determination, but Bishop is careful not to take a single and decided position on the question. Everything rests on the extent of the outside influences and whether they amount to predestination. Earlier, Crusoe had remarked:

“Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.

I wouldn’t be here otherwise. Was there  
a moment when I actually chose this?

I don’t remember, but there could have been.” (p. 163)

The first two lines quoted suggest the possibility of predestination; the second two, the possibility of free choice; but neither is certain. What *is* certain is the transformation that the change in Crusoe’s circumstances has had on his perceptions. The knife that meant so much to him on the island no longer has any meaning:

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<sup>57</sup> Bishop (1991), pp.162-166.

it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.

It lived. How many years did I

beg it, implore it, not to break?

[...]

Now it won't look at me at all.

The living soul has dribbled away. (p. 166)

This really goes beyond looking, or sense perception; it is more like a relationship. The meaning or value that an object holds depends on the relationship that the individual has with it. The idea of the object that is derived from this relationship might be termed knowledge of the thing.

Throughout her work Bishop is concerned with how to establish that relationship with the objects in the external world. In the early poems we looked at her focus was more inward, on the role of her consciousness; in some of her later poems, and most notably, I think, 'The Moose', she aims to remove her self from the process of observation as far as possible. Anne Stevenson refers to an essay Bishop wrote on the topic of Marianne Moore's animal poems in which she praised

Moore's ability 'to give herself up entirely to the object under contemplation, to feel in all sincerity how it is to be it.' Being 'it' for Bishop meant knowing instinctively how not to confuse 'it' with herself. (Stevenson, p. 76)

Putting aside Bishop's phrase, 'to be it', her point about 'not confusing "it" with herself' is surely apposite in the case of her own poem, 'The Moose'.<sup>58</sup> It describes, I would propose, something akin to Heidegger's notion of Being (see section 2.4 above).

The moose, the animal, actually plays a small part in the poem in terms of number of lines: only six of the twenty-eight stanzas feature the animal, and two of those focus more on the passengers' reactions. The description of the moose relies heavily on cliché and hyperbole. It 'looms [...] Towering [...] high as a church | homely as a house | (or, safe as houses). | [...] otherworldly' (Bishop, p. 172-3). And yet the moose dominates the poem. Partly, that is achieved by having so much scene-setting description while the reader, having registered the title, is waiting for the moose to appear. But it is also a canny admission on the part of the poet that we do not have the words to express the presence of the animal. Cliché and hyperbole are probably the best we have. 'Loom' is the best word for the standing of a moose, even though it is also the least original. Being 'otherworldly', the moose is best left outside our world. Attention is focused instead on the effect the animal's appearance has on the passengers and on trying to evoke that in the reader. This is a further reason for the long build-up: it helps to place the reader imaginatively in the scene. 'Why, why do we feel | (we all feel) this sweet | sensation of joy?' the poet asks (p. 173). It is because we have been taken outside ourselves, had a glimpse, literally, into another world. Here again, Bishop's view is amenable to ecocriticism; Jonathan Bate comments:

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<sup>58</sup> Bishop (1991), pp. 169 – 173.

Bishop knows that we can only know nature by way of culture [...] The moose is encountered on the road, a road being a piece of land that has been transformed by the demands of culture, a route from city to city. The moose comes to the bus, rather than vice versa. This is a poem not about getting back to nature, but about how nature comes back to us. (Bate, p. 202)

What Bishop achieves in 'The Moose' is something very similar to what Heidegger describes when he writes: 'only one element is needful: to keep at a distance all the preconceptions and assaults of the above modes of thought, to leave the thing to rest in its own self, for instance, in its thing-being.' (Heidegger, pp. 30-31). The 'above modes of thought' to which Heidegger refers are those which attempt to define the thing as its traits, its manifold of appearances, and as formed matter. These concepts only give us factual, scientific information which we already possess; they do not give knowledge about the 'thingly character of the thing'. Heidegger goes on: 'The earth appears openly as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable' (p. 46). The work of art can achieve this: 'In the work of art the truth of an entity has set itself to work. [...] Some particular entity, a pair of peasant shoes, comes in the work to stand in the light of its being' (p. 35), as the moose stands, as a presence, in its poem.

David Kalstone, referring to the early poems and stories, comments on Bishop's 'sense of absence or half-presence in the world' and remarks on the changed attitude in her later work: 'Her commitment to the *illusion* of physical presence – her hallmark – was hard won' (Kalstone, p. 22). Illusion

it may be, but the reader is not able to judge Bishop's mental state as she wrote, only the tone of the poem. What is certain is that Bishop preserves the space between the observer and the outside world that we had noticed in the earlier poems. There is no sense of merging, no sense of transcending physical boundaries, and no sense of appropriating what is alien or other. Kalstone comments on Bishop's reservations regarding Lowell's use of experience and the external:

Bishop simply felt not only that the outside world was often being absorbed and distorted by Lowell's autobiographies [...] but that he was "mythologizing" his life in a dangerous way, that the present was cripplingly shadowed by the burden of the past. (p. 213)

It is precisely this danger that Bishop avoids in 'The Moose'.

Inevitably, the bus passengers' reception of the sight they have seen, and the reader's reception of the poem, are coloured by the human consciousness; describing the moose as 'safe as houses' is an example of that. But in the act of absorbed concentration we might forget ourselves for a moment. We can do the same when we read attentively, so that, although the real objects are not, cannot be, present in the poem, the quality of absorbed contemplation is the same in concentrated observation of the real world or concentrated reading of the text. So the moose becomes 'The Moose', an object in the real world that we experience intensely and recognise its value.

The issues raised throughout this chapter have relevance to ecocritical approaches to writing. 'The Moose' specifically can be read as representing



the ideas Timothy Morton proposes under his term ‘dark ecology’: ‘Rather than seeking some false oneness, acknowledging the gap is a paradoxical way of having greater fidelity to things’ (Morton, p. 142). This describes the position that Bishop adopts in her poem. Morton argues that ‘openness to nonidentity [...] is still a kind of subjectivity’ (p. 182) and that ‘dark ecology dances with the subject-object duality [...] to love the thingness’ (p. 185), with the goal ‘that the narrator or protagonist is radically involved with his or her world, and thus responsible for it’ (p. 187). Bishop treats the moose in nature in a similarly objective style. Her treatment of the poem’s subject also reminds us of Charles Olson’s requirements for ‘projective verse’: ‘the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego’.<sup>59</sup> In the next chapter I shall examine Olson’s comments more closely and in relation to my next poet, Roy Fisher.

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<sup>59</sup> *A Charles Olson Reader*, ed. by Ralph Maud (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), p.47.

## Chapter Four

### Acquiring secrets objects share: an examination of Roy Fisher's poetry in the light of Charles Olson's 'objectism'

At the start of the second section of his essay, 'Projective Verse', Charles Olson defines the core issue as being 'the degree to which the projective involves a stance toward reality outside the poem as well as a stance towards the reality of the poem itself'.<sup>60</sup> This, writes Olson, is 'a matter of content' and he goes on to coin the term, 'objectism', which he distinguishes from 'objectivism',<sup>61</sup> in his formulation of what this means:

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 [...] and those other creatures of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. (pp. 47-8)

Such a description suggests the opposite of that aspect of Romantic verse that emphasises the individual imagination:

[...] the mind of man becomes

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<sup>60</sup> *A Charles Olson Reader*, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Davie (*With The Grain* p. 275) quotes George Oppen on the definition of 'objectivism'. The word refers not to an 'objective attitude to reality' but to the 'objectification of the poem'. Davie gives the citation: Serge Faucherau, 'Three Oppen Letters with a note', *Ironwood* 5, Tucson, Arizona (1975), pp. 78-85.

A thousand times more beautiful than the earth  
 On which he dwells [...]  
 [...] as it is itself  
 Of substance and of fabric more divine.<sup>62</sup>

Olson's approach is grounded in material reality and is closer to Morton than to William Wordsworth. Olson then claims that through the pursuit of 'objectism' the writer 'will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share' (Olson, p. 48). The reference to 'objects' here accords with the notion of material reality, but the sense of the word 'secrets' must imply that whatever this knowledge is, it is not ordinarily perceived; it has the quality of being hidden from view. This in turn must lead us to speculate as to why this knowledge should be ordinarily unperceived, how perception might be achieved, and what the nature of knowledge which is available to objects might be. The notion of hidden and secret knowledge which is lodged in the world of objects has a Romantic ring, which might seem surprising, and even contradictory, beside the more materialist terms that Olson uses.

However, it might be that what Olson is really getting at here is the quality of perception. One way to understand what that could mean is through the theory of Victor Shklovsky who emphasised that 'as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic'.<sup>63</sup> The function of art is to 'recover the sensation of life [...] to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived

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<sup>62</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805), XIII. 446-52.

<sup>63</sup> Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 3-24, (p. 11).

and not as they are known' (Shklovsky, pp. 11-12). The knowledge that Olson speaks of then becomes simply that derived from perception which is not clouded by habit; it is only secret insofar as automatic perception misses the nature of the thing observed. This explanation chimes with the general sense and tone of Olson's essay but in the examination that follows I intend to keep in mind the Romantic tendency that Olson's terminology suggests.

Roy Fisher's name has frequently been linked to Olson's, and others of the Black Mountain poets. Similar to Olson's concerns in his essay, Fisher's work is, in Sean O'Brien's words, concerned with 'the processes of perception, representation and interpretation'.<sup>64</sup> It is the purpose of this chapter to examine whether Olson's definition of projective verse might be useful in helping to identify the quality of Fisher's approach to these issues of 'perception, representation and interpretation'.

In his introduction to *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, Peter Robinson draws attention to the conflicting views of Fisher's work.<sup>65</sup> For example, despite acknowledging Fisher's position outside the mainstream of English poetry, Donald Davie places Fisher in a social democratic tradition dominated by Thomas Hardy. Eric Mottram, on the other hand, 'presented Fisher as the English exponent of an international modernism' and as an experimentalist. Robinson then goes on to list critics who have variously described Fisher as a modernist, a non-modernist and a postmodernist, and points out that Fisher has described himself as a Romantic. Andrew Crozier has used the terms

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<sup>64</sup> Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 121.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Robinson, 'Introduction', in *The Thing About Roy Fisher: Critical Studies*, ed. by John Kerrigan and Peter Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 1-15 (pp. 9-10).

‘mysticism’ and ‘transcendence’ in describing Fisher’s work,<sup>66</sup> yet Fisher has also been described as writing a poetry of things in the tradition of William Carlos Williams.

Partly, this wide range of critical assessments is evidence of the fact that Fisher’s work does not fit into any of the customary categories. He ‘does not occupy a position in contemporary poetry’, as Robinson puts it (p.10). It is also evidence of a pluralistic quality in his work. However, it might seem to be somewhat surprising that this pluralism should give rise to such contradictory assessments and it is worth examining what there is in the writing that accounts for this and identifying whether that explanation can be linked to Fisher’s methods of representing the objects of perception and the terms Olson uses in defining projective verse.

The issue of representation is raised in an essay by Michael O’Neill in which he refers to a resistance to ‘symbols’ and goes on to quote Eric Mottram, ‘that nothing can really stand for another thing’,<sup>67</sup> a comment which might have its origin in a suspicion of rhetorical devices, particularly metaphor. O’Neill proceeds further to observe that writers who hold this belief produce work which is ‘inductive and empiricist’.<sup>68</sup> This suggests writing which is grounded in sense experience and which infers general truths from the observation of particular instances. Such an account of the writing

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted by Ralph Pite in “‘Coming into their Own’: Roy Fisher and John Cowper Powys’ in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp.231-56 (p.242).

<sup>67</sup> Michael O’Neill, “‘Exhibiting Unpreparedness’: Self, World and Poetry’ in *The Thing About Roy Fisher*, pp. 209-30 (p. 209).

<sup>68</sup> O’Neill is quoting Peter Barry when he uses these terms.

process might lead the reader to expect poems which focus exclusively on concrete objects in the real world.

Mottram was one of the leaders of the radical group that challenged the poetry establishment in the 70s. His sentiments were echoed by another radical poet, Andrew Crozier, of whom Edward Larrissy comments that ‘he finds contemporary British poetry vitiated by an alliance of the “lyric self” with an intrusively “figurative” technique’.<sup>69</sup> Ironically, all language consists of one thing standing for another; that is why the real cannot be represented, except as representation. But there is also clearly a choice of attitude available to the writer as to the degree to which, as Davie puts it, ‘words symbolize anything beyond themselves’ or ‘stubbornly point to that which they name, and to nothing else, to nothing “beneath” or “above” or “beyond”’.<sup>70</sup>

Larrissy’s comments on Crozier echo Olson’s on objectism in that both refer disparagingly to the ‘lyric self’. Olson sees this self ‘interposed’ between man’s being and the natural world of things; Crozier sees it operating ‘intrusively’. In order to perceive accurately the observer needs to escape from his or her personal identity, to be more alive to the thing itself, without interference. The use of overly figurative language is reckoned to constitute a form of such interference. It will be useful to bear this attitude in mind, and to place beside it the function of association between objects that allows poets to explore internal states and emotions in terms of images drawn from the natural world. This is a function that we found to be of great

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<sup>69</sup> Edward Larrissy, ‘Poets of *A Various Art*’ in *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 75.

<sup>70</sup> Donald Davie, ‘One Way to Misread *Briggflats*’, reprinted in *With the Grain*, p.289.

importance in the work of Elizabeth Bishop. It is now time to examine Fisher's work in the light of these considerations.

Issues of observation and of how to represent the sense perceptions that the observing consciousness receives are the focus of Fisher's poem, 'The Memorial Fountain',<sup>71</sup> where he writes:

As for the fountain:

nothing in the describing

beyond what shows

for anyone [...]

no 'atmosphere' [...]

I don't exaggerate.

