

**Poetry and the Architecture of Imagination**

**by**

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## Abstract

This PhD brings together a collection of poetry, 'The Walled Garden', which comprises three linked sequences of poetry, followed by a thesis, 'Poetry and Architecture of the Imagination'. The critical work examines how architectural theory can inform poetic practice, and argues that overlaps between the two ostensibly disparate disciplines of architecture and poetry are creatively enriching of each other. The commentary investigates these sites and points of contact as overlaps that can help poets to explore the interconnectedness of systems and values of human and non-human worlds.

The submission begins with three linked sequences, *Pwllpeiran*, *Wan Under Wolcnan* and *Tintern*, work characterised by an awareness of place. Collectively, the poetry explores three key locations: Tintern Abbey and the River Wye, Pwllpeiran Research Centre and the Cwmystwyth Valley. My work also addresses various semi-urban locations that are often overlooked, abandoned or reserved for 'nature', and engages with current ideas in the 'new nature writing' and ecopoetic theory. More broadly, my critical writing is concerned with how humans interact with space and environment.

The first chapter considers the importance of architecture in Andrew Marvell's country house poem 'Upon Nun Appleton', and explores the poem's caution against regarding 'nature' as a form of utopia. Chapter Two examines John Burnside's notions of dwelling space and his idea of the garden as liminal space where borders can be crossed. Chapter Three considers William Wordsworth's understanding of place and memory, focusing on 'Lines Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey'. This chapter also addresses the phenomenological ideas of architect Steven Holl. Chapter Four discusses Alice Oswald's *Dart*, focusing on her use of the river to conjure poetic voices. It also evaluates the role of Peter Zumthor's architecture in the creation of poetic voices and atmospheres of 'otherliness' in my own writing.

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# the walled garden

pwlpeiran

wan under wolcnan

tintern

PhD Poetry Collection

pwlpeiran

**A hand a map a story****52°19'48 79" N / 3° 45'59 07" W**

*Pine  
resin  
evening  
clouds  
pinpricks of light soft  
sleeves  
rolled back  
sap and water that speaks*

*what is the summer season?  
shadows of woodlands and a running brook  
what is summer?  
borders of sleeplessness high sun  
a season?  
scent clustered in spinneys  
gathered in voices sifted through fog*

*rain etched pollen and the setting on of seeds  
voices of the forest*

*Farmers children shepherds gardeners women miners robin kite chaffinch fox moth butterfly.*

*A foreign country blotted and kissed with sea-salt and floating distances of blue trimmed hills.*

*A skelp of rain.*

**52°34'256"N/38°22'13" W**

The gardener must walk about the whole garden every Monday morning, examining every corner, observing every plant, tree or flower that needs staking. After great storms he will replant, protect and water. He tends not to speak. Yet he will move his lips, as he feels the metronome of the seasons through hoeing or digging or weeding, he murmurs constantly.

**52°19'50"N / 3°53'47"W**

*cloud: gold foam.*

*Undo this rope  
tributaries criss-cross  
tides once lithe  
now heavy with sweeps of amber  
it shivers and whines at my legs.  
Arrives highly tuned  
redoubles itself darkens my hem.*

*Daggers and trefoils  
reminders of stone lock out light and congeal into slate,  
cataloguing the properties of air and water.  
Darts of surf make their way up river.  
Gravel sweeps its colour to counterpoint the dark to make space.  
Water fastens me to the land and will drown or save*

*A farm a swallow a lostness lived  
Dwellings shift and change complexion, favourite haunts not the same as the realities of others.*

*At first, crossing borders, the landscape occurs quite tamely then nature and human hand stage  
manage my tidal sensibilities.  
I am travelling pieced but not plotted.*

*More water*

*A swallow darts the road disappears  
The buttoning again an anxiety that borders in the voice. Like some vagrant, materially inert yet  
apprehending the last of the ebb tide before the flood.  
A fissiparousness felt along the blood and in the heart.*

*An afternoon tide.  
Air, hot brackish divides the water. A small boat hovers  
striving to make the estuarine passages a stone's throw away  
and shallows awaiting their colour.*



52° 34' 37" N / 3° 82' 46" W

Tuesdays. Usually quite early before the dew has gone and if the grass is not too tall, it will have daisies. It must be cut and the gravel rolled.

The boundaries are all defined by water and waterfalls and the path paved with flagstones leads down to the river.

So he sows grass seed, plants roses, shrubs, to frame the meadows. Sets out hedges of hornbeam, walnut, Japanese cherry and blue spruce.

*rain from windows  
tumbles  
loose and silken  
subsides  
damp and opportune*

*from hinterlands strength and light  
enfold dust and air as propinquity of strawberry and husk*

*to the breaking earth the sky will give  
close coverings of rain spirals of sun  
spotted brooks  
straw and a promise of bees*

*the hook and eye of dawn  
bring a dulcimer of blackbird song  
and something more...*

*something soft  
scent of sap  
broken wood and apple*

*unblemished*

*quiescent*

*surfaces*

*into open ground*

52° 16' 30" N / 3° 50' 22 "W

The ice-cream van left behind a trail of half eaten cones. Now there is nothing except for dust and sunlight. A splutter of starlings hallelujah through the sky coming in ahead of the dark.

I sense but can't decipher the signs. But maybe they could, the grey monks, now rumours and ghosts. Like the stories I remember of distant summers. They left one night in rain and smoke.

Hideous shadows filled the road, their scriptures folded into the muddy furrows of fields.

No lamps. No light. Just men walking out to vanish. Long ago.

I never heard from them again. Yet still I sit up in the dark and pray: for faith. For anything really.

Are they hovering still in the hedgerows and undergrowth?

The sunlight grows thinner. More tourists arrive. Photograph. Leave. Look back.

Whatever was dragged and trodden is still here somewhere. They run at the back of my mind like a powder of snowy footprints from the house next door.

*No lives here anymore  
but if I walk just beyond the hedge  
west, along the presbytery  
and stop at the gate,  
I am haunted by an unexpected  
flash upon the mind's eye -  
glass spun to resemble skin and double time*

*a strange unease like robbing a bird's nest  
all tunnels and faith turned to dust and  
hunting grounds for snails*

*a heron flaps out  
on the border of seaside trinkets.*

Saintfoin, a French name, meaning holy hay, is very useful as it will grow in poorer land than will good hay grass, and is much liked by cattle. It is a beautiful flower, growing in spikes, the colour a pale crimson, exquisitely striped with deep scarlet becoming more purple as the flower fades, so that the top of the spike is often a light pink, and the bottom deep purple, and when the wind rushes over a field, it brings out changeable waves of colouring like a shot silk.

52° 35' 299"N / 3° 76'9283"W

John Leyland c1535

'About the middle of this Ystwith valley that I Ride in, being as I guess three miles in length, I saw on the right hand of the hill side Cloth Moyne, where hath been digging for Leade, the smelting whereof hath destroid the woodes that sometimes grew plentiful thereabout.'

*The track stops.  
They must have run out of breath,  
the ones who came here  
built this house where soil meets dusk*

*It faces the sun  
and the sea  
far off  
winking blades of gold.*

*There are other tracks  
but they seem lost somehow....  
and in the barely moving heat of August*

*wait*

*other selves*

*a moment's grace*

*through ghosting light the rope of a woman's hair swings  
as she turns, with a half smile to see dancing rags on drying lines  
hear the splash of cloth on stone  
smell the tan of autumn in the morning air*

*down the hillside quicksilver sheep pour*

*their house stopped here  
but not their minds swallows return to see if the nodding rose remembers*

*the day comes back as blue and gold.*

*There is nothing in between.  
Now only rooks capsize and pass*

*the wind breathes through the river and the sea waits to flatten stones.*

A layer of soil. Below that bedrock, Silurian between lowland and upland territories. Notable for summer pasturing. A mixed agricultural base was established. All suitable land being turned over to the cultivation of oats.

*To make spiders and green lace  
photons are parcelled as picoseconds of light  
to tell the leaves when to breathe  
cytochrome splits stasis to sweet mouthfuls of mist  
and trees that cannot grow old*

*hand in hand our circadian clock pivots best  
in blue light  
measuring brightness balancing rhythms  
turning a myriad of chemicals into dreams*

*hovering in the border of our eyes it is  
a compass to where wheat grows green  
giving air to the spaces between  
just as sycamores unfold against a slate grey sky*

*the invisible that uncoils plots combs the tangle of the world  
conserving ancient pathways in red and blue*

*to leave behind water and bluebells*

They have a graceful loose nodding spike. Their blossoms are separate, larger than those of wheat and barley, their grains being of a shuttle shape, sometimes blank and polished, though more often white. Their native home is said to be the Caucasus. The ancients may have made musical instruments of oaten straw. Arena is the Latin for Oats and the name of a pipe.