(Fisher, p. 167)

This amounts to a declaration of plain-spokenness. Later he states that he is 'working | to distinguish an event | from an opinion' (p. 167). In other words, Fisher wants his description to show us the thing itself, not to tell us his opinion about it. However, this approach is problematic. Language is not so innocent. When Fisher uses the word 'gaunt' for the shadows and 'garish' for the twilight he is selecting words that carry a tone, create an atmosphere. He even brings this atmosphere into the poem explicitly in the phrase 'sombre mood'. So there seems to be a contradiction in the poem, and Fisher is aware of it. After declaring his intention to avoid exaggeration he returns to his description with the phrase, 'And the scene?' This is followed by: 'a thirty-

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<sup>71</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 166-167.

five-year-old man, | poet, | by temper, realist’, which would fit Fisher himself as the observer. The observing consciousness is inseparable from its observations. So the poem is not just about a fountain; it is about the poet watching the fountain. The ‘sombre mood’ is the mood of the poet, ‘in the presence of things’ certainly, but the mood is subjective, it is not part of the external world he is observing. In fact, he draws attention to this by adding, ‘no matter what things’, thereby indicating that his mood would be as it is whatever he looked at, and it is his mood that causes him to select ‘gaunt’ and ‘garish’. It seems that Fisher’s intention is not to achieve a pure, objective description of the thing itself, but to describe the event of observing. That would necessarily include the observing consciousness, too. But Fisher has written, ‘nothing in the describing | beyond what shows | for anyone’; ‘what shows | for anyone’ cannot be individual and subjective. And more than mood, the poet has a ‘temper’, which is realist and this leads him to debate the virtues of pure description. Debate like this does not really fall within the terms of ‘working to distinguish an event from an opinion’. Fisher is aware of all this but clearly the subject interests him enough to include the contradictions in the poem. Hence his final, ironic comment that the goal he has been debating for his writing is a ‘romantic notion’.

Michael O’Neill points out that

‘The Memorial Fountain’ suggests the difficulty of escaping the ‘self’ [...] Fisher’s poem is a beautifully controlled illustration of the impossibility of distinguishing ‘event’ from ‘opinion’ [...] The semi-humorous phrase, ‘by temper, realist’, implies that ‘realism’ involves



subjective preference, but it does not free one from the dilemma that poetic knowledge will negotiate between ‘event’ and ‘opinion’.

(O’Neill, p. 217)

In ‘Projective Verse’, Olson seems to suggest that he believes the removal of the ‘self’ to be a possibility, whereas here O’Neill is emphasising the difficulty, or rather, Fisher’s perception of the difficulty, of achieving that. Earlier in the same essay, O’Neill states the case in somewhat stronger terms: ‘At the heart of his [Fisher’s] work is the unignorable fact of his own subjectivity’ (p. 210).

The term ‘realism’ may be understood as something different to having faith in our ability to have direct knowledge of the external world and to represent that knowledge through language. Given the belief that ‘self’ can never be removed from our understanding of the impressions we receive through our senses, ‘realism’ might be understood to be an accurate portrayal of the operations of sense impressions on the observing consciousness. That would mean observing and describing as precisely as possible but including the operation of consciousness as a necessary element in that process.

‘The Memorial Fountain’ does exactly this. ‘The Sidings at Drebkau’ offers a more extreme example of the same process.<sup>72</sup> It begins with realist description of the railway line and freight trains. The language here mimics its subject: lines 3-7 move with a heavy, slow, clunking rhythm, like shunting trains, which is achieved by the use of hard consonants. After line 7 the rhythm speeds up, like the trains gathering speed as the scene moves out into

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<sup>72</sup> Fisher (2005), p. 172.

open country. As the poem progresses we become more aware of the poet-observer and his judgements, at first implicit in the choice of words like ‘hacked’, ‘flayed’ and ‘deaden’, but becoming more explicit in verse 4. Fisher is examining his own response to the scene, the contents of his consciousness, as much as he is examining the content of the scene itself. His approach is similar to Bishop’s in ‘Arrival at Santos’ and ‘Brazil, January 1, 1502’. In the last verse the poet’s consciousness becomes explicitly the location for the event of the poem as he assimilates the scene he has been observing and records the impressions the scene has made on his consciousness, the historical awareness it elicits, ending finally at ‘home’ (Fisher, p. 172).

Does this go against Olson’s prescription for the removal of the self in ‘objectism’? Not necessarily, if we understand Olson’s objection to ‘the lyrical interference of the individual ego’ to refer to a habit of seeing external reality only through the needs of the subject. If Olson’s objection is to poetry that manipulates the natural world, viewing objects in the natural world purely as vehicles by which to express human emotions, rather than as objects in their own right, then Fisher’s approach of examining his response in the face of an accurate recording of the impressions objects make on his consciousness accords with Olson’s recommendation. The poet’s consciousness is responding to the external stimuli, not recognising a pre-existing emotion and then imposing it on the external scene. Fisher is here adopting an ecocritical approach as described by Laurence Coupe:

any literature which addresses the natural environment, should acknowledge its ‘dual accountability’ – that is, to both outer and inner

landscapes. Thus, nature is best represented, not through a flat ‘naturalism’ but rather through a creative play of language which alerts the reader to the delicate poise between the non-human world and the human mind.<sup>73</sup>

Coupe’s comment places emphasis on the role of the observing consciousness in representations of external reality and on the possibility of language establishing the relationship between them, which I feel to be applicable to Fisher. Marjorie Perloff, though, expresses some doubts about both sides of this model with respect to Fisher.

Perloff is sceptical of the view that Roy Fisher is an empiricist poet and the popular linking of Fisher with William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson and members of the Black Mountain group. In Perloff’s view the connection is tenuous and is at least partly attributable to critics being ‘misled [...] by Fisher’s stated predilection for a poetry of “things”’.<sup>74</sup> She develops her argument to demonstrate that Fisher is not as realist and ‘thingy’ as many critics suggest. Indeed, she identifies a refusal ‘to let the images do the work’ and a distrust of perceptual sensations, which somewhat contradicts both the popular view of Fisher and his own statements in interview (p.153). Furthermore, she maintains that “‘ideas” [...] are definitely *not* congenial to Fisher’ and she goes on to refer to his dislike of a ‘poetry of moral or political statement’ (pp.153-4). I can agree that moral and political statement, at least of a didactic nature, is alien to Fisher, though a moral and political stance

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<sup>73</sup> Laurence Coupe, ‘Introduction to Part Four’ in *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 157-9 (p.158).

<sup>74</sup> Marjorie Perloff, p.151.

may be found in his work. For example, his comment when discussing *The Ship's Orchestra* that he was 'not interested in making ... a thing which has got an authoritarian centre', I take to indicate a political stance (Fisher, 2000, p.58). However, that Fisher is not interested in ideas seems quite wrong to me. In an earlier interview he even cites Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) as 'a very splendid sort of stylistic influence for one to adopt' (p.43). It is true that Fisher refers here to Wittgenstein's style, rather than content, but the reference is suggestive, particularly since the *Tractatus* is concerned with the nature of reality, the status of things and the role of language in mediating experience.

I would suggest that there is both a reliance on perceptual experience and a distrust of perceptual sensations in Fisher's work and the existence of these opposing elements leads him to explore the nature and validity of his perceptions. This constitutes an interest in ideas. According to objectivism,<sup>75</sup> the poem is an independent object in the real world that readers can experience as they experience other objects. And like other objects, the poem can be associated in the readers' minds with other elements they have come in contact with. Furthermore, the poem is a language construction and it is in the nature of language to form its own connections and associations, independently of the speakers and writers. Denise Riley refers to this aspect of language:

All language in use [...] both is and isn't under the control of its speakers and writers [...] If there is 'an unconscious' which is in part

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<sup>75</sup> As defined in footnote 47.

language, but if language itself can also be argued to have an unconscious of its own and to possess a remainder, to be at the mercy of the invasive determinations of sound associations, of the wild and fruitful propagations of metaphor, and so on – then the speaker and writer become even less the masters of their utterance.<sup>76</sup>

Through the connections and associations produced by both the mind and language the poem can become connected to events or issues beyond the referents of its own vocabulary in the external world. Fisher takes advantage of this to do some thinking about ideas in the process of producing his poems. It may be this very aspect of the creative process that Perloff is responding to when she refers to Fisher ‘refusing to let the images do the work’. The ‘work’ is seeking for something beyond the image, contrary to imagist theory and the approach preferred by Mottram, Crozier and Davie. In Coupe’s terms, Fisher’s text acknowledges its ‘dual accountability’.

Fisher himself says that he has no training in abstract thought and is suspicious of it (Fisher, 2000, p. 57). Fisher likes ideas, but he handles them like a poet, not a philosopher, as in ‘The Memorial Fountain’. This means that the reader may not find a consistent and logical working out of a philosophical position in Fisher’s poetry. Rather Fisher allows the associative qualities of language to explore the possibilities of various lines of inquiry and speculation. The result is indeterminate.<sup>77</sup> If Perloff means that, then I can

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<sup>76</sup> Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp.12-13.

<sup>77</sup> Ian Gregson makes exactly this point when he refers to ‘Fisher’s central concerns with the complexities of perception and the problematic nature of representation [...] Fisher’s poems are consequently indeterminate in their

agree with her. What the reader *can* find is a philosophical curiosity and an exploration of ideas related to external reality and perception. In ‘An 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday Card for Roy Fisher’ Fleur Adcock writes, ‘your poems are not songs; they are to think with’ and I feel she is absolutely correct.<sup>78</sup> Importantly, ‘they are to think with’, apart from being a witty glance at the opening line of ‘Texts for a Film’, indicates that the ideas in Fisher’s poems are not definitive. Rather, they are in a raw form, for the reader to go to work on.

The ideas that Fisher explores in his work have to do with these issues of sense perceptions, the external world, and the relation between the two. As a result of these interests, Fisher’s writing contains a lot of ‘things’. Perloff refers to John Kerrigan’s comment on the ‘state of empirical overload’ and the ‘exhausted encounter with the real’ (Perloff, p. 152) in Fisher’s early poems, but goes on to observe herself that Fisher is ‘a poet drawn to the “perceptual field” of sensations, who doesn’t in fact quite trust those sensations either’ (Perloff, p. 153). This places Fisher in the same philosophical camp as the phenomenologists who maintain that empirical facts cannot give complete knowledge of an object and potentially in agreement with Heidegger that Being cannot be reduced to the data of sensory perception. It is also a crucial point to remember when reading his work because it takes us a good way towards understanding the impulses and

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form and meaning – they never present themselves as definitive or conclusive, but as provisional statements leading to other provisional statements.’

Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), p. 172.

<sup>78</sup> Fleur Adcock in *An Unofficial Roy Fisher*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2010), p.38.

motivation that give rise to Fisher's style of writing. He not only records the impressions that he receives of the external world through his senses, but at the same time he questions the content of those impressions, exploring their unreliability and inconsistency. Ian Gregson identifies this tendency as a particularly British response to postmodernism:

So where the work of thorough postmodernists is about the relentless deconstruction of the "real", there is in the work of even the most postmodern of British poets a tendency to accord the real a residual respect and allow it a residual place. (Gregson, p. 5)

Gregson identifies in Fisher 'a stubbornly pre-postmodernist resistance to pure fictiveness' and 'a modernist anxiety over the boundaries of knowledge' combined with 'explorations of the fragmentariness of being' (p. 5).

The notion of distrust of sense impressions is identifiable in several early poems but it also leads to the idea that there might be a way of perceiving which avoids the usual faults and inaccuracies. There is an attempt, or speculation about the possibility of attempting, to shrug off whatever is false in the poet-observer's reception of those sense impressions by constantly questioning the validity of the impressions the observer is conscious of. The residual place allowed to the real is located in the possibility that identifying and removing those false impressions brings the observer into closer contact with external reality. I will give this practice the term, 'perceptual-realism'. I want to use the term 'perceptual-realism' to

distinguish it from the nineteenth-century form of realism with its faith in the ability of language to describe the external world transparently.

In 'Linear'<sup>79</sup> and 'Kingsbury Mill'<sup>80</sup>, this perceptual-realism is presented as an openness to the flux and plurality of life as opposed to hiding from it in routine and repetition. This perceptual-realist temper means always seeing things in Shklovskian style as if for the first time and in a different light: recognising is not perceptual-realism, but escapism.<sup>81</sup> In both poems, travelling is used as an image for the possibility of that sense of fresh and changing experience. In 'Linear', Fisher describes travelling as:

a long line without anything  
 you could call repetition  
  
 always through eroded  
 country (Fisher, 2005, p. 163)

In 'Kingsbury Mill', Fisher is even more explicit about this desire to shrug off old habits of perception:

If only, when I travelled,  
 I could always really move –  
 not take the apparatus,

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<sup>79</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 162-163.

<sup>80</sup> Fisher (2005), p. 162.

<sup>81</sup> Fisher uses the phrase 'escapist realism' to refer explicitly to this attitude in 'Day In, Day Out', Fisher (2005), p.175.



teeth and straps,  
the whole thought-mangle.

The sight of Kingsbury Mill itself is followed by

Feeling the load of what's behind  
like steel bars caving in a lorry-cab  
racketing onwards through the pause. (p. 162)

The impact of the steel bars is an image of the weight of the cultural baggage the sight of the mill, and the naming of it, sets in motion. In 'Kingsbury Mill', that weight of preconception overrides any possibility of new perception. The poem begins, 'If only [...]', implying that the desired condition did not transpire, and no preconception-free idea of the mill is offered. On the contrary, the poem questions whether it is even possible to escape such cultural programming and the predetermined effects of language use. There is a similar questioning of the ideal of genuine perception in 'Linear', where the 'long line without [...] repetition' ends as 'crazily long and determined'. In its sense of 'not giving up', 'determined' is a concept full of will and energy; but it also means 'predestined', which actually contradicts the first sense. What use is will and energy if everything is already decided? As in 'Memorial Fountain', Fisher is speculating about ideas that remain beyond his reach but which attract him with the possibility of shrugging off false perceptions and acquiring some new knowledge of objects in the external world.

Such an ideal might be described as an aim towards greater realism, but the term ‘realism’ is problematic because of its reference to an earlier way of approaching the objects of the external world, as mentioned above: an incarnation of the ‘thought-mangle’, in fact. Fisher does not always make the sense in which he is using the word clear. This may well be an intentional use of ambiguity and designed to draw the reader into the process of investigating the terms of perception and representation, just as I am doing now. It might also be called an effect of writing as a poet rather than a philosopher. In ‘Day In, Day Out’,<sup>82</sup> for example, Fisher writes:

Escapist realism,  
 flight for a day  
 on a determinist train [...]

Likelihood  
 of a certain emotion at the flight’s extremity  
 great unlikelihood of its failure  
 to be conjurable[.]

This suggests that realism is a screen for escapism into a predetermined and acted social identity and that the mood or emotion is preconceived,<sup>83</sup> a

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<sup>82</sup> Fisher (2005), p. 175.

<sup>83</sup> Denise Riley describes this process: ‘As I project myself as being a such-and-such, I tacitly envisage myself participating in the wider social scene through some new identity category as I step, gingerly or proudly, across its threshold. Any act of identification is systematically askew, since I’m envisaging what I presume that I’m supposed, in the eyes of others, to really be’ (Riley, *The Words of Selves*, p.13). The narrator in Fisher’s poem is projecting such an identity and the poem is the vehicle that communicates it to ‘the wider social scene’.

manufactured emotion that the poem's speaker believes he wants to have, or believes others will expect him to exhibit. This is the effect of the word 'certain' before 'emotion', and also of the 'unlikelihood of its failure | to be conjurable'. This is the thought-mangle again. The question of whether the reader understands this to apply to a nineteenth-century style of realism, or whether it applies equally to the poet-observer's failed attempts to evade repetition in his perceptions, the perceptual-realism I have described remains an open one.

Another early poem, 'Toyland', also suggests the possibility of seeing beyond superficial appearances to some deeper reality, described by the phrase, 'the secret laugh of the world'<sup>84</sup>. Interestingly, Fisher uses a word here, 'secret', from Olson's description of the qualities derived by the poet from the application of objectism. In its beginning, 'Toyland' could be read as objectism in practice. The poem records the observations of the narrator with an attention to detail that serves to erase his presence from the scene while focusing on objects and surroundings. Such a self-effacing attitude chimes with Olson's prescription for removing the 'individual as ego'. Ian Sansom describes this aspect of the poem as 'withdrawal up and away from the people' and 'drawing apart from the crowds'.<sup>85</sup> Fisher's attitude to the notion and to the 'secret' seems to be ambivalent, however. In the first place, the poem's speaker is unable to get at the secret: 'I don't know what the joke is' (Fisher, p. 181). In this respect, 'Toyland' shares the uncertainty of the other poems on this theme. Furthermore, the treatment of the external

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<sup>84</sup> Fisher (2005), p. 180-181, (p. 181).

<sup>85</sup> Ian Sansom, "'The Secret Laugh of the World'" in *The Thing about Roy Fisher*, ed. by Kerrigan and Robinson, pp.193-208 (p.203).

elements in the poem, the people particularly, is problematic. Far from observing Olson's exhortation of 'getting rid [...] of the individual ego', the narrator of 'Toyland' is very much present and in judgemental mood. The self-effacing quality mentioned above applies only to the first half of the poem. Composed of twelve couplets, the pronoun 'I' first appears in the seventh couplet. Between that point and the end it is used nine times. Ian Sansom goes on to observe that the narrator's 'drawing apart clearly assumes a standing above [...] implies a God-like omnipresence' (Sansom, p. 204). There is a patronising, supercilious, even arrogant, tone in some of the terms Fisher chooses to apply to the characters: 'they spread formality', 'staunch smilers', 'nubile young lily-ladies', 'their calm hands', 'we know what they will do'. It is worth asking who 'we' refers to in the last of those phrases. Does Fisher include the reader in this power to know the secret doings of others? The reference to 'making water' is presumably intended to place the characters in some way but its effect is more that of sneering. The title of the poem compounds the problem. 'Toyland' suggests triviality and the poem seems to imply that that characteristic adheres to its inhabitants. It is also worth considering whether we read 'Toyland' as spoken in Fisher's personal voice, or as a dramatic monologue, though there is no clear indication as to the identity of the persona.

'Linear', 'Kingsbury Mill', 'The Memorial Fountain', 'Day In, Day Out' and 'Toyland' all share this concern with perception and the interpretation of sense data. They all seek to arrive at, or speculate about, a level of perception that might be termed as 'secret knowledge'. In this they might seem to conform to Olson's ideal of objectism. Where they depart from

that ideal is in their recognition of the failure of the project and their questioning of the terms in which it is phrased.

Light and the effects that it can create are recurring elements in Fisher's poetry and they are frequently associated with appearances changing and misperception, but there are also cases when this experience is associated with the notion of acquiring a true vision of the external world. In the prose section following 'The Sun Hacks' from *City*,<sup>86</sup> there is a series of misleading appearances: a drunken engine-driver leaning against a pile of baskets, clutching a parcel, looks at first like an embracing couple. The section goes on to draw a contrast between a view of the city and its inhabitants which recognises individuality and variety and the 'unformed stirrings and shovings spilling across the streets' (Fisher, pp. 37-8). The implication is that the various ways of seeing the figures and objects that are described here all have their own validity. However, this perhaps overly-rational conclusion is complicated by Fisher's comment on his vision of the engine-driver: 'I could not banish the thought that what I had first seen was in fact his own androgynous fantasy, the self-sufficient core of his stupor' (p. 37). It is interesting that he describes this 'core' as 'self-sufficient', which suggests that the vision is not dependent on the imagination of the observer, but is something independent emanating from the figure observed and that he has therefore gained access to another individual's fantasy. This would seem to suggest that the vision of the engine-driver as an embracing couple was not entirely a case of misperception. If the sight of the couple embracing was the engine-driver's own fantasy, then the observer-narrator has seen something

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<sup>86</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 27-44.

which is ordinarily unperceived; something that might be described as ‘secret’. This train of logic could lead us to the suspicion that such ‘secret knowledge’ might be obtained by apparently misperceiving concrete objects, the so-called misperception having a validity of its own. This speculation borders on the mystical. It is also important to notice that Fisher never says that any of these things are so. The first step in the train of reasoning is not a fact but ‘the thought’ that the observer-narrator ‘could not banish’. There is nothing in the poem that endorses this thought. The passage remains indeterminate; the reader is drawn in once again to wonder how far to go along the path of speculation.

‘The Square House: April’ offers a more explicit example of what might be an instance of insight.<sup>87</sup> The poem opens with simple and direct description:

Dawn birds at noon  
 on a still pale grey  
 April day with a tractor  
 behind the wood and aeroplane sounds  
 hidden in the sky[.]

The style and tone is plain-spoken; the timbre of the line ‘April day with a tractor’ is suggestive of William Carlos Williams’s red wheelbarrow.<sup>88</sup> But there is another element in the poem which is only identified as ‘something’:

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<sup>87</sup> Fisher (2005), p. 186.

<sup>88</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions Books, Paperback Original edition, 2011), p. 74.

‘There’s something in the fluid air’. It may be this ‘something’ that gives rise to the disorienting experience of all of the several species of birds that are mentioned possessing characteristics different to how they are named. The magpie is ‘like a parrot’, the ringdoves rise on ‘phoenix wings’, finches jump ‘like lice’, the blackbird is ‘a luminous emblem’, and all together these are ‘dawn birds’ seen ‘at noon’. The poem’s narrator says that the birds ‘sense’ this ‘something’, and finally: ‘They are in it. I | witness it. It is in | me.’ The poem seems to record a moment of insight, comparable to Bishop’s in ‘At the Fishhouses’, when the poet-observer achieves something similar to Olson’s notion of ‘secrets objects share’, although what that secret might be is not revealed. In one sense, Fisher has replaced uncertainty with vagueness, but there does seem to be a clear statement here of belief in this secret something. The final three lines of the poem encapsulate one of the central issues of the relationship between the observing consciousness and the external world. After the witnessing of the scene and description of its elements, during which the observer-narrator has apparently remained quite detached from the scene, he concludes: ‘It is in | me’. This could be read in an impressionist sense as the effect that the natural world has produced in his consciousness: a transfer from outer to inner. Or it could be read in an expressionist sense as the transfer from his inner state onto the external environment: the ‘something’ that he has witnessed deriving from his own consciousness. Or the poem might be read as questioning its own strategy of applying contradictory similes and metaphors and searching for ‘something’ in nature. The poem, characteristically, gives the reader no indication as to which reading to choose.

At this stage in our examination it is worth clarifying one of the elements that has arisen, namely that a poet who is often so firmly grounded in the material world can at other times appear to be attracted by concepts that seem to move beyond the purely material. The issue comes down to whether Fisher is seeking knowledge that might be termed metaphysical, or whether he is merely sceptical of the power of human senses to perceive all that there is in the natural world, and of human understanding to interpret correctly the perceptions that we do receive. If the latter, then his concern with perception may not be something so mystical, but rather a simple case of trying to see more clearly. This brings us back to Perloff's observation about Fisher's distrust of sense perceptions. It is interesting, though, to consider how far, and in which direction, these speculations can take him. The issue is further complicated by the role imagination plays in the experiences that Fisher is describing. As he comments in the prose section following 'The Wind at Night': 'The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate' (Fisher, p. 43). The 'something' that the narrator of 'The Square House: April' witnessed may have occurred in his imagination, but that may not make it any less 'real'. This notion is reinforced by the possibility we discovered in the prose section following 'The Sun Hacks' that the narrator perceived something that was not a concrete object in the real world but which nevertheless had an existence



independent of the observer's consciousness. The operation of imagination might be a suitable explanation for this phenomenon.<sup>89</sup>

Ralph Pite raises a related issue when he refers to Fisher's dedication of *A Furnace* to John Cowper Powys. Pite quotes Fisher's 'Preface' where he expresses his debt to Powys 'for such understanding as I have of the idea that the making of all kinds of identities is a primary impulse which the cosmos itself has'.<sup>90</sup> Pite goes on to observe that Powys believed that 'animals and plants, even stones and minerals, are not only alive, but each kind of living thing possesses its own quality of consciousness and seeks to become as completely itself as possible'.<sup>91</sup> Such a belief, which Fisher seems to suggest he shares, gives the notion of materialism a different sense to the one we are used to. Rather than suggesting a commonsense empirical attitude, materials have been invested with mystical properties. These are the terms used by Andrew Crozier in describing *A Furnace*:

What is imagined – the timeless identities entering nature – might yet give even well-disposed readers pause. And I think we should at least

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<sup>89</sup> William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* is relevant here. Williams is often cited as an influence on Fisher and Fisher refers to Williams quite frequently when speaking of his own reading. In *Spring and All* Williams emphasises that the imagination and the real world are not separate entities: 'To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination.'

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions Books, Paperback Original edition, 2011), p.3.

<sup>90</sup> Roy Fisher, *A Furnace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.vii.

There is also a possible agreement with Heidegger's description of the opposition between the self-disclosing world and the self-secluding earth by which entities achieve their identity. See Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp.47-48.

<sup>91</sup> Ralph Pite, p.231.

pause to ask if *A Furnace* does not arrive, finally, at a heterodox mysticism. Is its aim [...] to offer a prospect of transcendence?

(Ralph Pite, quoting Andrew Crozier, p. 242)

Crozier's conclusion is that this is not the case, but Pite comments that Crozier underestimates the 'heterodox mysticism'. 'It's as if Crozier cannot believe that Fisher would do such a thing', Pite concludes (p. 242).

Ian F. A. Bell and Meriel Lland propose a reading of Fisher's work that might provide a way to understand the apparent transcendentalism and mysticism and the idea of an element of consciousness in nature and inanimate objects. They identify a preoccupation with 'blending and bleeding', with 'transitional manoeuvrings which mix and mingle', a 'crossing of borders and boundaries of all kinds'.<sup>92</sup> The processes by which the products of nature are constantly forming, absorbing and evacuating material, decaying and appearing in other forms, can be explained in purely physical terms. Ecocritical understanding of the interdependence of natural systems is in harmony with such processes. Bell and Lland draw a comparison with William James's preference for 'the relational character of subjectivity', for the 'transitive' over the 'substantive' (p. 109) of which 'flow, seepage, and permeability' might be an expression. However, this materialist interpretation does not necessarily preclude a reading which looks beyond material considerations and finds in the notion of the 'transitive' the possibility of processes by which objects might acquire consciousness, at

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<sup>92</sup> Ian F. A. Bell and Meriel Lland, 'Osmotic Investigations and Mutant Poems: An Americanist Poetic', in *The Thing about Roy Fisher*, ed. by Kerrigan and Robinson, pp. 106-27 (p.106).

least in theory. I will comment more on Bell's and Lland's ideas when I come to look at *The Ship's Orchestra*, but first I would like to examine *A Furnace*, where we can find another form of border crossing which bears witness to Fisher's willingness to speculate beyond the material.

Passing from life into death might be described as crossing a border and considerations of the two states, and the relations and commerce between them, is a major theme of *A Furnace*. The poem is much concerned with whatever the dead might be said to leave behind: a remaining presence in the world. Although this does include the lives and deaths of human figures, Clair Wills points out that individuals do not occupy the centre of the poem: 'the concern of the poem is with temporal relations – the overlapping and occlusion – of landscapes, cities and cultures, rather than with anything in the domain of personal experience'.<sup>93</sup> To a large extent, this is true. There is a modernist impersonality to many sections of the poem, although there are also passages which draw on the narrator's personal experience, recounting childhood episodes in section III, 'Authorities', such as: 'Don't | ask your little friend | what his father does [...]' and 'Neighbour-fear | for the children [...]' (Fisher, 1986, pp. 21 and 25). There is also the vividly described personal experience of the opening of 'Introit'. In fact, there is a noticeable contrast in style between these personal and impersonal passages. The recording of direct sense impressions here:

old industrial road,  
buildings to my left along the flat

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<sup>93</sup> Clair Wills, 'A Furnace and the Life of the Dead', in *The Thing about Roy Fisher*, pp. 257-74 (p.259).

wastes between townships  
 wrapped in the luminous  
 haze underneath the sun (p. 1-2)

contrasts strikingly with the abstract tone of:

Whatever breaks  
 from stasis, radiance or dark  
 impending, and slides  
 directly and fast on its way, twisting  
 aspect in the torsions of the flow  
 this way and that[.] (p. 11)

It is possible to find a model for this aspect of Fisher's approach in *A Furnace* in the work of T. S. Eliot. A. David Moody draws attention to Eliot's employment of a transition between the impersonal, abstract thought of 'Time present and time past | Are both perhaps present in time future' and the personal experience of 'Round the corner. Through the first gate, | Into our first world' in the opening of *Burnt Norton*.<sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> This modulation between two voices is a defining aspect of the style of *Four Quartets*. Fisher also alternates between two such voices in much the same way in *A Furnace* in order to give expression to the contrasting elements of experience of the material world and

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<sup>94</sup> A. David Moody, 'Four Quartets: music, word, meaning and value' in *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. by A. David Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 142-57 (p.144).

<sup>95</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton* in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 171-176, (p. 171).

the attempt to interpret sense impressions through mental analysis. The two voices are, in fact, the result of two different ways of approaching sense experiences of the external world.