*grain stores of oats grass*

*cathedrals of glass  
icons relics and statues on a  
moving belt*

*silks of a new faith  
fluorescent in the body of the stem*

52° 41'806"N / 40°65'76"W

Cryptochrome

Blue light photoreceptors in animals from the Greek meaning hidden colour. Blue light mediates phototropism. Highly conserved molecules derived from photolayse, a bacterial enzyme activated by light and participating in DNA repair, it possesses two chromophores: flavin, from the Latin *flavus*, meaning yellow; and pterin, first discovered in butterfly wings, hence the name, from the Greek for wing, *pteron*.

*night's soft feet pause.*

*sheep turn into mist.*

*stars wait.*

*water capers as showers of gold*

*tiny water nymphs, who would have reassured*

*Ophelia had she stepped in here,*

*pull in the air*

*-unripened as yet-*

*about itself*

*a sky padded with geometries of light*

*between hay and honey*

*a hand*

*mine*

*moves*

*yours*

*a breeze*

*more wash than sibilance*

*becomes a yellow spring*

*moving*

*a short while*

*amongst the vivid air*

*painting light*

*to blue and*

*gold*

Water roses, shrubs and trees twice a day during summer. Once early in the morning and once at twilight. Water bare meadows until the grass appears.

52° 21'34 92" N / 3° 45'15 12"W

*through arrow-slits in the sky  
hunger flensing the air  
working the hedges of the upper field  
through ragwort and daisy  
its shadow dimpling the mud  
shivering rabbit in the bracken*

*a feathered arc  
fell to  
the river's glinting jaws*

*in this heat  
an anchor and flux  
of gulls white and screaming  
drop*

*i see it*

*stitched into the breathless metal of the tide  
flooded beak a trick of rainbow plastic  
astonishment still alive in its cold stare*

*amid grey shale the kite died  
its red feathers beyond the reach and fetch of the wind*

*a dropped spear  
precipitating into rust*

When tools are broken, he mends them unless unserviceable.

J. Evelyn

'The best water is from Rivers, and running streams, so it be leane and not cold: that which is allways standing or shaded corrupts and is not good. But the water of pondes and, and wherein cattel soil is excellent: but Raine water has no fellow.'

*clouds gallop over hills so fast  
they dizzy sight flatten fields  
and colourwash larches  
enough to break your heart.*

52° 22'12" N / 3° 57'42" W

*the weather turns in on itself and distance becomes stretched by frost.*

*the dark is deepest here*

*where the river stops and earth flattens itself.*

*Elver-coloured, it fishes up the moon, small and shrunken, as its swimming companion.*

*suddenly a man's laugh, as if out of favour*

*comes to rest in the trees.*

*G. Cumberland 1796*

'...our way lies under steep precipices, on the right of the valley, near some old mines of lead-ore; whose dingy scrofa, impending above the high road, choaks the river into which it falls, and which now runs broad and shallow through the vale, manifesting to the admiring spectator the amplitude of the excavations into the bowels of the rock, whilst the powder-blasted gloomy crags, that scowl above the aperture, convey no bad idea of the sulphurous soil of Milton's nether world.'

The wages were very poor at the time. They were digging a mile into that hill- if you were having lead, you were having money, but you could be digging for six months and not striking any lead, so there would be no wages. You were having your own bag of flour to make bread.

Another wild road cuts below the mountain.

Here are grey scars spoil heaps

shells of mine workings... Ty unnos... smoke in the air; the air turning.

*moonlight and old seas breathed silver through these cracks and folded rocks.*

*can't sleep.*

*the valley's gorged with rain*

*the workings - sprawling pools showing*

*silver scraps of sky.*

*listen. voices. still calling through these tunnels, hooked and crinkled to the heather and slate.*

*we had silent friends who showed us where to look... the knockers... never saw them...left them food and drink*

*used all sorts to find the ore: hazel rods for silver: pitch pine cut before sunrise on a waxing moon, for lead and tin. them before us, stone hammers and antler horns.*

*hushing and a great fire to heat the rock till it shivered. after that stone wedges to crack it open.*

*hard rock and slow work.*

52 ° 41'105"N / 4°08'909"W

Overnight snow had come.

February.

Like stiff paper, snowdrifts held the hillside in blue shadows.

Light began to adhere itself to the windows as if the house had swallowed the cold. For a while, as it unburdened its sticky light into the landscape of the bedroom, she lay on her bed translating her thoughts into leaves and twigs, recalling his body in the spangled shade of early woods. Fractal and finned by leaf and light. And of how the sunlight had made and remade them...banded, freckled and foxed.

*Morfydd.*

He would smooth her name through his lips as if turning a pebble over in his hand.

And she thought of how he made her heart stream and long for him like skirrs of ribbon.

Then her thoughts became like gorse...

‘He was forty and not worth the snap of the fingers.’

...and the river at twilight trailing away into heather and sheep.

And the newborn. Still. Inherent blue rising from his cloudy skin. She had looked at him through refractions of light, not tears, but as an apple of gold. The first gold, she had thought, in the world, before metallic gold was known.

*her hat hung from the coat hook.  
a small straw coracle  
draped with a shawl of dog roses  
piping of summer.*



**52°36'99"N / 3 ° 96' 17" W**  
**30°30'20"N / 45° 49' 29" E**

Arthur Jones, Private, 14213 South Wales Borders. Formerly of Cwmystwyth. Took part in the siege of Kut al Amara. Killed in action 9th April, 1916, aged 18 years old. Buried in Amara War Cemetery, Iraq.

I hadn't intended to visit the church, but the rain whipped my face with ropes of ice and pulled me in through the door. Astonished by the darkness of the interior and the hammer beams of rain, it took a few minutes to recover my senses. Certain that I was alone and having sought refuge from the sudden downpour, reverentially, almost obediently, feeling for some reason discomforted by my unexpected intrusion upon this place, I removed my hat, my shadow patterning the dark. Teasing the glove from my left hand, the wool caught a ring and pulled it from my finger, tessellating light and sound as it hit the floor.

Then a clear plain silence followed by one of those trapeze acts of the soul when what was now was never now, when what was entirely here was not really here.

Something was there: a shadow  
 Somebody there  
 Someone breathing deep and fast.

A voice seemed to feel its way towards me through the dark.

'Let me tell you of a picture that haunts me. It does not move, but holds me now as it did then. Some pictures fade, but others continue to bleed into the present and tug at the certainty of now. A picture of clothes, like a half open parcel, crumpled, worn, damp. Familiar. The soft dent of fingers still discernible. He must have fallen forwards. The bullet an expanding one. The hole where it entered his body, microscopic. The right hand pocket above his backbone, a large rent: his braces still stiff with blood. Tracing my fingers along the woven fabric, strangely reminiscent of some shattered bloodline, that should have protected his skin: kept out the flooding Tigris.

A hand reaches through from that time to pull back a curtain, to leave a drifting smell of damp exhaled in a jumbled room, dim in the strange light of memory.

I remember waiting whilst he made tea. Glancing around the room, piles of papers, novels and art books. Clothes strewn, like figures pulled from a painting or exiting for a scene change. Small framed photographs. Glass cabinets whose dark recesses held curios drawn up from deep below the surface of cold water where the light never penetrates. Our time together reduced to motes of dust.'

**52 ° 21'962" N / 3° 935'17"W**

Wheat, the grain above all others serves for the support of humans, the ears are the very token of fertility and prosperity. It is a hardy plant, usually sown late in the year. There is nothing more exquisite than the colour of young wheat in spring, when the frost and snows have begun to pass and the slender flags or leaves mantle the dark soil that feeds them.

Seven in the morning. The lorry had come. The weather was not promising and we set off in a fine drizzle; grey clouds added to the chill. We climbed up out of the village, its bogland retreating until we left behind the last tree and stacks of peat drying. We struck off from Cwmystwyth, along the turnpike road and headed north.

Parts of the bog are untouched by man.

*sheep had strayed into a quiet land,  
beside a stream, the bridge of the blessed ford  
and through the stuttering mud they led them to find  
a tramp frozen to death.*

*he sleeps now in dreams of endless fine summer weather  
the thrum of rain far off and never quite arriving  
it falls elsewhere.  
he can sense it but now his feet are never wet.*

*the cold too has stayed away.*

*he dreams on through the dark and light of seasons  
that have no inkling of why the leaves are tired  
or why the coracles of rowans at their reddest now  
must fall.*

William Mason

'Now let thy Art  
exert its powers, and give by varying lines  
The soil, already tam'd, its finished grace.'

Every night the Gardener asks what roots, salads and garnishes are to be gathered and what will be used by the cook, and he will inform her from time to time of which fruit is ripe and which is in season.

'*Vines* at every peere of the wall. *White Muscadine* at the corner peere next the doore into the East quarter.

*Corrinth* and *Gooseberries* betweene the Trees in both quarters:  
*Strawberries* in the Bordures. *Violets* in the halfe-circle.'

*five o'clock blackbird*

*a landscape populated by sunlight  
and barely breathing apple buds  
gentle as restraint*

*teacups for conversation - the garden diary laid out to plan the day's transplanting, for dressing  
and keeping*

*peering into the garden  
nature has no purpose*

*the indifference of lilac overhead and moss underfoot  
light hanging like rosaries in the ivies and the blossom.*

**52°36'547"N / 3°82'08"W**

*racing clouds bring in dark and light again  
hurrying on to be caught in the quiet open spaces... the far off trail of birdsong  
and the tinsmith clink of another closeby*

*cool dappled world*

*the air*

*thin air the air of vanishing things  
snow pine resin straw  
these things are here in the river as it runs along  
the backbone and shoulders of rock*

*clean rain woodsmoke and cold  
green amber rush of water dead leaves*

*listening to the birds and the movement of the weather through the trees  
dark silurian rock peers back as the water curls its way over stones  
ferns and grasses  
distant pushes of light and dark wilderness*

*the field's source is the forest  
the artistry of healing that holds feeds the soil and us  
through vetch moss timothy fescue and rye grass*

*celandine-yellow straw- yellow silver- yellow*

*morning field  
flickering tractors leaving flocks to  
swim uphill  
past  
hedgerows smouldering a glut  
of summer berries*

*through yellow bracken a tapping sound of  
hammer on metal - a robin  
and a breeze tugging at shiny cobwebs  
what's left of the year's light  
articulates flies to blue fire*

The night had brought a screaming wind its hand having divided the flock. He turned his back on it, half ran down the lane slipping and stepping into the mud.

Rain beating down. Gorse and thorn stunted from wind that brought salt from the sea.

He could not see the sheep.

The brook had risen overnight. Ridges in the field.

Still he could not see the sheep.

The brook a drought in summer where the sheep could walk across when the water was not deep and fast.

Down a deep ravine, flowing into the bay of a steep cwm carrying the sheep before it, catching them unawares. Thorn bushes and brambles held the bodies fast.

Flood water ringing

a wave coiling over rocks bringing the bloated ewe with it.

The sheep cowered, dogs flashed past. One tried to scramble out but was pinned by the swirling water.

The shepherd gasped. Reached for the animal. The current pushed him back. He clenched his teeth and fought the swell.

In the squinting light the sheep and mist like spider's floss.

*blood bone black smoke call space eye grass vetch*

*the road floods.*

*the sky goes out.*

*the black soil brings winter green.*

*here they think through eyes hand skin body  
these readers of the land*

*they can hear that moment when the birds have settled into their shuffling trees  
and the doors of the forest swing wide in the drift of an icicle moon to release  
shrinks of deer and geese*

*an owl works the now silvered hedgerows making its own acoustics of the sky*

*time is filtered here conveys space like minnows bobbing in water  
a fox's bark ribbons over green linen of late fields*

*an alder shredded by mist floats late moths like sycamore planes.*

wan under wolcnan

**sceaduhelma gesceapu scridan  
cwóman wan under wolcnan**

**Beowulf II**

**642 -51**

it happens every time

waters swell  
recede

swans - absurd and sentimental -  
slow down winter water's mirk  
splashed flecked  
black-legged spirals of light with well-oiled sails  
like the mind's intended space they find new water

through the pulp of twilight  
I saw them  
a sprinkling of salt

the white had made them



**blueprint**

a woman standing in the dark  
t r a c i n g        stones  
sorting grains of granite and flakes of mica

afraid to say more than it meant threads  
the plainsong of oystercatchers  
while frost candles the grass and swallows prepare to leave

thought    alights in trees

swings the flat earth round  
keeping a handful of you  
airtight

here  
where the light makes aluminum silver

or here  
in the autopsy of my hand

**moth**

flashing over polished stones  
 our candles bobbed  
 like plums in cold water

and glanced across  
 the foxgloves and cow parsley  
 scenes we had breasted

in the tang of that  
 late summer afternoon's  
 high smoulder

lured on by lamps  
 piercing the dark,  
 a theatre of our cheekbones and foreheads,

we made our way  
 across the shingle  
 to lay

sugared offerings  
 and  
 wait

to see the moth:  
 of its kind,  
 the last.

Splendid of under wing  
 and crimson burning eye,  
 it had clung

to this half mile of deserted strand  
 surviving storm, heat  
 breaking wave

changing air encroaching  
 sea and crumbling  
 land

so it fed

and we watched  
its wings, breathe in and out  
as if in ecstasy,  
its proboscis plunging  
the flowing rags  
of treacle and rum,  
sucking like an opium addict  
the sticky manna we had made.

surfeited,  
in the juddering beam  
of its scarlet eye

with broken wing  
it flashed from the  
clutch of earth to

simply vanish

and leave  
as if to chide us  
for being late

now only air, dark water  
and fading land,  
hollow eyed and

parchment skinned  
marks the empty road  
back home.

**blank five**

‘the rain’ you said ‘of a day of a night of a day will wash an orange eye into green grass’

you were right; flowers a bleed of copper

half transparent in the sunlight swim thin as fish

unfurling under thin walls of water; snail shells;

wraith-like under trees;

between blades of grey green grass moss  
a mechanical bird;

hops;

listens;

hops...

chrome green sap torn from hazel and from thorn stares out through the starting rain

white orange tipped like scorched fern

a butterfly

straggles;

bobs;

zig - zags...

if it settles;  
you will stay;

**moon**

that last night  
 the moon slipped into my room  
 a desire path of light among webs and husks.  
 she'd come to say sorry

it was September

she dropped by  
 with a suitcase of darkness  
 the first few  
 swallows had left  
 only a taste of windfalls now

i had missed her

so had the room  
 its books  
 and photographs  
 in which she feigned some interest

other objects stirred  
 as she passed by  
 pearls on the bedside table glanced up  
 with unexpected life

papers jostled  
 scattered books  
 seemed to wish to open up

i waited

watched her white gaze glide  
 across the floor before  
 touching a picture of a boy

she left the room  
 crossed the roof  
 became caught  
 in a blackthorn hedge  
 beyond the garden

i could wait no longer

-moon - i asked -                    will i find a wingspan in dust on the window ledge?-

**everything starts in the middle**

narrow bands of houses become wire fences  
 studded with fleece  
 then salt flecked roadside thrift splashed in on  
 sea-rolled tyres bright with summertime  
 mapping the verges of these March roads

strange to think of the web of lives out here  
 beyond the reach of the urban hub  
 where darkness means something other

the rain is darker here  
 giant hogweed umbrellas of Chinese emperors  
 silver this Ordovician darkness  
 a moon holds itself bruised against sky  
 though stars flare,  
 nothing is safe despite a muffle of oaks  
 raftering all that is creaturely  
 and the air lying green with aniseed

more houses

the road runs on to the coast  
 others have already disappeared  
 the weather different from the half  
 remembered land of flutter-moth and amorous bee  
 their notes fragile now like violins made of frost  
 rimes filmy and delicate hang about last year's roses  
 roads and air streaked  
 with the fume and iridescence of oil delete the things  
 we half remember molly blobs kingfishers

all surrendered

or barely alive in places reserved for nature

a passing watchfulness and remembrance of moths  
 reminds that what we face is the malice of fields of rotting rape

a writing we could have known emerges from behind time dishevelled trees  
 a hand forged chain-link fence loops  
 holds on to crockeries of blossom and lost nicknames  
 twitch, quitch, quack and scutch

things we fail to see          near at hand          imagined woods

**chalked**

recently expelled  
something had frittered away  
the tinnitus of history

the roofs the walls

stand dismayed in the  
stopped air of the afternoon

something on a broken wall  
a hook of superstition a chrysalis hangs fogged and ditched  
deaf in its second skin cleaving the sway of the weather

no body

something lives here  
mud then wire words break step with light  
tilt the stones names voices erased

something passes through a distance shivers

spilt light chalk and flint bones here then

now something restless

here in double trust

**wellum**

i will not speak of this again  
this

light -

shows something deeper in landscape  
and  
proves the pointlessness of things

such as crying on the shingle  
    skipping in the park while nacreous clouds  
    burn holes into green  
willow tracery

that day - the day i fell for Botticelli  
- someone said the light was wrong  
but how was i to know?