Interestingly, there are further points of comparison between Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Fisher's *A Furnace*. Thematically, the two poems deal with the same issues: life and death, time, experience of the real world and the urge to discover a 'meaning' behind outward appearances. For Eliot, that leads to a reliance on the spiritual and divine. Fisher's treatment of the theme leads him at one point to consider the border between life and death in terms that coincide with Bell's and Lland's description of liminality and border crossing when he refers to Edgar Allan Poe's tale of M. Valdemar.<sup>96</sup> This passage occurs towards the end of a section which critiques the establishment of a binary concept of reality that is based on language and education:

wherein the brain  
 submits to be  
 cloven up,  
 sideways and down  
 in all of its pathways

where to convert  
 one term to its antithesis  
 requires that there be devised

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<sup>96</sup> Poe's tale 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845) describes the result of an experiment in which M. Valdemar is put into a hypnotic trance moments before he dies. The narrator experiment preserves the subject in a state of suspended life-death for seven months.

an agent with authority – [.] (Fisher, 1986, p. 16)

Fisher sees this binary, oppositional world view as one of the power structures of authority; a means of validating the privileged side of the dichotomy. It is significant, though, and an aspect of the major theme of *A Furnace*, that one of the dichotomies he critiques is life-death. *A Furnace* repeatedly suggests that this is a false distinction, that the dead are present in various ways and that the denial of this is part of authority's commercial and management structure. M. Valdemar's experiment is in 'the province of the agent, | between antithesis and thesis', the result of the exploitation of which is: 'And as if it were a military installation | specialize and classify and hide | the life of the dead' (p. 17).

The aim of this activity is to 'hide the life of the dead', in other words, to erase the signs by which the past may be known, as in the urban renewal schemes described in *City* and others of Fisher's poems. Ironically, the exhortation to 'make it new' or to see things always as if for the first time might be understood to work towards the same final result: a loss of the past. I do not say that is Pound's or Shklovsky's intention, nor even that it is a necessary outcome of pursuing their theories and methods. The point is more about language. The terms in which these differing theories are couched contain a verbal contrariness to the meaning of the phrase in Fisher's poem. I think that Fisher is exploiting that here. At the same time, in the British way mentioned by Gregson (see above, p. 173), he allows that space for a traditional, empirical conservative approach to the world that a sense of history promotes.

Furthermore, Fisher also exploits the ambiguity of his own phrase, ‘the life of the dead’, treating those words not just as expressing the idea that past generations leave their marks on the environment, but also literally, to mean that the dead experience a kind of existence that can be called *life*. I would suggest that he does this for a number of reasons. Firstly, because the words are already on the page with one meaning so why not explore their other meanings, too? Secondly, because mystical speculation like this undercuts the traditional empirical conservatism mentioned above. Thirdly, because the combination of the first two reasons creates the kind of indeterminacy that Fisher so often aims at. This could also be an example of Denise Riley’s contention that language has its own ‘unconscious’ and to some extent ‘isn’t under the control of its speakers and writers’ (See above pp. 170-1).

The presence of the dead may be inscribed in a quite materialist, commonsense way in the street plan of cities that have passed through several stages in their development, each supposedly new plan super-imposed over an earlier one and deeply influenced by its form. But *A Furnace* also includes references to the dead visiting the real world. Section 1, ‘Calling’, opens with an allusion to Odysseus in the underworld attracting the dead by filling a pit with blood (Fisher, 1986, p. 5). An important element in this allusion is the fact that by giving blood to the dead Odysseus also restores memory to them, and recognition. Memory and a sense of the past are vital elements in our understanding of the external world and our own identities. That allusion is picked up again later in the section by the repetition of the phrase, ‘Waiting in

blood' (p.9). The lines that follow this repetition seem to enact the crossing of the boundary between life and death and then to retrace that progress:

[...] The straight way forward  
 checks, turns back  
 and sees it has passed through,  
 some distance back and without knowing it[.] (p. 9)

This notion of the dead crossing and re-crossing the border between life and death recurs, again with an allusion to Odysseus, near the end of section II:

They come anyway  
 to the trench,  
 the dead in their surprise,  
 taking whatever form they can  
 to push across[.] (p. 18)

One way to read these passages is to regard the references to the return of the dead to the living world as a metaphor for the persistence of genetic material and characteristics in later generations. There is an explicit reference to genes in the lines immediately preceding the dead coming to the trench and it is couched in terms that recall the back-and-forth motion across a border of the earlier account of the life-death dichotomy:

[...] Genetic behaviour,



scrabbling, feeling back across the spade cut  
 for something; the back-flow of the genes'  
 forward compulsion[.] (p. 18)

Furthermore, the term 'double spiral', which Fisher uses in his preface and which occurs as an image throughout the poem and features on the cover, is a term that also describes DNA.

There is, then, an account of these passages that is grounded in physical materiality. Fisher, on this reading, would not seem to be proposing that something of our personal identity survives death. However, there are other passages where this materialism seems to be called into question. It is my proposal that these passages represent Fisher's response to the sense of mystery in life. Such a sense of mystery is present in the opening section of 'The Return'. Here Fisher writes of 'the timeless flux | that cannot help but practice | materialization' and describes ice crystals 'falling from where they were not' (p. 11). There is a scientific explanation for the formation of ice crystals; however, science is not invoked here: as an image it suggests creation of concrete substance out of thin air. More significantly, the passage goes on to refer to 'timeless identities [...] with no | determined form'. An identity with no form, no physical incorporation, and also timeless seems to defy materialism in no uncertain terms. Given this apparent questioning of the validity of a materialist view of reality and the concern with the life of the dead, the quotation from John Cowper Powys a little later must lead the reader to speculate whether Fisher is envisioning a form of transcendence here: 'they have life in them that can be revived' (p. 12).

Fisher refers explicitly to a sense of the unexplainable in life in the final section of the poem:

[...] There have always been  
 saucers put out for us  
 by the gods. We're called  
 for what we carry. (p. 46)

The word 'called' here echoes the title of section I, 'Calling', which in turn recalls the allusion to Odysseus. The 'saucers put out for us' resemble the blood he put out for the dead. The title, 'Calling', might be understood in various ways. A calling can be a vocation, such as a poet has, or a priest; it might refer to calling in the sense of trying to communicate with someone, and in the context of the poem, that suggests contact with the dead. The phrase, 'what we carry', suggests both memory (especially in connection with Odysseus) and carrying cultural baggage, by which not only the nature of the calling is culturally relative, but also attitudes to issues of calling are regarded as relative to the cultural standpoint from which the calling in question is being examined. The present of the poem is described as 'barbarous', and makes of callings 'rank parodies' (p. 46). In this cultural environment, 'for what we carry', suggests material possessions, or trade and commerce, 'cargo-cult', as Fisher calls it; such is the nature of this debased 'calling'. The terminology implies criticism of these contemporary manifestations of callings, thereby suggesting that other, earlier examples were more authentic

and valid. However, Fisher's approach may be ironic, itself a 'rank parody' of genuine callings.

In fact he suggests this in a passage from section 3, 'Authorities', which refers to being 'grotesquely called' and

[...] compelled  
 by parody to insist  
 that what image the unnatural  
 law had been stamping  
 was moving into Nature[.] (p. 23-4)

However, the state of being 'compelled | by parody to insist' that an unnatural image 'was moving into Nature' is attributed to 'fools' (p. 23) who are specified as 'priests' sons' and 'teachers'. These teachers have 'a little Homer, | a little Wordsworth, two or three generations | of Symbolist poets'. The combination of influences might describe Fisher himself. Similarly, the complaint about the activity of these 'fools' – insisting on the unnatural image being able to move into Nature – ironically amounts to a parody of section 2 of Fisher's poem (see above, p. 192). The notions of barbarity and parody serve to muddy and question these concepts further. They are, as Fisher puts it, 'refracted by whatever murk | hangs in the air' (Fisher, 1986, p. 46), but in the final section the appearance of apparently supernatural beings enacts this transition from the idea of being outside the natural to having an existence in the natural world:

[...] Self-generated  
 and living perfect to themselves  
 in some other dimension, they have it  
 laid on them to materialize in the cold  
 upper air of the planet[.] (p. 46)

Furthermore, the terms in which their appearance is described extends the idea of materialisation noted in the reference to ice crystals ‘falling from where they were not’. There are elements in *A Furnace* that clearly defy the laws of physics as we understand them. At another level, Fisher is simply playing the familiar game of viewing clouds as the objects their shapes suggest and his comment that ‘There’s a choice of how to see it’ implies that perception is purely subjective.

There is a characteristic vagueness, once again, in Fisher’s use of these terms and what the reader might understand by them. In addition to that sense of indeterminacy, we need to take account of the fact that the title of the prefatory section of *A Furnace* is ‘Introit’. As a psalm or chant preliminary to Holy Communion, ‘Introit’ is a title that is clearly relevant to the themes of life, death and transcendence. Its connection with the celebration of Holy Communion casts a specifically religious light on the issue of objects and materials changing form, suggesting transubstantiation represented in the wine and the wafer. And finally, it leads the reader again to speculate on the significance of the return of the dead in those passages where they are represented as having an existence after death. It is true that the portrayal of the dead in the poem is more suggestive of zombies than anything that might

be likened to Christian concepts of life after death and I am not suggesting that Fisher's poem promotes a Christian view of the world. Indeed, at this point the treatment is more suggestive of the parodying of religious callings that is a feature of modern barbarism. However, his treatment of the themes I have been discussing is intriguing. He seems to slip back and forth across the boundary of belief in a metaphysical element in life, rather in the same way as he represents individuals crossing and re-crossing the border between life and death. This contributes further to that sense of vagueness and uncertainty that we have identified, and creating that sense is very probably a part of Fisher's intention.

Clair Wills comments on the indeterminacy of *A Furnace* in connection with this notion of transcendence:

He preserves an indeterminacy, a suspension between a robust naturalism and what he calls 'the other dream or intention: of encoding / something perennial' (F, p. 12 [Wills's abbreviation for *A Furnace*, p. 12]) which is reminiscent of gothic ambivalence towards supernatural forces. *A Furnace* is marked by the impossibility of telling signs from coincidences, portents from accidents; it achieves an unlikely marriage of secular doubt and a sense of trans-human powers[.]<sup>97</sup>

This seems to me to be an excellent summary of this aspect of the poem, and of elements in Fisher's work in general, and one which I fully endorse. Fisher

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<sup>97</sup> Clair Wills, 'Life of the Dead', p.260.

himself makes an explicit statement about his position regarding what Wills calls 'robust naturalism' when he writes, 'I want to believe I live in a single world' (Fisher, 2005, p. 43). It is the idea of *wanting* to believe that is so telling. It suggests that monist materialism cannot satisfy his curiosity, much as he wishes it would. In the same paragraph, the lines 'The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate', could be read as a comment on indeterminacy, an inability to distinguish between experiences designated 'real' and those designated 'imaginary'. More importantly though, Fisher here accepts both ways of perceiving: the habituated form of perception which remembers and recognises objects and their associations, and the Shklovskian form of seeing as if for the first time. Furthermore, these lines amount to a statement on the role of imagination in constituting reality that strongly echoes William Carlos Williams's thoughts on the subject as expressed in *Spring and All*. Williams's argument in that book is that art which attempts to reproduce nature is a form of plagiarism and is lifeless. Instead, 'works of art [...] must be real, not "realism" but reality itself' (Williams, p. 45). There is a danger that this might be misunderstood to suggest an attempt at the impossible: a contradiction of the premise accepted at the start of my introduction that 'the real can only be represented precisely *as* representation'. That would be to mistake Williams's point, though, which is that the work of art, when it is released from the artist's hands, becomes a part of the external world of things and its audience experiences it as an element of that reality. This is a theory which has ecocritical implications. As Jonathan Bate explains it, although a work of art is 'a *representation* of the state of nature' that '*does not make it unreal*'. Art,

particularly poetry, ‘may create for the mind the same kind of recreational space that a park creates for the body’ (Bate, pp. 63-4). The poem becomes a space in the external world which other minds can inhabit and which they can experience as they experience other objects in the natural world. Williams and Bate thus provide a theoretical basis for Fisher’s comments on the imaginary, the remembered and the real. The last paragraph of ‘The Wind at Night’ is speculative and philosophical in tone; to discover how it would feel if the imaginary were portrayed as experience with the force of reality, we should look at *The Ship’s Orchestra*.<sup>98</sup>

*The Ship’s Orchestra* presents the imaginary and the real having equal force. The ship in the poem is sometimes presented in traditional realist terms, as in the opening section describing the Ivory Corner and the corridor and washroom. It is also described in terms that reveal it as an image of the body. If life is a journey, then the body is the vessel in which we make that journey. The ship is also an image of the mother’s body. The long paragraph that begins: ‘Reasons. The ship is a unity’ continues by describing its ‘*skin* of white paint’ (my italics) and goes on, ‘some would think of it as having the shape of cleavage’, which suggests the mother’s breasts (Fisher, 2005, p. 112). This metaphor is a continuation from the previous paragraph which had suggested an equivalence between the ship and breast-feeding: ‘I am about to be fed with cosy food [...] It is the sort of time when something very large and wide and silvery, like the capsized hull of a vast ship, can begin slowly to rise above the horizon’ (p. 112). Simultaneously with the experiences described in the above quotation, the narrator is hearing Amy play her

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<sup>98</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 105-128.

trombone and the whole paragraph moves seamlessly between simple, realistic statement ('Soon there will be a meal'), infantile expression ('my being a great big boy criminal'), the scene on the ship, the infant's feeding time, and the image of the mother's breast as the dominant reality in the infant's world. This metaphor of ship for mother's body, combined with the infant's point of view, is repeated a few pages further on:

The ship has come close, drawn itself up my body and stretches far away from me above and below and on all sides. And all the compartments of which it is made are full of milky sounds ready to knock against the bulkheads and echo all through the vessel.

(p. 117)

The text does not distinguish between what is 'real' in the sense that it is a representation of an object existing in the external world and what is 'imagined' or memory and has its existence in the narrator's mind. As such it presents the scene on the ship where events are represented as taking place, and the events that take place simultaneously in the narrator's mind. The link between these two areas of experience could include the fact of the approaching mealtime and the effect of hearing Amy play her trombone. The quality of the sound produced by the instrument, the shape and action of playing the instrument itself may have awakened the associations in the narrator's mind. In this passage, Fisher is creating a fuller representation of experience than we generally meet with. He aims to 'tell the truth about things' in the sense of rendering the feel of experience into language. He is



unveiling the nature of our experience of the external world as we move through a scene and interact with its objects and other people.