beyond the  
razor-wire  
a soft crike  
unfurls- sometimes lilac in the early light

scales tip to tip scale

the fishes and i flipped and wellum

drowned you like a coin

(‘Crike’ is an old word for creek and ‘wellum’ is a word for the radiating ripples set off by surfacing fish. They are what is seen when a fish plops in water)



**march 13**

just a woman on a lawn  
reaching out to touch your sleeve  
amid the sunlight that falls on us  
and the barely breathing apple buds

gentle as restraint,  
red brick walls japped our separate hands with warmth  
our tracks invisible to ordinary sight

stillness and the light forms us into  
its own daguerreotype

**twelve moons**

early morning twists scrabbles

a different silence at five

distant milky water  
 filled with an unfamiliar moon  
 just as a blade of china presents itself in soil

listening skin things the eye can't quite see  
 breath held

and a world that breaks

aches

laps

from veins until a shimmering appears from  
 things looking up not lost but in a  
 pause

a hoverfly

or

prismatic hues of gnats coaxed  
 from earth to perform an ancient asymmetric bobbing dance

watched

by a  
 starling  
 piping

keen notes

such lividity of heat

makes blood tremble until its voice becomes something like water

later somewhere between the potting shed and home  
a sliding screen between here and there somehow makes colours weave and shift,

roll in their sphere

birds

inflorescences painted complexities  
released by iris -barbed feathers

something else glimpsed through nets of light and pigment

illusions of substance swelling  
in green ropes

resolve themselves into staring eyes of dew

**aphrodite**

the horses are asleep

so aphrodite slips in through the loaded sea

comes ashore and looks around

i'm run aground with my tottering rosary of shells

the air swirling with the grief-stricken calls of oystercatchers

so at first, i don't see her

but then

her slipper prints pearl beneath the bladder-wrack tell me she's here

didn't you know she writes messages

and leaves lugworms to post them in the sand as the tide goes out?

that she salts breezes tails and flanks with a clear day-bright needle?

bobs orphaned rock pool weed out on a turquoise sea?

best of all she shines the blue glass bead of a cormorant's eye.

just as the horses wake and the sky resumes call

she huddles into air-borne seeds to become

thrift wall pennywort roseroot

white billows                    i tie the shells around my ankle

and begin to walk

**sometimes**

'here' you said 'sometimes

the gap between worlds' grows thin becomes inverted like a pin

if you break the glass and face the wrong way'

you said

wet air glints into tides salt pebbles my finger;  
 on the road an inlaid marquetry of bright crystals shoals the weightlessness of this spring afternoon  
 into moss fraying pools; there lie shadows of our common skin; a blade of eels;

night wakes them

stars admire them into flax and weed and water;

' here is spring' you said 'a blister of sequins left behind in water;'

particles fizzing into grass'

un-pleated latitudes

how little is seen from  
 the

a  
 i  
 r

tintern

**flag iris**

open tongues of honeysuckle tangle inscriptions and press  
against the door skin drawn back its flank a bed for flies  
drunken peonies loosen webs of water and faith holds out in blobs of lichen  
or gathers in the broken calyxes of plastic cups.

the abbey moans.  
shifting its weight in the wind so at least we know still  
alive floodlights flare and burn it has closed its eyes.

it rains harder a spear of flag iris parts the morning's blue bubble sap  
invents that that should not be

a clock

bites our world in half and now  
pencilled in drawn back  
a world before where ships happened and maps were full of holes





**and here's the thing**

and here's the thing...

my skin recovers

maps and tides have turned

floating wefts of silk and light

coloured books read after dark

a flourish of birds

flowers frozen in silent ponds

summer in a winter's night

a further tilt in the heart's happenstance

**geometry**

now that the lawnmower  
has sung it to perfect lines the grass lies  
obediently

between the raspberries

through the darkening foams of elder  
geometry of roses droop themselves  
the garden still bound the afternoon lay where it had fallen

between the counterpanes of  
dark and light a childhood  
sea scarfed

slips into the house  
having hidden among the frail blooms  
presses into the white spaces

of jumbled rooms  
in the body of you  
and Piero here with his stagey frames

turning pages  
the scene arranges itself  
god's blue hand seems to cover this place

## oeillet

Between molecules of  
stone light chisels

slypes of red berried hedgerows  
a man spews  
leaves  
between

his jaws husks scatter

we know unknow his  
demi sense

of pollen trailed voices tatt eredthrough veilsof sunlight

dust motes rising and  
failing

gold leaf in warm water

her  
e

through the mouth of the afternoon we walked into the open lipped sky  
here

coloured earth and milk water become half glazed windows the ground sulks, curdles under the  
listing columns

the pocketbook drawings once asplutterof hallelujahs now a green  
twilight of clerestories half heard

water shadows the path with silver seeping into the moment.  
To find them we took the bridge

they forded the stream in their mole dark

conspiring with a cancelli of birdsong making new shrines in the air of green and gold

something like grief cantilevers the light rolling back rock fingers and touch drumming the last  
flutings as stones slither to earth

briars and night approach with long purple shadows and conscience a visual thing catch each  
other entwined along a fence crows hang like inverted ogee arches still dipping with the air bell  
men of superstition hop relieved while clouds egg and dart time into puddles

**tintern**

husked away the night stair  
gathers darkly  
i imagine

splashed bib and inked fingers  
splitting candles into tumbling clocks  
hooking new colours fortified with amber

later still an accomplice punctuates  
halting cones of space  
palms pressed

to sit and wait like grasshoppers on door frames

lint winged moths  
wakeful at drifting windows  
tapping to be absolved by figures now ribbons

on silent walls

**unseen wye**

grass blades vein the  
sandstone columns

old light

reappears in this morning's frost where  
trows once paddled the river's patience

moves on  
picks up the scent of someone's thought shaking out their light  
marks a footprint in the puddled sand

what plan with all its intricacies scurred their minds?  
did they begin by skirting its furthest borders forms coalescing sparkling?

stones to mark foundations two further boulders suggest an entrance  
turning to consider the view across the adjoining land

pallid dripping unlovely in ungodly light?

flesh and blood had been here  
scattering bright nerves  
gliding the broad nave treading the night stair

now light splinters

a strange fog bites the air

an equipoise of light and mist tied up somewhere near the curving limit

now a

grinning dark dark beneath night's dark that roused something

slipped a tarnished coin bet  
ween the stone floors  
and shuddered into the fading mouth  
only their evidence carried weight

the roof. an eardrum  
groans the beat of death

black smoke paddling the sky  
a shadow-hinge swung

this morning's ice  
slowly filled  
rounded out  
and made  
that river disappear

**a secret brightness**

light lies as  
morning skirts the  
bright blue  
to  
warm

a button sewn into the linen of your shirt  
a tiny iceberg between twists of snow  
white facets cut to blue and gold,  
its oily planes daily kiss skin and sleeve as  
your hand brushes through arcs of space and time

forgetful at first like a hand in ice  
then moving ellipses into pale heaps  
of sugared almonds

correct  
stock-still in glassy pinnacles  
bare  
breathing through  
lichen canvas

to surprise us yet

the plane of snow rises again  
silver like a thrush defiant, against  
gills of lapping dark,  
a late rose balances

ash inside an amber sleeve

**hilversum**

clapping pours in  
like heavy rain and  
reaching through water  
the lady announcer clears her throat

to speak of this life of odds and ends.

the dial swoops Chopin dies  
his feathers mute  
all haptic knowledge suspended  
in the pelt of afternoon

light comes down  
over bowls of lilac

spreads itself on strings of glass  
to be caught in a grid of wooden boards

dreams and silence pondering the  
window frame looking for a way out

to jostle late sparrows in the park.

in between the silences you are going

like the sky unfurnishes estuaries after dark  
and leaves them floating as bones and silt



## Introduction

The critical component of my dissertation explores a writing practice that seeks to reify poems as objects, as physical interventions in a collective response to ecological crisis. My aim has been to develop a poetics in which such textual interventions are both personal and political, to write poems that not only reflect on the consequences of human activity for the environment but also contribute to ongoing debates about the experimental possibilities that language offers to ecopolitics. I have set out to achieve a creative practice that moves towards a poetics of relation. My thesis examines the influence of earlier work, and evaluates the role of ‘nature’ poetry and ‘new nature writing’ in my efforts to employ poetry as both an active and critical mode of thought.<sup>1</sup> Although my nature poetry draws on the environment-focused writings of an earlier generation of activists and authors, it is also inflected and conditioned by current forms of writing that I have found to be both thematically and stylistically arresting. The term new nature writing poses an immediate challenge: whilst its various forms involve different approaches, with separated and related emphases, collectively they reflect a shared anxiety about the ways in which we as humans have become disconnected from the non-human world, a process that has gathered pace since the early 1970s and the beginning of the environmental movement.<sup>2</sup> The connecting thread that links new nature writing is the search for new possibilities in terms of how humans can make meaning and refine our sense of connection with the non-human world. My writing places itself within this search.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing, Rethinking the Literature of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). p.1

<sup>2</sup> See Jason Cowley, ‘Editors’ Letter: The New Nature Writing’, *Granta*, 102 (2008), pp. 7-12.