Fisher's method here is illustrative of the whole poem which constantly mutates from one form to another at the levels of realist description, metaphor and image, and language. The nonsense language of the anonymous lovers: 'Throbber, she said, you're my throbber. And you're my gummy, was the reply. My gummy; my guggy gummy. Now you're my thrubber, she said', is followed by the matter-of-fact style of: 'I have known this all along' (p. 110). The great discrepancy in the register of the two styles is in keeping with the tendency of the poem to constantly shift perspective. The nonsense word, 'gummy', is also constantly trying to transform itself in the reader's mind into 'mummy', which both enacts the mutating process of the text in the reader's mind, and the narrator's subconscious desire to regain the infant's relationship with his mother in the breast-feeding passages, and the sound of 'guggy gummy' reproduces the sounds of the infant before the full acquisition of language.

Continuously, throughout *The Ship's Orchestra* there is this flow between images, style and content that recalls Bell's and Lland's comments on 'flow, seepage and permeability'. There is a real sense in which language and image in *The Ship's Orchestra* have these qualities. Bell and Lland comment: 'In both James and Fisher, being is fixed and objects or landscapes are solid only on a temporary and provisional basis, as a means of getting about, as points of departure' (Bell and Lland, p. 114). This describes exactly the experience of reading *The Ship's Orchestra*.

I have already mentioned Clair Wills's comments on 'the impossibility of telling signs from coincidences' (see above p. 196) in *A Furnace* and that comment can be applied to much of Fisher's work. Fisher establishes these signs, coincidences, portents and accidents partly through the creation of patterns. Patterns serve to suggest that there might be some governing principle that controls their creation; a meaning that can be discovered by the correct interpretation of the pattern. However, if that governing principle is absent, what appears to be meaningful is in fact random coincidence and accident.

Recurring images, words phrases and categories, or what Marjorie Perloff calls 'verbal clusters', serve as pattern-forming devices in *The Cut Pages* (Perloff, p. 160). Indeed, the poem opens with a statement of this aspect of its organization: 'Coil If you can see the coil hidden in this pattern, you're colour-blind'.<sup>99</sup> The verbal patterns throughout the whole poem are clearly there for every reader to see. Perloff's summary of these 'verbal clusters' is: '(1) references to ordering, control, containment; (2) references to movement, change, opening, journeying; and (3) images of vision and items that obscure vision – shade, shadow, shutter' (Perloff, p. 160). Other groupings are possible, but the point is that we recognize the pattern. Significantly, though, Fisher links the perception of the pattern with a form of misperception: colourblindness. Yet the concern with pattern pervades the poem, not only in the patterns it creates, but also in explicit references to patterns. For example: 'Summoning all the scratches into pattern' (Fisher, 2005, p. 92) is a line that supports Perloff's contention that 'the longing for

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<sup>99</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 87-104, (p.88).

pattern' is a major motivation for the actions that lead to their creation (Perloff, p. 160). Awareness of pattern is an activity of imagination since it is reasonable to assume that nature itself lacks such awareness. We see patterns then, firstly, because we have the imagination and linguistic ability to describe them, and secondly, because we want to see them. In this respect, patterns signify the element that we have repeatedly found in Fisher's work of the suggestion that our experiences of the real world can reveal something beyond the simple impressions made on our senses, but always failing to identify what it is. Sean O'Brien describes this paradox in Fisher's work:

his modus operandi depends on rejecting the idea of ends and purposes. Yet his work also reveals the mind's hankering after teleology – the gritty ghost in the machine, put there by language, which implies closure as well as ramification. No origin is available, but the mind is paradoxically engaged in a continual search.

(O'Brien, p. 112-3)

Interestingly, this concern with pattern in our experience of the external world is one which Fisher shares with Eliot. In *East Coker*, Eliot presents pattern as something which the human consciousness imposes on experience and which is therefore essentially false and constantly changing since the consciousness that creates it is constantly changing:

[...] There is, it seems to us,

At best, only a limited value

In the knowledge derived from experience.  
 The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
 For the pattern is new in every moment  
 And every moment is a new and shocking  
 Valuation of all we have been.<sup>100</sup>

I would suggest that this passage would serve as a very good summary of Fisher's handling of these themes in *The Cut Pages*. For Eliot, pattern is not the sign of a meaning; it is a distraction. Eliot finds divine meaning beyond pattern. Fisher identifies an urge towards patterning in the observing consciousness, and I believe he agrees with Eliot that it has no significance beyond itself. However, Fisher is fascinated by the possibility of the 'something' that might exist behind these signs the external world leaves on our senses and by the thought that it is the weakness of our perceptions that prevents us seeing it, but he does not discover the certainty that Eliot goes on to find in *Four Quartets* in a spiritual apprehension of reality.

In conclusion, there are elements in Fisher's work which I judge to be in accord with Olson's conception of objectism and there are elements which I feel contradict objectism. Fisher shares with Olson the intense focus on, and respect for, the objects of the external world. Both Olson and Fisher present the view that this focus on objects can lead to new knowledge but I find Fisher is more uncertain about the reliability of whatever information he derives from sense perceptions. Perhaps the point on which the two writers

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<sup>100</sup> T. S. Eliot, *East Coker* in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 177-183, (p.179).

diverge most noticeably, in my opinion, is on the issue of subjectivity. Olson argues for getting rid of subjective interference; Fisher is sceptical that this is possible: subjectivity is the condition under which we perceive. This leads Fisher to a position that is indeterminate, as we have seen, and that in turn is a possible explanation for the manner in which he sometimes turns to a form of abstract speculation that brings him closer to Eliot than Olson, at least in terms of approach, if not in his conclusions.

Finally, I would like to refer to some of Fisher's comments in interview to show how his own words support the conclusion I have reached. Jed Rasula raised the issue of subjectivity and objectivity: 'I wonder if there's any connection between these kind of perceptions and your feelings about the subjective obstacle to objectivity?' (Fisher, 2000, p. 67). To which Fisher replied that these were ideas he had, but that he did not 'necessarily want to solve the problem' (p. 67), and then continued:

if you can steer a sufficiently agile course you may be able to see yourself coming, you may be able to see the back of your own head. I suppose I have this sort of objective in general. Insofar as the language will in the end defeat you, this seems to me a very honourable thing to do, to try to see what is outside the range of vision, to try to break or to catch time or the limits of the perceptive field at its tricks in limiting consciousness of the world.

(p. 68)

In a later interview with Peter Robinson, on the subject of ‘revelation’ and the use of sense perceptions, Fisher appears to make a categorical denial of access to ‘secret’, transcendental knowledge:

The idea of revelation is, of course, a projection of the condition of the perceiving self – it’s not that I believe there to be a troupe of Beings behind a curtain, poking meaningful things through – and by this time I wanted to exercise a perception that felt itself to be in better shape[.]

(p. 106)

Fisher goes on to assert the importance of sense impressions:

What I mean by ‘obligation’ is that we’re obliged by our senses, insofar as they’re not subjected by cultures to various quaint patterns of occlusion, to pay attention to the entire array, in order to find what’s safe and what’s not[.]

(p. 106)

These comments are part of a reasoned discussion and that is something quite different to writing poetry. However, Fisher’s position here clearly leans towards the physical and material. Yet the suspicion that the material does not describe all of the external reality is hinted at in the phrase, ‘to see what is outside the range of vision’. I do not understand this to mean turning one’s head or using a microscope. In the second interview, the phrase, ‘it’s not that I believe [...]’, is interesting. This common expression is typically used when a primary statement is going to be modified. For example: ‘it’s not that I

believe the plan won't work, I simply feel it's too expensive'. Fisher has left his modification of the primary statement unspoken but implied. I would like to give the final word to Fisher, but from a poem, not an interview: 'No system describes the world' ('Metamorphoses').<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Fisher (2005), pp. 316-318, (p. 317).

## Chapter Five

### Was Brownlee Innocent?

#### 5.1 The role of binary opposites in *Why Brownlee Left*

In *The End of the Poem*, Paul Muldoon comments:

The sense of the phrase “the end of the poem” on which I’ll focus here has to do with the influence of one poem on another within the body of work of a single poet, whereby the “gaps” or “blanks” in one poem are completed or perfected by another[.]<sup>102</sup>

In other words, the point at which any particular poem reaches its final word is not the end of the poem since there is always the possibility that the poet will extend the poem’s existence through a future reference, or indeed, that another poet will do so. Conversely, the poem does not begin with its opening word since it may be an extension of an earlier poem, a re-working of themes or ideas that the earlier poem did not resolve. This is a good description of Muldoon’s method in *Why Brownlee Left*, where each poem refers back or forwards to other poems in the collection, enlarging on and developing aspects of the themes of the whole collection, sometimes picking up specific words or phrases in the process. The impression created by his comment is,

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 58.



amongst other things, one of almost endless possibility and openness. The reader has the impression that the poem is never finally decided.

Included within the phrase 'the end of the poem' is its opposite concept, the beginning of the poem. After all, the poem that ends must have had a start; beginning and end form a pair as salt and pepper, heaven and hell do, each implying its partner. Furthermore, the process of cross-referencing, allusion and influence described by Muldoon provides a picture of both beginnings and ends since it includes the concept of source material for later poems as well as continuation of earlier ones. This introduces the notions of conception and origin, ideas which recur throughout *Why Brownlee Left*. It also emphasises constructedness since beginning and end are concepts that apply to the construction of objects.

The notion of beginnings and endings is part of a larger structural pattern that is central to *Why Brownlee Left*: the collection is permeated by a set of binary opposites which can be collected under the umbrella term 'innocence and experience'. It should be clear from the outset that these pairs are not presented in an either/or sense. Ian Gregson draws attention to the hybrid quality of Muldoon's imagery and forms and this quality also suggests the mixing of the terms of each binary pair. Gregson comments that Muldoon 'harps on hybrid imagery and deploys hybrid forms (like parody and the juxtaposition of diverse generic elements) in order radically to call into question the whole nature of identity' (Gregson, p. 38). The effect of the hybrid aspect of language and perspective works precisely to destabilise the over-simplified ways of viewing identity and behaviour represented by binary pairs (p. 40). This chapter examines how Muldoon employs binary pairs and

the destabilising effect of hybridity to represent his concept of how we experience the world, what knowledge we might gain from that experience and how we might represent that knowledge.

A relatively simple example of Muldoon's treatment of polar opposites occurs in the short poem, 'Bran'. The poem divides into two halves, following the division of the stanzas, where adult love-making in the first stanza is contrasted with regret for the innocence of the child's love for his dog, as described in the second stanza. Tim Kendall comments that 'Bran' mourns its [childhood's] irretrievability'.<sup>103</sup> Kendall goes on to contrast that childhood emotion with the adult lovers and states that the ecstasy of the lovers is 'faintly ridiculous'. He concludes that this 'detached' judgement on the part of the protagonist 'prompts only a misty-eyed nostalgia for the "pure joy" of the protagonist's boyhood' (p. 78).

However, Kendall misreads the poem when he attributes 'pure joy' to the young boy since the stanza break and punctuation make it very clear that it refers to the lovers: 'While they sigh and they moan | For pure joy, || He weeps for the boy on that small farm'.<sup>104</sup> It is clear that the 'pure joy' is felt by 'they'. Furthermore, I would argue that there is nothing inherently 'ridiculous' about that, not even 'faintly' so. I do, however, pick up the tone in the poem that Kendall is referring to. That tone is produced by an earlier line: 'women | Who have let themselves go'. It is the double meaning of this phrase, and more specifically, the nature of the two elements that are linked via that double meaning, that creates the sense of the ridiculous. The women

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<sup>103</sup> Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Chester Springs: Dufour Editions, 1996), p. 78.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left* in *Poems 1968-1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 73-102, (p. 78).

have 'let themselves go' in the sense of surrendering to their passion, but also in the sense of ceasing to take care of their physical appearance. It is that incongruous linking of the two meanings that leads the reader's lips to curl, just very slightly. But the awareness of that second sense, not caring about appearance, can only be the effect of a certain way of looking. The partner who lets him (or her) self go equally is so lost in the immediate experience that they have no attention to spare for 'the detached gaze' that Kendall refers to. But Kendall's judgement is dependent on that detached gaze, and that applies equally to the protagonist in the poem and the reader. Thus the authority of the lyric self is undermined since that self has chosen one fixed point of view amongst several. The significance of this for my thesis is that it shows very clearly that what we see depends on how we look; similarly, that what we understand depends on how we read. In both cases language mediates and influences the nature of what is perceived. Judgements that might be expressed in the terminology of innocence and experience are invalidated.

It is important to be clear about these points because the 'pure joy' can validate the emotion in stanza one if one reads it that way, but it applies only to the women. The male counterpart does not share in it. He is watching the women with Kendall's 'detached gaze', conveyed in the line 'While he looks into the eyes of women' (p.78), and Kendall's reading of the poem would certainly be appropriate to the consciousness of the poem's male protagonist. The reader might take a different perspective, though; the poem allows for that. These judgements are the result of perception; they are not inherent in the actors or their behavior. In this sense, the poem is a perfect illustration of

the point Gregson makes about hybridity: that it allows for a plurality of perspectives.

A final issue which I think will confirm that this poem is not so simple as its surface might at first suggest is the inaccuracy of its final line. The boy hugging his dog does *not* know all there is to know of rapture. That is precisely what the poem is demonstrating. The male protagonist's belief that the boy (presumably his own younger self) 'knows all there is of rapture' is due to a falsifying idealisation. 'Falsifying', that is, if one accepts the validation of the 'pure joy', but not if one looks with the 'detached gaze' of the male protagonist.

## 5.2 Muldoon in Newton's universe

Identifying themes that invite the use of the terms 'innocence' and 'experience' calls up associations with Blake's *Songs*. It is sometimes observed that Blake was in a sense anti-nature,<sup>105</sup> but that what he really opposed was the mechanistic Newtonian view of the working of the natural, physical universe. Isaiah Berlin comments that the Newtonian concept of a universe governed by absolute and discoverable laws was most congenial to the Enlightenment way of thinking but anathema to Kant. For Kant, the problem with a universe in which all actions and events were subject to immutable laws of cause and effect was that it denied free will. If there was no free will in nature, and if humanity was a part of nature, then each person's actions were predetermined and inevitable (Berlin, p. 75-6). This led Kant to

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<sup>105</sup> Ackroyd (1999) writes of Blake that 'once he had found art, he had no taste for nature' (p. 59).

develop a philosophy that would return free will to humanity. The Romantics, and Blake, were more in sympathy with this vision of a universe where individuals had the power to determine their own actions and influence their own fates. A side effect of these developments, as Berlin observes, was that nature and humanity were no longer regarded as forming a single harmonious system. In some cases nature was seen as being in conflict with human culture (p. 76). The legacy of this train of thought is clear in *Why Brownlee Left*.