<sup>3</sup> The distinctions between Nature and nature are complex. This thesis is concerned with mapping through the process and investigation of writing, the interrelatedness between the human and the non-human world; arguing that poetry is part of ‘an ecosystem where elements of nature writing are developed and integrated in a unique way’. All references to nature in this work are approached using this definition. See David Landis Barnhill, “Surveying the Landscape: A New Approach to Nature Writing.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2010, pp. 273–290. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/44086817](http://www.jstor.org/stable/44086817). [accessed 5 May 2020].

Key contemporary writers such as John Burnside and Alice Oswald, who have sought to revive and release nature from more confining historical definitions, are considered in this commentary alongside Andrew Marvell and William Wordsworth, whose earlier inventions hint at a modern sensibility. We can also trace affinities between new nature writing and recent shifts in Romantic studies, led by critics such as Fiona Stafford, whose recent work explores the ‘local attachments’ of poetry, where the local is no longer overlooked or considered inconsequential, but rather deemed to be ‘essential to art with any aspiration to permanence.’<sup>4</sup>

With its shifts between prose and poetry, the new nature writing offers rich explorative possibilities. This dissertation, then, places itself within the ambit of this movement and takes as a focus of discussion the question of whether it might be possible to acknowledge how nature, in its nostalgic form (as often associated with the nineteenth century), may provide a fruitful means of reaching beyond the inclusive self-referentiality and dislocation of the ‘lyric’ eye.<sup>5</sup> Another focus of my poetic practice has been to shift attention away from my own voice as some form of instruction. Rather, in that respect, two areas of areas of attention have informed my critical stance: the local and immediate forms of nature to be found in my own locality where the industrial and environmental encounter each other; and an attempt to destabilise the I. The latter has been effected in agreement with the idea of the ‘opening of the field’, which aims to achieve a more unpredictable, open form of writing.<sup>6</sup> For instance, open field poems might use the whole of a page’s space to engage with and reflect on where the overlap between the human and non-human can occur, as with a building in a landscape or that landscape itself. The writing is more open to reflection, or perhaps even represents an embodiment of the network of relationships between the

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<sup>4</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments, The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.30.

<sup>5</sup> Don Paterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018 ).

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Tarlo: ‘Open Field: Reading Field as Place and Poetics’ in *Placing Poetry* Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding (eds.), (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2013), pp.113 - 148.

animal, vegetable and mineral world referred to as ecology, and performs its own act of critical reflection on it.

Whilst my writing acknowledges Jonathan Bate's argument that the most ecopoetics can do is to reduce our sense of alienation from nature, it also seeks to develop Bate's more optimistic view that it might be possible for human beings to be aware not only of nature, but also be simultaneously conscious 'of the adverse eco-effects of industrial and capitalist practices and collectively, of their power to reverse these effects'.<sup>7</sup> Further, this critical commentary examines how the creative inflections from modern writers such as John Burnside and Alice Oswald have shaped my own writing in its attempts to revive and indeed release nature from its more confining historical definitions, as posited by Bate. The works of both Burnside and Oswald are subjects of study in this thesis. Since there are also affinities between new nature writing and the shift in Romantic studies through the work of critics such as Fiona Stafford, the concept of poems to themselves as forms of 'local attachments' has informed my consideration of the work of William Wordsworth, in particular 'Tintern Abbey' and its influence on thinking about poetry in relation to place.<sup>8</sup> My thinking and writing about the phenomenology of space have been signally shaped by the philosophical architectural theory and writings of Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor – my work concerns itself throughout with place, and in particular how to accommodate sensory experience and the immediacy of environment. Rivers, gardens and buildings, on or near to the banks of rivers as utopian spaces, have informed my understanding of place, and these tropes appear in both my research and poetry. In what follows, I examine works that engage with water, gardens, buildings and 'in between' places to trace the bearing they have had on my perceptions of place.<sup>9</sup> As I

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Peters and Ruth Irwin, 'Earthsongs, Ecopoetics, Heidegger and Dwelling', *The Trumpeter* 18:1 (2002) <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/index.php/trumpeter/article> [accessed 14 June 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments, The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.30.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Glancy: *In-Between Places: Essays*, (Tucson: UAP, 2005) p.77.

explore, historical poetic antecedents, in particular the country house poem, have been invaluable in shaping my eco-minded dialogue. Of particular importance in this respect is Andrew Marvell's poem 'Upon Nun Appleton'.<sup>10</sup> This work has a simultaneous narrative between the non-human and human world. The development of ideas geared towards evolving a poetic language that does not insist upon a hierarchy of thought or action by either party receives further creative inflection from the work of Veronica Forrest-Thomson.<sup>11</sup> Just as story and place are in continual dialogue, each dependent on the other, the poems that form this collection are informed by, to borrow Gillian Tindall's words, 'what we know from our own lives, and the places through which we pass according to what we have read'.<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, I address the work of three poets and two architects to evaluate how their related understandings of place have been both culturally and ecologically significant to my own creative practice. This introductory discussion begins by considering definitions of environment, and asks how the work of Andrew Marvell and John Burnside might allow for 'poetic extrapolation of possible worlds'.<sup>13</sup> In subsequent chapters I examine the significance of place and memory in the work of William Wordsworth; rivers in the work of Alice Oswald; and defining and sensing place and space in the work of Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor. These architects and poets have influenced my own poetic investigations of the borders between the human and the non-human world, helping me to develop a hybrid form of critical thought and writing that marks the intersection between poetry and architecture. As such, my poetry compositions may be said to hinge on the creation of an

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<sup>10</sup> Andrew Marvell, *Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Methuen & Co., 1986), p.66.

<sup>11</sup> Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A theory of twentieth-century poetry* (Manchester: MUP, 1978)

<sup>12</sup> Gillian Tindall, *Countries of the Mind: The Meaning of Place to Writers* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1991), p.vii.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.132-33.

immersive and powerfully evocative web of material connection, a self-sufficient world of thought and feeling.

## Defining Environment

In my critical work, I have focused on environmental boundaries such as rivers, gardens and overlooked landscapes. My central argument explores the danger inherent in viewing such landscapes as unproblematic coordinates. My argument proposes that by attending to overlooked or forgotten landscapes, we have an opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of our relationship between shifting and fixed environments. Of equal importance, however, is the recognition that utopias – and utopia writing – usually carry warnings.

The terms ‘deeper’ and ‘utopian’ are significant within contemporary environmental discourse, and require some attention here. So-called ‘reform environmentalists’ argue that it is possible to view the natural world primarily as a resource for human beings, whether economically or culturally, but equally assert that we should strive to defend it against over-exploitation.<sup>14</sup> Deep ecologists, on the other hand, urge a drastic change in human self-understanding, in that as humans we are part of a greater living identity. As Robert J. Brulle notes, ‘[i]t is as if Western society has deliberately set out to destroy the integrity of the ecosystem’.<sup>15</sup> This dualistic, anthropocentric system of values is moving towards a more ecocentric approach, and such a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism requires a fundamental re-evaluation of how we think about our environment as a society. Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth have attained a renewed prominence in the new nature writing of Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin, Michael McCarthy and others, particularly with regard to proto-environmental politics. Kathleen Jamie, however, identifies energising uncertainties with regard to the possible helpfulness of these latter-day Romantics’

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<sup>14</sup> Michael E Zimmerman, ‘Deep Ecology’s Approach to the Environmental Crisis Philosophy’, in *Humanity and Ecology: Philosophy of Nature and Environmental Ethics*, Odera Oruka (ed.), (Darby, Diane Publishing Co. 1994), p.249.

<sup>15</sup> Robert J Brulle, *Agency, Democracy, and Nature: The US Environmental Movement from a Critical Theory Perspective* (Cambridge: the MIT Press, 2000), p.3.

thinking about nature. Her observations on the dangers of making nature too comforting point to Jonathan Bate's revival of Wordsworth as a 'nature poet' in *Romantic Ecology* of 1991.<sup>16</sup> There is a danger that an over-dependence on Romantic values about nature and an assimilation of New Labour metropolitan ideas about nature may flip us even further back to a position where we view nature as a form of nostalgia; or, as Mark Cocker suggests, use it to talk about ourselves, and only ourselves, and so lose sight of our current environmental difficulties.<sup>17</sup>

As an additional warning, Kate Rigby's work on ecopoetics in *Ecology Without Nature* also suggests that Romantic attitudes towards nature (such as those of Wordsworth) were not always that clear-cut; living as we do so removed from the natural world, reacting in a way that breaks through or overcomes conventional modes presents any would be writer with a considerable creative test.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, as David Farrell Krell argues, German Idealists and Romantic writers at the end of the eighteenth century were less benevolent than many eco-critically minded poets and commentators are today in acknowledging what the positive forces of nature might be.<sup>19</sup> Nature, whilst an evident source of life, is at the same time one of disease and death. Rigby argues that writing a form of 'negative poetics' is the only way in which poetry about nature can have any sort of effect.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Western thinking about the environment is tied inextricably to Romantic ideology, which is itself complicated in its representations and subsequent interpretations of nature. In identifying these frictions in various canonical readings of Romanticism, Rigby offers advice that,

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*: (London: Routledge, 2014), p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Cocker, Death of the Naturalist: why is the 'new nature writing so tame'? in *The New Statesman* <http://www.newstateman.com/culture/june2015/culturalcapital> [accessed 14 July 2017].

<sup>18</sup> Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p.53.

<sup>19</sup> David Farrell Krell, *Contagion: Sexuality, Disease and Death in German Idealism and Romanticism* (Bloomington: IUP, 1998), p.22, see note on 171.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, Kate Rigby, p117.

as a writer, I considered crucial. Namely, she warns against the distracting effects of metaphor. In the search for a language to examine nature, the act of allowing the metaphor to be unthinkingly projected onto reality poses a dangerous separation, as the metaphor may fail to mediate the voice of nature adequately. In *Topographies of the Sacred*, Rigby sets out to reframe nature by moving away from the transcendental qualities of the works of the Romantics, and returning them to their lived bodily experiences within nature and history.<sup>21</sup> Rigby's reconceptualising of nature (which extends the reach of Jonathan Bate's *Song of the Earth* (2000) the pioneering study that invites readers to revisit Romanticism and its views of nature in order to think more deeply about the natural world) prompted me to reflect critically on my own work and its relevance to the tradition of nature poetry. Rigby's illuminating focus (away from nature as read by readers of poetry, instead considering the complex relationship between writer as recipient rather than producer of nature) is a key influence and an important means of informing my own writing. Ecopoetics alone, Rigby contends, cannot solve environmental crisis, and she asks, 'How then does the work of art "save" the earth?'<sup>22</sup> Perhaps by drawing attention to itself, as a form of text; though as Robert Macfarlane in *The Wild Places* warns, any sort of over dependence on the map is, in Timothy Morton's words, clear evidence of the 'omnipotence of the... mind', as the road atlas insists on technologically altering our sense of the landscape.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Macfarlane contends (rightly) that technology has caused us to confuse our sense of the 'genius of the place': 'The wild places are no longer

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., Kate Rigby, p.53.

<sup>22</sup> Kate Rigby, 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis' *New Literary History*, Vol. 35., No.3, (Summer 2004), 427-442, p.437. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057847> [accessed 16 February 2012]

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology with Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.178.



marked [...] the river valleys and the marshes have all but disappeared. If they are shown at all, it is as background shadings or generic symbols.’<sup>24</sup>

For Macfarlane, the road atlas encourages us to imagine the land itself only as a context for motorised travel; as he points out, ‘[i]t warps the reader away from the natural world’. Damian Walford Davies is entirely correct in his contention that,

most of us conceive of the map as truth – the world out there as we know it, an object of authority (underpinned by trigonometric and GPS authority) that allows the reader to become a mobile wayfarer and thus master, the land.<sup>25</sup>

However, we should pause for thought and consider that the map is, like metaphor, ‘a symbolic representation of the world, and not the world itself’. The idea of the map as ‘truth’, to use Walford Davies’ word, is a reminder that our ability to achieve a deeper understanding of place where it might be possible to engage with both human and landscape ecological concerns, is becoming increasingly elusive.

Exploring the interconnectedness between culture and environment is a focus of my own study and reflects the concerns of recent psychogeographical and environment literature, such as those that animate Paul Farley’s and Michael Symmons Roberts’ *Edgelands*.<sup>26</sup> Much as the Romantics prompted their readers to look at hills, lakes and rivers, this recent work suggests that rather than hurry towards the distant wildernesses – which in most cases are not really wild, since

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<sup>24</sup>Giselle Bader, “Space, Place, and Memory in Holloway by Robert Macfarlane, Stanley Donwood, and Dan Richards.” *Space and Culture*, vol. 23, no. 2, May 2020, pp. 98–105, doi: [10.1177/1206331218773658](https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218773658). [accessed 14 May 2020]

<sup>25</sup> Damian Walford Davies, ‘(Dis)trusting maps, British Library – Picturing Places’, The British Library <https://www.bl.uk/picturing-places/articles/distrusting-maps> [accessed 17 September 2019].

<sup>26</sup> Paul Farley and Michael Symmonds, *Edgelands* (London: Vintage Books, 2012).

there is likely to be an owner – we recognise instead, an imaginative and vital resistance in the wastelands of urban places. It is possible to see these underdeveloped and unseen places as something to celebrate. *Edgelands* suggests that traditional definitions of pastoral environments open up to spatial de- and re-territorialisation of space into something uncertain and debatable: nature in these places, therefore, leads to a different understanding of the pastoral: ‘the human confronted with-far-more-than itself’ as Stuart Cook states.<sup>27</sup> Farley and Symmons Roberts have been helpful in my own practice, challenging me to think about traditional sources of nature, considering sites where the urban and rural continually renegotiate their borders.

My research seeks to identify the local, and, through experiential writing, explore the edges and overlap between what we normally conceive of as architecture, gardens, wastelands and water. Far from being a narrow frame of reference, these liminalities work as creative frameworks that encourage a deeper understanding between people and their environment, as well as removing the potential tension posed by more obvious picturesque landscapes. As Walford Davies points out in *Cartographies of Culture*, ‘Place becomes space-dynamic, contested and multiple in its symbolic qualities and representative identity positions, rich in its possibilities for liminal experience.’<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Walford Davies also recognises how the ‘spatial flow’ between sites, whilst difficult and contentious, allows for reflection and consideration of the experience of displacement<sup>29</sup>. My attempts to connect with human and ecological perspectives as a chthonic relationship, though not necessarily a mythic one, is explored by identifying and writing experientially about rivers and the sites that rivers run through, as well as the architectural forms that are built or abandoned on or near

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<sup>27</sup>Harriet Tarlo: ‘Open Field: Reading Field as Place and Poetics’ in *Placing Poetry*, Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding (eds.) (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2013), p.288.

<sup>28</sup> Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture, New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p.24.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture*, p.25.

riverbanks, focusing on the smaller identities and intensities of nature in abandoned or urban spaces in the hope of achieving a greater intimacy with the landscape and its environs. In my work I want to find and explore a vital and felt connectivity, with the intention that the resultant writing represents more than a simple description of landscape in metrical form, but rather becomes an expression of, as Coleridge argues, ‘Nature in the active sense’: *natura naturans* as opposed to *natura naturata*; one or other of the many complex relationships between external nature and human activity.<sup>30</sup> I am aware that much of the more-than human world is incomprehensible, and so nature can never be simply described. It is always something other. This otherness is not necessarily a consistent or stable thing and that brings with it its own challenges in attempts to write about nature. Acknowledging this dilemma, Ian Davidson and Zoe Skoulding in *Placing Poetry* (2013) explore how movement and change are defining experiences in modern life. In sensing a consumable and mobile scenery, relationships become destabilised and Davidson and Skoulding endorse the role of creative writing in assisting in how we might redefine our sense of place. The advice they offer is to examine ‘the grain of a locality that contains its own histories’.<sup>31</sup> Choice of locality raises an important question about the role of creative writing and can be helpful when faced with the dilemma of how to avoid picturesque spectatorship.

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel Coleridge Taylor, *Biographia literaria* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907), pp.166-67.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Davidson and Zoë Skoulding (eds.), *Placing Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodolphi, 2013), p.13.