Muldoon explores the idea of a Newtonian universe operating according to natural laws, but without the Enlightenment optimism in the discovery of those laws and with an admixture of scepticism, which is not to deny the importance of historical events, but rather to question the accuracy of our knowledge of the past or our ability to draw correct conclusions. Muldoon even considers the possibility that human events are predetermined, but demonstrates that, if they are, we cannot read the course they will take. As Clair Wills comments, Muldoon

is preoccupied with the ways in which departure or origin predetermines the nature of the journey and the place of arrival. One of the things Muldoon is saying in 'October 1950' is that he doesn't know where he is going, since he doesn't know where he has come from, and yet his destiny may be no less inescapable for being hidden.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p.69.

However, alongside this Newtonian view, Muldoon also shares with the Romantics their notion of the conflict between human culture and nature.

The poem, 'Why Brownlee Left',<sup>107</sup> explores this issue of free will and man in nature and combines the theme of expulsion from paradise with a much wider concern with the issue of leaving home, a theme which develops further into a concern with finding a place of belonging, a new home. The first point that we note about the poem is that it never supplies an answer to the question of why Brownlee left. One of the ambiguities concerns the quality of the life that Brownlee left behind. The poem reasons that 'if a man should have been content | It was him' but this assessment is based on material considerations: the fields and farmhouse that Brownlee possessed (Muldoon, p. 84). That leaves open the question of mental and emotional aspirations and how far his rural existence satisfied these. His life may have been one of simple pleasures and contentment, or it may have been one of stultifying boredom. There is also the issue of nature versus culture to consider. Brownlee's former way of life was not carried on in a pure state of nature; agriculture is culture of a kind. However, it was a lifestyle that was close to the land and the rhythms of nature. Brownlee's disappearance might, then, have been either an expulsion from an idyllic, pastoral form of paradise or an escape from a virtual prison. He may have lost the good life in harmony with nature, or he may have made a grasp for freedom. Kendall summarises the two possible views of Brownlee's disappearance thus:

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<sup>107</sup> Muldoon (2001), p. 84.

the poem offers two alternative fates: that Brownlee heroically evades his destiny, and abandons his farm to set out for an inheritance other than that decreed by his name; or, crucially, that he has become so much a part of his environment that he is indistinguishable from the ploughed field which is his namesake. (Kendall, p. 69)

One of the differences between these two possible views is free will. In the first scenario Brownlee is asserting his independence and freedom to act in a manner that reminds us of Romantic ideology as described by Berlin. In the second he is powerless to escape his predestined fate. In either case the natural world is seen to be inimical to human aspirations of individuality, either requiring the human subject, as an outcast from the original Eden, to go on a quest in search of an identity, a home and place of belonging, or denying individuality and difference between the human and non-human world. The latter provides not only an unattractive image of what it might mean to live at one with nature, but also a dramatisation of Morton's criticism of 'ecomimesis', a style of writing which aims 'to undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves' (Morton, p. 63). Which of these interpretations is correct is an impossible and unnecessary question. By raising the issue of 'why Brownlee left' and then deliberately failing to answer it, Muldoon has indicated that the answer is not the point. The point is the range of possibilities and the absence of a single truth. Furthermore, Muldoon is drawing attention to the constructedness of the poem's reality by, ironically, failing to construct it at this crucial point, and that in turn draws attention to the constructedness of our perceptions in the real world.

### 5.3 Innocence and experience

A poem that pursues the notion of innocence and experience at a more complex level is 'Cuba'.<sup>108</sup> On a first reading, images of innocence seem to collect around the narrator's sister, May. Her name suggests springtime and rebirth in the natural world. The 'white muslin' of her dress suggests purity and innocence and she seems to be the victim of the two fathers in the poem, whose bullying attitudes pose a threat to that innocence (Muldoon, p. 78).

Tim Kendall makes the point forcefully:

the poem's fathers manipulate May, imposing their narrow prejudices on her; 'Cuba' is a parable of innocence destroyed, rather than preserved, by their sanctimonious codes. (Kendall, p. 76)

The white muslin dress which, as a piece of imagery, is so suggestive of innocence, is suggestive of the very opposite to the experienced eye of May's biological father. He describes it as 'next to nothing', with the obvious connotations of promiscuous behaviour, but linking his complaints about her clothing to the Cuban missile crisis and the prospect of nuclear war and human annihilation is both naïve and inconsequential. The exaggeration of the comparison might serve to make May appear all the more innocent; however, the presentation of this part of the narrative serves at least partly to undermine any portrayal of her father as the representative of cynical

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<sup>108</sup> Muldoon (2001), pp. 78-79.



experience. It is actually comic. The pounding of the table gives the quality of caricature to the scene and the terminology of the lines ‘Those Yankees were touch and go as it was’, and ‘But this Kennedy’s nearly an Irishman | So he’s not much better than ourselves’, suggests a less-than-serious attitude to the father’s grasp of international politics (Muldoon, p. 79). In this way Muldoon casts doubt on the ‘experience’ of the father.

We do not hear May’s reply, but we do know that she heeded her father’s recommendation to ‘make your peace with God’. And we overhear her confession in which she describes her transgressions in language that suggests they are about as trivial as they could be, ironically so in a world on the brink of nuclear conflict. It is possible to read the final part of her confession – ‘a boy touched me once’ – as accidental contact from the way she phrases it. The religious Father’s salacious interest in this part of the story betrays his experienced attitude.

‘Cuba’ is interesting, though, for how much it does not tell and I would suggest that how each reader receives the poem depends largely on how they supply the missing information in their understanding of the scenes and character that *are* shown. This, of course, mimics our experiences in the real world where our knowledge is partial, our understanding of events is fallible, and possible interpretations are multiple. For instance, when May arrives home in the morning she is wearing her evening dress, which prompts the question: where had she spent the night? The reader might also be very well aware that it is none of his or her business, yet still recognise that the text as it stands allows the possibility of asking. The answer to the question might be such as May’s father would consider ‘innocent’: May might have stayed

with a girlfriend. Her father does not ask where she spent the night; he focuses his attention on the style of her dress. Given the drift of his criticism, that suggests that he knows, or has been told, that she stayed with a girlfriend, family member, or some such. Is it true? Did May stay away overnight without taking a change of clothes for the morning? It is possible that May has hoodwinked her father. Is he more innocent than her, in fact, believing everything he is told?

As for the other Father, May tells him exactly what he wants to hear, as evidenced by his obvious interest. Actually, if May is knowing, she handles the situation with considerable psychological insight and acumen. Has she hoodwinked this Father as she may, perhaps, have hoodwinked the one at home? It is possible that May is simply managing male authority and exploiting the situation for her own advantage; namely, in this case, the freedom to do what she wants. Whilst many readers would not argue with her right to do that, the term 'innocent' would probably no longer apply to her in the sense that it might apply to the boy in 'Bran'.

The poem does not answer the questions I have raised regarding May, but the questions circulate about the scenes and dialogue that the poem contains. The speculations that the reader might thus be drawn into ironically echo the Father's prying imagination in the confessional. We are a bit like the curious younger brother, listening at the curtain. May could be leading us all on. On the other hand, she might simply be innocent; or innocence in the process of being destroyed, as Kendall suggests. Or perhaps May is already an adept at deceit before the poem begins. The use of the word 'deceit', with its highly pejorative tone, is an example of how language can be manipulated

to create another perspective. It is probably no coincidence that her name is May, thus conveying the uncertainty of that modal verb.

May, as mentioned earlier, is not only the name of the narrator's eldest sister and a verb; it also signifies a part of the year associated with spring, a season that has been recurring for a good deal longer than the word has existed to name it. It is part of the annual cycle of nature and in this sense May might be said to symbolically represent that nature, here threatened by culture in the form of religion and paternalism, just as Cuba, the area of land and the ecological system it supports, is threatened by two belligerent governments. The uneasy relationship between man and nature is a recurring theme in *Why Brownlee Left* and Kendall's phrase, 'a parable of innocence destroyed', could be adapted to give it an ecocritical slant: 'a parable of nature besieged'.

'Innocence' and 'experience' are terms that suggest Eden and the Fall. These two elements, plus the threat, again, of nuclear conflict, all appear in 'Early Warning'.<sup>109</sup> The theme of Eden and the expulsion from paradise is introduced in its clearest form so far in this poem and, together with innocence and experience, becomes one of the organising principles of the collection. The title, 'Early Warning', refers ostensibly to a warning that apple-scab disease is 'in the air', but it is also a phrase strongly suggestive of systems to detect missile attack, especially nuclear attack, in time for defensive action to be taken. The idea of conflict is carried in the poem by the neighbours, who come from opposite sides of the sectarian divide and the

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<sup>109</sup> Muldoon (2001), pp. 80-81.

reference to ‘two sturdy Grenadiers’ in connection with the Protestant Billy Wetherall (p. 81).

The tree in the Catholic family’s garden ‘was bowed down more by children | Than by any crop’, which uses the cliché of the large family to identify their religion, but also introduces the theme of innocence in the image of the children playing in the tree. The image alludes to both the Christian symbol and Blake’s ‘The Echoing Green’.<sup>110</sup> The nature of the children’s games, though, or rather the terms in which they are described, is more troubling. They ‘lay siege to the tree-house’, and the reference to playing at war connects with the implications of the title. The line ‘We would swing there on a fraying rope’ offers another example of the hybridity of language since the childish game of clinging to a rope and swinging is here made to serve also as an image of execution by hanging: ‘to swing’ being a common slang expression for ‘to be hanged’. The detail that the rope is fraying, which in its ‘innocent’ setting indicates that the family are poor and can only spare worn-out materials for children’s games, carries a much more sinister sense in its ‘experienced’ setting, suggesting that the corpse has been swinging for some time.

In their games, then, the children parody the world of experience, but are also preparing themselves for entry into that world, which is presented as comparable to the expulsion from paradise. The presence of the apple tree and the threat of disease to that tree focus attention on the theme of Eden and the Fall. The question arises of when the change from childhood innocence might

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<sup>110</sup> William Blake, ‘The Echoing Green’ in *Songs of Innocence*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), pp. 15-16.

The poem does not refer directly to the children climbing in the tree, but the engravings that accompanied the original publication both include a tree and the second represents children in the branches (p.16).

take place; when does the content of the childish game become adult reality? And is that change inevitable? Inevitably, they will grow up, but do they have to grow into that particular reality? Does the parodying of the world of experience in the game constitute a pattern that means the children are predestined to enter that same world in reality? These questions will be seen to be directly relevant to the collection's title poem and there is an oblique and witty reference in 'Early Warning' to the significance of this issue in relation to 'Why Brownlee Left'. After the siege of the tree-house, the children 'Draw up our treaties | In its *modest lee*' (my italics).

#### 5.4 Man and the natural world

Indeterminacy is a key quality of the poems in *Why Brownlee Left* and this applies also to the relationship between man and the natural world. As we saw in the title poem, there is a potential conflict between human aspirations towards individuality on the one hand and living in harmony with nature on the other, as well as uncertainty about which end of the spectrum is actually being revealed. These elements are present in 'Whim'.<sup>111</sup> A couple meet in a pub; the man invites the woman back to his place with a view to having sex, which, however, actually takes place in the Botanic Gardens. The location is an interesting one because a botanic garden can be said to be both natural and cultural. Its contents have been collected from the natural world but the environment in which they are growing is entirely artificial. One might say that a botanic garden is artificiality forced onto nature. That would be an

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<sup>111</sup> Muldoon (2001), p. 75.

appropriate description, too, of the title of the book the woman is reading, *Cu Chulainn and the Birds of Appetite*, where ‘birds of appetite’ is a euphemism for sex drive which has an artificial tone beside the man’s more direct and earthy terminology, *How Cu Chulainn Got His End*.<sup>112</sup> That metaphor, ‘birds of appetite’, consists of taking an element from the natural, non-human world and giving it a sense that refers to the human. It is intended to give a soft gloss to human sexual appetite through the culturally derived associations attached to birds: that they are gentle, soft and appealing. The two forms suggested for the title of the book are directly connected to the content of Muldoon’s poem, which also concerns sexual appetite and activity. This subject might be considered in terms of artificiality as opposed to naturalness since those terms have been raised by the location in the Botanic Gardens and the language of the two alternative titles.

Tim Kendall describes the encounter as ‘brutish’ (Kendall, p. 77). It is interesting that he should select a word which carries connotations of being ‘animal-like’. Other adjectives that might reasonably be applied could include ‘spontaneous’, ‘exploitative’, ‘impassioned’, ‘casual’, ‘natural’. Kendall treats ‘Whim’ rather briefly, but his assessment seems to rest on what he calls ‘the dominant tone’ which is ‘merely cynical’. He supports this judgement by referring to the phrases ‘To cut not a very long story short’ and ‘Once he got stuck into her’. It is true that those phrases create the tone that Kendall identifies, although the phrases and the tone they denote are the product of the narrator’s consciousness; they reflect a way of looking. Kendall goes on to

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<sup>112</sup> Both titles represent a playful punning on the actual title of Standish O’Grady’s volume: *The Coming of Cu Chulainn*.

describe the end of the poem as ‘a sour, mock-heroic joke at the couple’s fate’ (p. 77). As with the lovers in ‘Bran’, so much depends on how we read the relationship between the woman and the man. One cannot dispute that their encounter begins as a casual pick-up in a pub. The title of the poem underlines the casual nature of their encounter. But since they both appear to be willing actors, since there is a measure of affection, at least, in the phrase ‘they held hands, and kissed’ and since, finally, it is easy to understand how ‘one thing led to another’, the act they engage in does not have to be exploitative or ‘brutish’. They are simply following their instincts and passions. There is also some ambiguity as to the timeframe of the events. It certainly appears that the pick-up, visit to the Botanic Gardens and subsequent embarrassment all happen in fairly rapid succession on the same day, but the grammatical structure: ‘They would saunter through the Botanic Gardens’ may be read as the past habitual, thereby opening the possibility that what had started as ‘whim’ has developed into something more lasting and serious. Kendall has also drawn attention to Muldoon’s experimental use of verb tense and the uncertainty it can give rise to (p. 66). There is even an element of sympathy towards the lovers’ ridiculous position at the end, when ‘gently, but firmly | They were manhandled onto a stretcher’ (Muldoon, p. 75). The sympathy expressed in ‘gently, but firmly’ is slightly undermined by the brusqueness of ‘manhandled’, so nothing is absolute here.