## Chapter 1: The Walled Garden, Utopias and the Importance of Listening in to Nature

The influence on my writing of the topographical or ‘country house’ poem has been vital and conditioning.<sup>32</sup> I found it was possible to examine the garden in the tradition of seventeenth-century utopian texts that caution against an abiding sense of longing for nature, while also considering how human lives might be more integrated with nature. For Paul Alpers, the pastoral remains a valid form because it contains the self-conscious and the critical.<sup>33</sup> Marvell’s ‘Upon Appleton House’, however, embodies a constitutional irony. It departs from pastoral in that, on the one hand, it appears to be a semi-private poem, and yet, on the other, it also addresses political and philosophical issues. Marvell appears to be something of a ventriloquist who momentarily catches a number of voices throughout the poem, populating the ‘temple green’ with ‘birds and trees’. The speaker appears as a lay philosopher and is made into an observer and passive participant in the woods of Nun Appleton; in demanding the ‘wings’ of the ‘fowl’ in order that he may ‘fly’ on ‘the air’, Marvell merges both the speaker’s mind and the apparent consciousness of the natural environment. The human body is remapped and bound within the natural environment of Nun Appleton, and so the respective territories are mixed. Marvell’s ‘Nun Appleton’ has been especially enabling in my own practice, since its seemingly modern sensibility and investigations of place involve similar ecological and political concerns to those explored in my own poetry: ‘Nun Appleton’ can be read in keeping with Timothy Morton’s advice to use ‘the cosmic, the historical and the political’ and so make use of the intrinsic playfulness and reversibility of language’.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> G. R. Hibbard “The Country House Poem of the Seventeenth Century.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 19, no. 1/2, 1956, pp. 159–174. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/750248](http://www.jstor.org/stable/750248). [accessed 23 May 2020].

<sup>33</sup> Paul Alpers, ‘What is Pastoral?’, *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 8, No.3 (Spring, 1982) *JSTOR* <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343259>> [accessed 14 May 2017].

<sup>34</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.142.

Marvell's mixing of biology and metaphor might be seen as a multi-directional exchange and the ideological depiction of the house and estate seems to question how building and garden might come to represent a utopia; although he appears to construct alternative societal structures, the voice that Marvell adopts allows for a more fluid conception of power that could expand both ways and allows the atmosphere to weave itself in and out of the poem. Marvell certainly seems to be questioning the dangers of trapping the mind in the 'prison house of language'.<sup>35</sup> Marvell's diction allows for the opening up of what might be called a 'third area'.<sup>36</sup>

In seventeenth-century England, empirical science began to emerge, together with an awareness of what we now call ecological issues. Interestingly for this discussion, 'Upon Appleton House' concerns itself with habitats, rather than the idea of a well-managed estate alone.<sup>37</sup> Marvell, in treating nature emblematically, notes that whilst we are seeing other kinds of beings, they are also seeing us.<sup>38</sup> Marvell's treatment of nature in his poem suggests that, as humans, we will make our marks; the dilemma he poses is, what kind of marks do we wish to make?

The garden is a significant choice. Traditionally, the pastoral mode has offered readers an alternative, imaginary society or idea of the utopic. Franklin Ginn points out that 'gardens are

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<sup>35</sup> Bradd Shore, 'Is Language a Prisonhouse?' *Cultural Anthropology* 2.1 (1987), pp.115-36, <<https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1987.2.1.02a00100>> [accessed 15 June 2018].

<sup>36</sup> Alison Mark, *Veronica Forrest-Thompson and Language Poetry*. Liverpool University Press, 2001. *JSTOR*, <[www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5rdzwc](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv5rdzwc)> [accessed 14 July 2018].

<sup>37</sup> Although largely ignored in the nineteenth century, the poem became established as a forerunner of Romantic attitudes. Wordsworth recognised Marvell as a lyric poet and the influence of stanza LXVI of 'Appleton' can be seen in Wordsworth's preference for the stock-dove song to the nightingale; the delicacy of the description may be why it appealed to Wordsworth.

<sup>38</sup> Simon D. Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy and the Abyss* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), p.6.

animated by a desire for perfection'.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, 'a garden is always a utopian construct, for its creation is predicated on hope – hope that what one has planted will grow and that one's planting will provide nourishment for the soul'.<sup>40</sup> Utopias are necessarily speculative and David Harvey acknowledges that the possibility for change in our current attitudes to nature lies in Marvell's use of the image of 'insurgent architect' as a means of changing ideas and imagination.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, as Diane Kelsey McColley notes, in seventeenth-century England, poets became more sensitive to the actual lives of plants and animals, and as England's landscape was being changed by deforestation, mining, the engineering of waterways and wetlands and the effects of the Civil War, they felt impelled to restore ideas of the land in the style of Virgil's *Georgics* and the Garden of Eden.<sup>42</sup> These imagined places are typically associated in tension with the binaries of city/country and nature/culture, and address political and societal issues.<sup>43</sup> They are undeniably human-centred. However, alternative pastorals exist to attend to, rather than to appropriate, nature for political or unrealistic ends; the garden and estate of Nun Appleton fits in some senses the definition of alternative pastoral as a place of security and sanctuary after the horrors of civil war. Yet, despite the poem's explicit intention of celebrating Fairfax's victory, Marvell also seems to be exploring the lure of a utopian collective in that it might be possible to evolve a different ethic for living. Significantly – in terms of my argument as seen from a creative writing perspective – Marvell does

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<sup>39</sup> Franklin Ginn, 'Book Review' in Annette Glesecke and Naomi Jacobs (eds.), *Earth perfect? Nature, utopia and the garden* (London: Black Dog, 2012), p.1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>41</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), pp.183-185.

<sup>42</sup> Diane Kelsey McColley, *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell* (Aldershot, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), pp.13-14.

<sup>43</sup> John Barrell and John Bull (eds.), *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), p.6.

not present nature as either passive or fragile, or as something that is merely waiting for human intervention:

Art [...] deface[d]  
 what she had so sweetly wasted  
 In fragrant Gardens, shady Woods,  
 Deep Meadows and transparent Floods

(lines 76-80)

These lines constitute a warning, then, to Lord General Thomas Fairfax, to whom the poem was written and whose parliamentary victory had led to the temporary abolition of the monarchy. Nun Appleton is ‘a republic of animate nature’.<sup>44</sup> Marvell's particular garden pastoral imagines several different ways in which the garden may be understood. Paul Alpers argues that the central theme is ‘the human imagination and the home it finds and makes for itself in the world’.<sup>45</sup> So far, so Heidegger, and, as we shall see, Wordsworth. The voice of the poet emerges quite distinctly in this poem, and is markedly different from the figure of the shepherd, who typically narrates in earlier classical forms, being replaced by Marvell’s speaking persona. Furthermore, the poem is remarkable for its close attention to the actual setting; the way it treats the relationship between the human and non-human; and in terms of the specific ecological issues it raises:

Within this sober frame expect  
 Work of no foreign architect  
 That unto caves the quarries drew  
 And forests did to pastures hew

(lines 1-4)

Marvell comments that Fairfax’s house should be ‘sober’ and not subject to ‘foreign’ interventions. He may have been suggesting architectural restraint, to make his reader aware of the cost to nature of building simply to exhibit human pride, contrasting it with animal activity:

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<sup>44</sup> Kelsey McColley, *Poetry and Ecology*, p.14.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.65.

Why should of all things man unrul'd?  
 Such unproportion'd dwellings build  
 The beasts are by their dens express'd  
 All birds contrive an equal nest  
 The low-roof'd tortoises do dwell  
 In cases fit of tortoise shell:  
 No creature loves an empty space  
 Their bodies measure out their place.

(lines 9 - 16)

The image of the tortoise is particularly revealing, as Marvell hints at the importance of proportion in '*Their* [my italics] bodies measure out their place'. He argues for a sensitivity of thought in regard to place and its resources. Marvell sees limitations in the human-centric world, its need for ownership and its destructiveness, and the warning he offers acknowledges that changing attitudes will be hard. For example, even the garden, traditionally a haven of peace and calm, in Fairfax's version is modelled after a 'Figure of a Fort' (v.xxxvi, line 6.) and the morning sun 'Hangs out the Colours of the Day' (v.xxxvii, line 2). In the imagery of war, as Thomas Healy points out, 'Nor do the woods offer a satisfactory refuge'.<sup>46</sup> It seems that Marvell presents his world as at odds with itself as a result of civil conflict. The world he describes is struggling to heal itself from the effects of civil war. More than that, humanity is utterly predicated upon itself; Marvell appears to warn us against seeing nature simply as an extension of human control or power. 'Upon Appleton House' is especially remarkable, then, for its fusion of human lived concerns. It recognises the conflict between old and new ideas and as such the poem prefigures a Romantic recognition of the garden as threshold.