The final line, ‘Like the last of an endangered species’, should alert us to the issue of the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. We have already observed how the natural world is made to carry symbolic meaning. Here is a case where the tables are turned in the sense that the

human couple have come to represent an endangered nature. The extent of that endangering is conveyed by the last line of ‘Whim’ and also through a further development of the subject and imagery in ‘The One Desire’.<sup>113</sup> In the latter poem, the Botanic Gardens make another appearance where the palm-house represents humanity’s urge to dominate and control nature: ‘That iron be beaten, and glass | Bent to our will’ (Muldoon, p. 93), the purpose of which is to contain some part of the natural world. The palm-house is presented as a kind of prison for nature, where, thanks to a missing pane, ‘some delicate tree [...] Would seem at last to have broken through’ (p. 94). The ‘delicate tree’ tries to escape from the human world in the same way as Brownlee, perhaps, tried to escape from the natural. On that reading, Muldoon appears to reject both the Newtonian and Enlightenment aim of controlling and exploiting nature and the Romantic ideology of being at one with nature. This does not indicate an indifference to nature, but perhaps something closer to Morton’s belief in acknowledging the separation between the human and non-human worlds as the first step in a responsible attitude to the environment (see above, pp. 160 and 214). The final line of ‘The One Desire’, which reflects on humanity’s relationship with the non-human world, is far more cynical and bitter than the final line of ‘Whim’: ‘We have excelled ourselves again’. By contrast, the couple in ‘Whim’ are metaphorically transformed into that part of nature that is ‘endangered’, suggesting the possibility of learning through imaginative identification.

The role of the couple in ‘Whim’ is not so simple or straightforward. The elements that Kendall discovers are present, but so are other,

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<sup>113</sup> Muldoon (2001), pp. 93-94.



contradictory elements. In addition to the theme of the relationship between humanity and nature, the couple also raise the issue of sexuality, which clearly has a place in a collection that takes innocence and experience as one of its organising principles. Tim Kendall's reaction that the encounter is 'brutish' is part of the point of the poem. As in 'Bran', it is the experienced eye that forms that judgement. There is a species of child-like innocence in the way the couple themselves 'lay there quietly until dusk'. To conclude this discussion, I would say that rather than disagreeing with Kendall's description of the 'dominant tone' of 'Whim', I would propose what might be called a more ecocritical reading of it: the cynicism is not directed toward the locked lovers but toward the quality of humanity's relationship with the non-human world.

### **5.5 In search of home**

Brownlee's departure signals a possible journey in search of identity if we read that poem as an act of free will and assertion of individuality. 'Promises, Promises' offers a possible sequel to Brownlee's story.<sup>114</sup> The narrator is 'on a farm in North Carolina' where 'There is such splendour in the grass | I might be the picture of happiness' (Muldoon, p. 85). The setting and the prospects for contentment in a rural idyll are reminiscent of Brownlee's life before he left, but the narrator is overcome by a sense of loss and missed opportunities: 'Whatever is passing is passing me by.' And this is the problem for the figures in so many of the poems in this collection: the impossibility of

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<sup>114</sup> Muldoon (2001), pp. 85-86.

being satisfied with what is given; the ever-present suspicion that there is something more, a better way to live and a better place to do it; the feeling that we might once have led an idyllic (innocent) existence, but that now we have lost it, left it or been cast out. In several poems, that sense of loss is connected to a broken relationship; the sense of yearning connected with the desire not only for a home but for the person who will share it with us. In ‘Promises, Promises’ that relationship is first suggested by the phrase, ‘for the love of marijuana’, which signifies not simply the drug. There is a play in the sound of ‘marijuana’ on the names Marie and Juanita, and this hinted-at figure is echoed in the next stanza by the Indian girl with a strand of fair hair and blue eyes, descended from one of Raleigh’s colonialists and a local Indian. The third stanza returns to the present and the longing ‘For the love of one slender and shy’, which might sound like rather stereotypical characteristics of the Indian Marie-Juanita, but also refers to a remembered lover in Bayswater whom the narrator has ‘kissed Goodbye’. The title, ‘Promises, Promises’ is typically used in speech as an indication that a promise has not been, or is unlikely to be, kept, thus adding unfaithfulness to the narrator’s list of self-accusations.

‘Promises, Promises’ is a melancholy poem, full of dissatisfaction, regret and loss. The narrator seems to be trying to make sense of his own position and emotions and there is the feeling that he wonders how far he has himself been responsible for the course his life has taken. The image in stanza three of a figure who ‘stirs within my own skeleton | And stands on tip-toe to look out | Over the horizon’ could be read either as a possible, unrealised future: the path that was not taken to the partner that was never met; or as the

past still influencing the narrator's life and identity: the same old Brownlee, living the same life that he thought he had escaped. Jefferson Holdridge draws attention to the second of these elements:

Home in Paul Muldoon's poetry is a place one wants to leave and can never leave. It is an identity, in fact, rather than a place. It can't be left behind, no matter how many personas one puts on.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to commenting on the theme of home and trying to leave it, Holdridge here also raises the issue of predestination or self-determination.

'Immram' echoes and develops many of the themes, images, concerns and even specific words of the first part of the collection.<sup>116</sup> The narrator begins his quest to discover the truth about his father, and by implication himself – 'Your old man was an ass-hole. | That makes an ass-hole out of you' (Muldoon, p. 94) – by driving 'west to Paradise'. In addition to being a search for origins, the logic of both this quest and the comment linking the narrator and his father implies that identity is determined by genealogy. 'Paradise' is a nursing home where 'people go to end their lives'. The narrator's mother has recently attempted suicide and is unable to speak. Kendall points out that her action was an attempt to assert free will and take control of her destiny, its failure leaves her more dependent than before (Kendall, p. 85). A second visit, though, provides the narrator with information about his father's debt to Redpath. This knowledge destroys the

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<sup>115</sup> Jefferson Holdridge, *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2008), p. 43.

<sup>116</sup> Muldoon (2001), pp. 94-102.

narrator's hopes that 'All might have been peace and harmony | In that land of milk and honey' (Muldoon, p. 97). His return to paradise is blocked by Redpath's drug empire, which 'ran a little more than halfway to Hell'. However, the narrator admits that even without this impediment, paradise would still be unobtainable because of 'the fact that our days are numbered'. The fact of death, the most basic fact of nature and the terms of existence, prevents us from returning to a lost Eden. So once again, nature and humanity are in conflict; nature thwarts humanity's hopes and desires.

Redpath is based in the Park Hotel, where 'Steel and glass were held in creative tension', the same construction materials that had been mentioned in connection with the Botanic Gardens palm-house in 'The One Desire'. There the construction expressed the human 'will, | That heaven be brought closer still | And we converse with the angels', though the attempt was a signal failure (p. 93). In Redpath's world, paradise and the angels have been replaced by cocaine: 'This was angel dust, dust from an angel's wing' (p. 99). Bolivia, Peru, 'the slopes of the Andes' are exploited by the drug barons, 'everyone taking their cut'. In this state of experience, paradise means exploiting nature for huge profits, an attitude that had been described, albeit in a very different context, in 'The Geography Lesson': 'all that greenness turned to gold' (p. 77). And this commercial activity is in opposition to the desire for home and authenticity: 'bananas were harvested while green | But would hanker after where they'd grown'. It would seem that humanity's expulsion from paradise is self-imposed.

In conclusion, *Why Brownlee Left* leaves the question of why Brownlee left totally unclear. The collection examines the concepts of

innocence and experience and finds them highly ambiguous. In western culture innocence and nature are connected, as are experience and culture. However, the division between them is so uncertain that from one critic we can read that ‘There is no nature’<sup>117</sup> and from another that ‘The contention that everything is nature is surely difficult to dispute’.<sup>118</sup> Muldoon’s handling of the innocence / experience dichotomy and its ambiguities can thus be read as an exploration of the ambiguities of the division between nature and culture. The sense of time passing that comes with experience brings in its wake a sense of loss and yearning for the past, which is associated with a state of innocence. From a distance, that past innocence appears as our true place of belonging, our origin and, therefore, our identity. Cast out from this original home, this Eden or paradise, the experienced individual searches for a new place to belong and tries to understand who (s)he really is. But this search also raises doubts about the true nature of that past, the true quality of innocence and the validity of the lost Eden. With knowledge of time and the lost past comes knowledge of death, making the search for the ideal all the more urgent while at the same time lending a sense of futility to the whole enterprise.

In ‘Palm Sunday’<sup>119</sup> Muldoon expresses a wish that echoes Fisher’s desire ‘to believe I live in a single world’ (Fisher, 2005, p. 43).

Characteristically, Muldoon uses a less direct expression than Fisher’s ‘I want

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<sup>117</sup> Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, quoted by Jonathan Bate in ‘From “Red” to “Green”’ in *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 167-72 (p.171).

<sup>118</sup> Jhan Hochman, ‘Green Cultural Studies’ in *The Green Studies Reader*, pp. 187-92 (p. 189).

<sup>119</sup> Muldoon (2001), p.88.

to believe' when he asks 'I was wondering if you'd bring me through', and then goes on to ask for:

[...] a world where everything stands  
 For itself, and carries  
 Just so much weight as me on you.  
 My scrawny door-mat. My deep red carpet. (Muldoon, p. 88)

But in a world where innocence and experience are undecideable (is May innocent or devious?), where language has become so debased that 'Paradise' means a place where you go to die, this would appear to be an impossibility. Jefferson Holdridge comments on the absence of this envisaged world in terms that echo both Mottram and Olson (see above, pp. 161 and 164): 'Once the object stands for more than itself, or when something disrupts that perfect assessment where "everything stands [...] for itself", then secrets are unlocked, identity disrupted' (Holdridge, p.54). This process is the equivalent of losing innocence; experience consists in the knowledge of connections and the inevitable disruption of identity that it brings in its wake:

In Muldoon's world to grow up is to know more facts, to have more experience, to see more of the conjunctions and resemblances that could link anyone to anything. It is not, however, to learn how the world makes any final, stable sense.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Stephen Burt, "'Thirteen or Fourteen'": Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 6-25 (p.18).

In fact, 'Early Warning' has already given an early warning against this hope: 'We would depend on more than we could see' (Muldoon, 2001, p. 81); a (religious) faith in what cannot be perceived, the kind of innocence that cannot survive into adulthood. Even the act of expressing the wish raises new uncertainties. Are we to read 'door-mat' in the sense of 'to treat someone like a door-mat'? *Why Brownlee Left* presents a world where we never know what anything means, or even whether it means anything.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

#### 6.1 The paradox in Prynne

This study has shown that Bishop, Fisher and Muldoon are all deeply concerned with the nature of perception and how to understand, interpret and represent it. They all employ a variety of styles and techniques from the simple and plainspoken diction of Bishop in ‘Arrival at Santos’ and Fisher in ‘The Memorial Fountain’, and Muldoon’s use of plain idiomatic speech in ‘Whim’ and ‘Cuba’ or the seemingly simple diction of ‘Bran’ to the more complex abstract writing of Fisher in some sections of *A Furnace* or the mass of similes in ‘The Square House: April’, Bishop’s complex use of images in her early work or Muldoon’s use of wordplay and double meanings. A stylistic study of the work of these poets would certainly be of interest and would offer far more detailed information about these matters of style and language use than the present study can claim.

A further element in the work of all three of these poets, and an aspect which adds to the complexity of the writing, is the sense of indeterminacy and contradiction which I understand to be an integral part of each poet’s attempt to ‘tell the truth’ about their experience of the world. In the case of Bishop and Fisher, that has also included an element which verges on the mystical, or at least the possibility of the mystical; both are willing to consider a non-material element in experience and that element is associated with



imagination and artistic creation. This mystical element would seem, on the face of it, to be lacking in *Why Brownlee Left*. However, the issue of predestination and free will opens an area of speculation in which a possible truth – the course that a life which is predestined might take – exists, but is not accessible. Muldoon does not commit himself to this belief, but he raises the possibility of it and as such, it constitutes the possibility of the existence of something in human life and experience which is beyond perception yet directly influences events.

In the introduction to the critical part of this dissertation I referred to Edward Larrissy's comments on J. H. Prynne's 'chains of imagery that might begin to assert themselves with an air of inscrutable self-evidence' and the 'drift toward coherent views' (see above, section 2.3). Larrissy described this aspect of Prynne's work as a paradox, and evidence of a 'doubleness'. It is now time to consider how far the strategies of my chosen poets have resulted in anything comparable to the quality that Larrissy finds in Prynne. The extent to which these strategies coincide with the paradox in Prynne's writing can best be demonstrated by showing that Prynne's examinations of perception and experience give rise to the same issues we have observed in Bishop, Fisher and Muldoon. Prynne confronts these issues much more directly. He is a philosophical poet in a way that the other three are not, which means that the arguments that Prynne has under consideration are introduced as material in his poems. The issues, though, are the same, as I hope to demonstrate by an examination of Prynne's early work, which will provide a useful tool that can be applied to the other poets. I have drawn only on work published up to, and including, *The White Stones* (1969).

The call to ‘take knowledge | back to the springs’ announces Prynne’s interest in authenticity and origins.<sup>121</sup> It also suggests that something has been lost from humanity’s experience of its world and that we should repossess that which has been lost. The same sentiment appears in some form in all three of my poets. Later, Prynne represents that project in a discouraging light:

The fact is that right  
 from the *springs* this water is no longer fit  
 for the stones it washes: the water of life  
 is in bottles & ready for invoice. (p. 15)

Prynne is highly critical of commerce in ‘Die A Millionaire’ and here shows commercial activity in direct conflict with nature, as Muldoon does in ‘The Geography Lesson’ or ‘The One Desire’. But despite the apparent pessimism in these lines, the poem eventually works its way to hold out the possibility of ‘What runs | *back*, or could be traced upstream by simply | denying that conspiracy of “cause”’ (p.16). Hope, if that is what this is, seems to reside in language, in ‘naming’, and it is associated with ‘mysteries’. It is ‘the question of names’ that ‘runs back’: ‘And the back mutation is knowledge’. The goal here is strongly suggestive of Bishop’s search for knowledge in ‘At The Fishhouses’. For Prynne, it is the failure in the act of naming that makes possible the delusions of the modern age. The poem’s subtitle, ‘(pronounced “diamonds in the air”’, underlines the slipperiness of language and its

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<sup>121</sup> ‘Die A Millionaire’ in Prynne, pp. 13-16, (p.13).

potential for misrepresentation, and thus casts ironic doubt on the process the poem appears to be encouraging. This is Prynne's answer to Jarrell's question: 'how can you find a language so close to the world that the world can be represented and understood in it?' Prynne explains how language and naming might achieve that in 'A Note on Metal' (1968).<sup>122</sup>

Published in the same year as *Kitchen Poems*, 'A Note on Metal' traces the development of the coinage system and the mercantile activity it made possible, which form the embryonic beginnings of capitalism. It is with the development of metallurgy, Prynne states, that 'the theory of quality as *essential*' originates, displacing 'the magical forms through which property resided in substance' (p. 128). Prynne considers the magical properties of objects during this period of change:

For a long time the magical implications of transfer in any shape must have given a muted and perhaps not initially debased sacrality to objects of currency-status, just as fish-hooks and bullets become strongly magical objects in the societies formed around their use.

(p. 129)

However, as coinage developed, the coin became a metonymic unit 'where the magical resonance of transfer is virtually extinct' (p. 130). The demise of magic continued with the introduction of a bi-metallic currency 'where even the *theoretic* properties of metal are further displaced [...] We are almost completely removed from presence as weight' (p. 130).

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<sup>122</sup> Prynne, pp. 127-132.

As Prynne recounts these developments, there is a sense of loss and exclusion from a knowledge of ‘substance’, the concrete elements of the external world. That this has a religious significance is clear not just from the associations of magic with early forms of religious observance but also from the religious diction Prynne uses, not only here in ‘A Note on Metal’, but throughout these early collections. Words with a religious sense or connotation occur with sufficient regularity to be noticeable: sacred, sacral, spirit, holy, the soul, angels. It is clear that the phenomenon of religious belief is an issue of concern in these poems.

Names have lost their magic; the language itself is debased and that is the root of the problem. This is the message that can be deduced from ‘A Note on Metal’ and ‘Die a Millionaire’. The poem ends on a note of hope: ‘Know | the names. It is as simple as the purity | of sentiment’ (p. 16). Prynne is endorsing Olson’s belief in the ‘literal’.<sup>123</sup> That endorsement, however, is not unequivocal; Prynne expresses a degree of scepticism regarding the extent to which the literal can answer his ‘prayer’ for purity of naming: ‘The literal is *not* magic’, he states in ‘A Note on Metal’, but adds, ‘for the most part’, thereby leaving the door open for the possibility of some magic (Prynne, p. 131).

The process that Prynne is describing here also describes the movement of Bishop’s poem, ‘At The Fishhouses’, or Fisher’s poems, ‘The Memorial Fountain’ and ‘Kingsbury Mill’. One might object that Fisher’s movement is much more a forward one in search of experience that is

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<sup>123</sup> See Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics*: ‘Olson’s primary concern is to effect a return to what he formulates as the truth of the “literal”’ (p.100).

authentic because it is not derived from past knowledge, and that would be a valid comment. However, the fact of the search and the ultimate goal of experiencing the world directly and finding the language in which to present that experience; these are the points of convergence. Bishop and Fisher enact that search while Prynne describes the nature of the search. The fact that Fisher's image uses movement in an opposite direction does not alter the essential sameness of their projects. Furthermore, Prynne also questions the notion of the return to an earlier, ideal state in 'Numbers in Time of Trouble' (see below, p. 237).

'Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self'<sup>124</sup> continues the themes of 'A Note on Metal' by addressing the issue of 'qualities' and names, and like 'Die a Millionaire' it portrays naming as debased in the modern era, but also considers the possibility that language can provide the means to a more genuine experience of the external world. The word 'pure', also in the form 'purity', is a key concept. It appears in both poems and in 'A Note on Metal'. In the latter, the phrase, 'a "purer" and more abstract theory of value' (p. 129), links purity to abstraction and thus to the displacement of 'the magical forms through which property resided in substance' by 'the theory of quality as *essential*' (p 128). Via the concept of value, purity is linked to commerce and the debased conditions of the modern age - ironically, a debased purity. In 'Die a Millionaire', 'purity is a question of names', the means by which we might 'take knowledge | back to the springs'. So 'purity', as a word, can have both positive and negative applications. 'Sketch' plays on the possible senses of 'pure', so that the name of the material, 'silk', is pure in the sense that it is

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<sup>124</sup> Prynne, pp. 19-20.

an abstraction, what Prynne calls ‘the sidereal display’: ‘it is what we *know* we cannot now have’ because names have become displaced from substance (p.19). The poem expresses a hope for the recovery of ‘pure’ names and qualities: ‘The qualities then are a name, corporately, | for the hope that they will return to us’ (p. 20). The final section of the poem concludes, however, that the hope is already a function of commercialisation and ‘count’, by which abstract value replaces the present quality of the substance, and that therefore ‘the star & silk of my eye, that will not return’ (p. 20). I take the phrase, ‘of my eye’, to refer to direct perceptual access to the actual substance, the equivalent of Olson’s ‘literal’. The final line of this poem, then, contradicts the optimism of ‘Die a Millionaire’. What Prynne is confronting here is very much the same issue that Roy Fisher confronts in much of his work, of which ‘Introit’ from *A Furnace* is a good example.

This discussion of *Kitchen Poems* and ‘A Note on Metal’ has made reference to the past and historical processes. ‘Numbers in Time of Trouble’ introduces the idea of the ‘time standard’, or relativity of history, suggesting that we might ‘come off it’.<sup>125</sup> Despite historical processes, Prynne states that ‘we are | underlaid by drift’, suggesting the absence of a controlled direction. The purpose of ‘com[ing] off the time standard’ is ‘to move | right out of the range of those sickening and | greasy surities – like “back to our proper | homes”’ (p. 17). This is an interesting development because it seems to deny the notion that a return to an earlier state might be the solution to contemporary degradation. As already indicated, that solution is not presented in an unequivocal light, but this call to reject ‘the time standard’ would seem

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<sup>125</sup> Prynne, pp. 17-18, (p. 17).

also to render impossible any notion of return to a lost golden age in its denial of historical process. However, as Mellors points out, the ‘greasy surities’ of ‘our proper | homes’ is a comment ‘directed against the consumer society, which wants “home” to be something that can be attained by mere material purchase’ (Mellors, p.154). Mellors’s comment can apply equally to the building one inhabits, the concept of home as a place of belonging, and the myth of an earlier state, all of which are capable of being commercialised and sold. Mellors goes on to suggest that Prynne does recognise the possibility of attaining ‘home’ but that the search for it is linked to a nomadic spirit and to moving forward rather than back in time. This is now a view that coincides with Fisher’s forward movement. Home, in fact, is a place that we have to leave in order to find our place in the world:

home is easily our  
 idea of it, the music of decent and proper  
 order, it’s this we must leave in some quite  
 specific place if we are not to carry it  
 everywhere with us. (Prynne, p. 100)

These lines from ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’<sup>126</sup> clearly endorse the idea of leaving home and as such, strongly echo the sentiments we found in Bishop’s and Muldoon’s poems of travel. This urge to depart in search of a new place of belonging is the equivalent of the movement described in ‘Die a Millionaire’:

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<sup>126</sup> Prynne, pp. 99-100.

the true expansion  
 is probably drift, as the Scythians  
 being nomadic anyway for the most part  
 slipped sideways right across the Russian  
 steppes (p. 14)

As mentioned above (see p. 237), since it lacks any controlled direction this ‘true expansion’ by ‘drift’ is distinguished from imperialist expansion, which Prynne had characterised a few lines earlier as:

[...] Imperialism was just  
 an old, very old name for that  
 idea, that what you want, you by  
 historic process or just readiness  
 to travel, also “need”[.] (p. 13)

In fact, Prynne provides an answer here to Bishop’s doubts in some of her Brazil poems. There is also a sense of the absence of directed intention in the expression ‘slipped sideways’ which connects to the phrase ‘we are | underlaid by drift’, so that leaving home and ‘com[ing] off the time standard’ are linked. Furthermore, ‘Moon Poem’<sup>127</sup> makes it clear that it is the act of seeking hopefully which is the main purpose, not the arrival at a new place: ‘we go in this way | on and on and the unceasing image of hope | is our place

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<sup>127</sup> Prynne, pp. 53-54.



in the world' (p. 53). There is this sense in Prynne's early work that the ideals that he identifies are always out of reach and may in fact be illusory, a point of view which he shares with Bishop, Fisher and Muldoon.

Prynne frequently repeats words, images and concepts across several poems: religious terminology; hope, need and desire; rising and falling; hills; and the words 'drift' and 'slip'. This technique creates a pattern in Prynne's early work and that pattern suggests both design and meaning. It is a technique that we have observed in Fisher and Muldoon, and with the same effect. The reader naturally begins to look for reasons to explain this patterning and in the same way, the poems look to the external world to try to identify a meaning there, or at least to consider the possibility of such. The repeated use of religious terminology is one indication of Prynne's interest in, and speculation about the possibility of, a divine presence in the universe. The hope for a place of belonging is the expression of another element that can give meaning to human existence, although as indicated above, Prynne expresses scepticism about attaining it, as he does about the other elements. The investigation of the hope and desire for this idealised existence recurs throughout the early poems. 'The Wound, Day and Night' confesses a belief in an ideal state: 'I am born back there, the plaintive chanting | under the Atlantic and the unison of forms' and expresses the hope that 'It *may* all flow again'.<sup>128</sup> The stress placed on '*may*' by the use of italics in Prynne's text hints at the uncertainty of this hope ever coming to pass.

There is an irony in this desire to go back to an ideal state in that it contradicts the desire to leave home, to move forward, to 'go in this way | on

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<sup>128</sup> Prynne, p. 64.

and on'. It also contradicts the judgement that repetition is a process that limits humanity's capacity for perception and experience. 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' makes the point that there can be two kinds of repetition; one that blunts perceptions and another that is a coming home to a true perception of 'literalness', the ideal 'unison in forms': 'Again is the sacred | word, the profane sequence suddenly graced, by | coming back' (p. 100). The kind of experience and perception that Prynne is imagining here might be similar to that which Bishop describes when Crusoe, returned to England, remembers his relationship with the objects that carried intense meaning for him when he was on his island.

## **6.2 The importance of choice**

Robert Rowland Smith comments that: 'the poem itself is a textual object that depicts real objects like urns, but those real objects are then manifested in the poem as images which endure and so achieve a quasi-objectal status of their own' (Smith, p. 43-44). Furthermore, objects do not find their place in the poem by chance; they are chosen by the poet, and the fact of choice is also significant in a way similar to Crusoe's knife being significant. Choice also introduces an element of exclusion: 'the choosing marking a point at which an otherwise endless series of numbers or choices is arrested' (p. 43). In other words, choice is a function of Barthes's referential illusion by which realism is released from the impossible requirement of describing every feature of an object, landscape, experience and so on. Choice performs another important function in that it is an expression of free will, whereas predetermination

means an absence of choice. This notion is particularly relevant to the work of Bishop and Muldoon. Ironically, though, the act of choosing represents the removal of choice. You cannot have your cake and eat it too. In addition, the act of choosing not only singles out the chosen object for special attention, it also draws attention to the chooser: 'if I choose a certain object this proves in turn how special I am, that I am special to it' (p. 40); the object becomes the medium through which the poet expresses his or her self. Repetition can be viewed as the removal or negation of choice in the sense that repetition assumes that choice is pre-determined. Choice thus becomes the tool by which meaning, or value, can be created. Crusoe's knife is important because he chose it and this act of choosing lends meaning to the knife in the same way as William Carlos Williams describes the meaning of 'sky' for the farmer or fisherman (Williams, p. 19). In her earlier and mid-period work, as we saw, this aspect of perception seems to trouble Bishop. In her later work she seems to have resolved, or at least accepted, these difficulties. The contradiction which choice and choosing contains within its very nature becomes an expression of the indeterminacy we have found in all three poets. The conditions of existence are such that by choosing, we remove choice; commitment to one path shuts off other possibilities - the path not chosen. Thus it becomes unclear whether choice is genuine or not.

The issue of the limitations of science and scientific investigations and the notion that science is dehumanised because it fails to take into account an element that escapes scientific measurement has an obvious connection with Romanticism. One of the elements in human experience which seems to defy scientific measurement is imagination. The role of the imagination in

understanding our experience of the external world is an important issue. It is also important in terms of creativity. William Carlos Williams focuses on the role of the imagination in artistic productions in *Spring and All*, where he emphasises that the purpose of art should not be to attempt to reproduce elements from nature but to use the imagination to produce a new object, the work of art, that takes its place in the world:

Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it – It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature[.] (Williams, p. 91)

This is another way of reading the elements in a poem that Morton criticises as ‘ambient poetics’. According to Williams, these elements are not ‘a mirror up to nature’. Neither, according to Williams, is the function of the creative imagination to serve as an escape from the external world into the ideal interior state of Romanticism. The creative imagination, through the act of choosing, generates the meaning that objects in the external world have for the poet and expresses this in language. Such a meaning must necessarily be subjective, but it is nonetheless an element in the poet’s experience of those objects; an element that is not accessible to science. It is the generation of this meaning that I identify in the production of my own poetry and which I find

in the work of the poets in this study. This is the issue which was discussed in relation to Bishop's work (see above, pp. 146-47 and 153). Bishop had her own reservations about the validity of human choice in perception, but the fact remains that the experience is genuine. For Williams, the guarantee of meaning is the poem's presence in the world of objects.

Williams develops his argument in confident style, though he does introduce the notion of 'great works' which must necessarily limit the applicability of his ideas:

we are beginning to discover the truth in the great works of the  
 imagination A CREATIVE FORCE IS SHOWN AT WORK  
 MAKING OBJECTS WHICH ALONE COMPLETE SCIENCE AND  
 ALLOW INTELLIGENCE TO SURVIVE

(p. 37; Williams's capitals)

For all three of the poets in this study, Soloman's account of Heideggerian Being, quoted in the introduction, would seem to hold true: 'Being is not derivative of our knowledge of particular beings'. Factual information, or scientific knowledge, will not reveal the 'truth about things', whether the 'thing' is Crusoe's knife, Kingsbury Mill or the reason that Brownlee left. Rather, it is the 'making of objects', like Bishop's moose, Crusoe's knife and Brownlee's disappearance, which 'complete science' by their demonstration of the imagination's ability, through the process of choice, to create presence in the external world and thereby to show that the imagination and the external world are not separate entities. In order to

achieve this, the language that the poet employs must be vitally connected with the external world to which it refers, as with the sky for Williams's farmer and fisherman or 'naming' as Prynne defines it. Williams and Prynne describe the process that I believe Bishop's, Fisher's and Muldoon's poetry illustrates. The uncertainty over the free exercise of choice, though, creates the quality of contradiction and indeterminacy that pervades the work of these poets. And if it is the act of choosing that generates value and meaning then doubts about free choice undermine faith in that meaning. This description of the situation agrees with my experience of reading these poets. This is the 'truth about things' as they have told it.

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