Whilst Marvell's poem constitutes a poetry of attentiveness (the modality in which my own work has been composed), his writing also warns against distorting and distanced attitudes in thinking and writing about nature, for they suggest suppression or concealment. The writer must be

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Healy, *Marvell's use of Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp.72-73.



aware of the precariousness and liminality of both tame and wild nature; in writing about nature, it is, as Fiona Stafford points out, vital to do so with, ‘a spirit of resistance and inner clarity’.<sup>47</sup> In what I would consider to be good writing about nature, an attentiveness to precariousness and liminality is usually in evidence. It perhaps helps to explain why Marvell’s poetry works to fuse the habits of human consumption, ecology and poetry to achieve a ‘science of belonging’.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Marvell presents his version of the topographical landscape poem as a sum of cultural and collective experience, rather than an individual subjective experience.

The collective nature of Marvell’s approach offers helpful creative possibilities in that, beneath the surface adulation, we discover something more objective and categorical: namely, a clarity of voice and organisation of argument that advocates caution and decorum. Although the poem on first reading suggests preservation of the traditional way of life, on closer analysis what emerges from Marvell’s poem is more ambivalent: despite Nun Appleton being, ‘heaven’s centre/ Nature’s lap? And paradise’s only map’, (lines 761 - 778), the whole feeling of the poem seems ironic, as if Paradise is elsewhere. Marvell’s unsettling and shifting focus is an approach that I adapt in my own poem, ‘Pwllpeiran’ where the Georgic view of nature is set alongside views and voices that convey tension, and which suggest that appearance and reality are deliberately at odds with each other.

From my consideration of Marvell’s poem I sensed that it is possible to rework and redefine what seems at first glance to be traditional forms and perspectives of nature. Taking his poem as a prompt or guide, and by exploring and expanding the voices that emerge from various locations,

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<sup>47</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments, The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.8.

<sup>48</sup> Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, Roderick Watson, (ed.), (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), p. 45.

whether sub-rural, urban or rural, I found myself shifting focus to the process of composition through the otherliness that Marvell hints at – from a new awareness of nature’s inaccessibility. This vital alterity became a new agency of composition, and I began to develop a device that I conceptualised in terms of this otherliness. A creative device, otherliness also presents itself as a critical mode of thinking; one that helps to reveal aspects of the non-human world it. As I examined landscapes in my own locale for example, my initial thoughts had been to salvage, then to make present, record and memorialise, and ultimately preserve, this local topography. That notion, however, was soon overtaken when, standing in the landscape, I became acutely aware of a sense of in-between-ness, informed perhaps by Marvell’s ideas. I had felt it before in that part of the matrix of thought and imagination where psychology and topology meet. The sensation seemed to draw up something pre-constructed, and I became aware of the possible disjunctions between landscape and language, and more worryingly, my inclination to resist this in-between state and instead preserve nature, failing in my attempt to work towards nature. As Geoffrey Hill points out in his essay ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’, ‘the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement’.<sup>49</sup> Hill’s technical advice to the poet is to set out to achieve a sense of at-one-ment, to accomplish a bringing of accord or harmony; such an approach seemed to me important, both in initial creative responses to nature, in the gathering of sense data. as well as in drafting a poetic response.

As previously outlined, one of the technical characteristics that emerged was my work’s interest in the fleeting, fractured momentary sense: an interest in the ephemeral set against a wider context of material things and the nexus of human and non-human relationships that is disappearing. I was conscious, too, that this emphasis in my work was redolent of the post-Romantic ‘rural idyll’ – of attempts like Wordsworth’s (theorised in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*)

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<sup>49</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, Kenneth Hayes, (ed.), (Oxford University Press 2000), p.3.

to posit isolated sites where such things and relationships might still remain, though at the same time aware that such reserved forms of nature are prone to nostalgia.<sup>50</sup> Underpinning this realisation was a sense of increasing otherliness – other voices/sensations, all of them alternative to my own – coupled with an awareness that in constructions of idyllic, utopic spaces, the text itself may undergo a process of self-estrangement. In other words, in the physical act of writing, language becomes the object rather than the place. Once again the warnings about the persuasive discursiveness of metaphor ring true as it can also move the writer and reader away from feeling place: instead of being in a landscape, metaphor can make it possible to feel separate from and outside these locations. That is not to suggest that the attempt to move inside, into otherliness, will yield nothing, but rather that through the topic, the challenge, as I see it, is to engage with the place, rather than in a fabulation of what once occurred there.

Negotiating this difficulty is acknowledged in Forrest-Thomson's 'third area' and Foucault has also offered thoughts on how, while living in the modern era, we seem compelled to search for history and this sense of disconnection will undoubtedly affect how we view landscapes. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault describes this estrangement as an 'archival' desire: something distinctly modern. He notes that we treat history 'as a search for the origin'.<sup>51</sup> The importance of Foucault's definition for my own writing is that this 'archival' desire can prompt being distracted by the ways in which landscape is marked by architecture and how past human transformations have shifted the very components of the landscape, prompting nostalgic responses. In an effort to resist such impulses I tried to concentrate on my own immediate responses to landscapes in so-called 'in

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<sup>50</sup> Martin Scofield, (ed), *Wordsworth & Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 2003 ), p.5.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, (trans.), A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p.205.

between areas'.<sup>52</sup> Architectural forms too, can pose a real danger, as Marvell warns in 'Upon Appleton House': architecture can cause quarries and forests to be levelled in pursuit of building resources, as well as being distracting in their own right, particularly if employed in the pursuit of human vanity. It seems, then, that in my exploration of landscape spaces, I am encountering a space that is separate from the ordinary world and yet at the same time intimately connected to it. The challenge, then, is to find a language to reflect that connexion. The dilemmas highlighted by Hill have made me suspicious of putting my poetry into any particular category. I have studiously avoided the term ecopoetry, which I consider too broad to be helpful, and at times diminished by a didactic political agenda that may alienate readers from both poetry and the politics of ecological crisis. In my poetry, I seek to present readers with areas of difficulty, but the tensions that arise reflect my own efforts to locate a language evocative of what I take to be a human need for connection – hence the chorus of voices that emerge from my writing.

The composition of my poem sequences were structured, and disciplined, by a wealth of critical writing on utopias. This body of analysis informed 'Pwllpeiran', particularly in the Hafod sections, which responded to the utopian aspirations of Thomas Johnes and his ambition to create an enterprise that was both social and aesthetic. Other shaping influences are the utopian ideas taken forward by Lefebvre and others, in particular the notion of heterotopia.<sup>53</sup> According to Foucault, heterotopia is based on the desire to create an enclosed area in and on which to impose order. The garden, as Foucault reminds us, is perhaps the oldest example of heterotopic space. He proposes that the heterotypic juxtaposes different real places and locations that, although incompatible with each other, are linked to specific points in time. Henri Lefebvre's definition of

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<sup>52</sup> Diane Glancy: *In-Between Places: Essays*, (Tucson: UAP, 2005) p.77.

<sup>53</sup> Michel Foucault, *of other spaces* L. De Caeter & M. Dehaene, (trans.), in M. Dehaene & L. De Caeter, (eds.), *Heterotopia and the city: Public space in a postcivil society* (London: Routledge 2008) pp. 13–29.

heterotopia, however, is radically different from that of Foucault. Lefebvre argues for heterotopia as a social space of possibility where something different is not only possible but essential for transforming our understanding of space. As David Harvey argues, ‘escape’ underpins Foucault’s account, and by Foucault’s definition the heterotopia is fully functioning when humans find themselves in breach of their own time and where life is experienced differently.<sup>54</sup> Finally, and crucially, the heterotopia has a function that takes place between two opposite poles. On the one hand, it reveals how all space is illusory and all the locations in which life occurs is fragmentary. Conversely, it forms another real space, as perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is disordered. The heterotopia is not an illusion; it is a compensation, transformation or revelation. Key, then, to otherliness is David Harvey’s definition of Foucault’s idea of escape: through a breach in time it might be possible to suspend usual human autonomies and to flip in and out of the binaries of nature and culture, attempting to elide the complexities of both.

Foucault’s idea of a breach in time and its resultant juxtapositions is examined in ‘Pwllpeiran’ where the concept emerges as a disjunctive voice or sometimes voices – a doppelgänger that exists alongside or within the landscape, and is intended to give an unsettling sensation. My own authorial feelings about the landscape are thus intentionally redirected, intending to create tension between landscape, text and the voices of the poem. These voices are deliberately distant, and using Foucault’s idea of a breach in time, take the reader to something that may seem familiar, yet further into the work, the images become much darker. The intention is also to ensure that although the feelings in the poem begin as mine, the poem is not confessional; the views expressed are not exclusive to me. The anxiety that lurks within the poem might, for instance, be that a poem, much like a piece of architecture, communicates something more than an immediate

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<sup>54</sup> David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley and California: University of California Press, 2000), pp.183-85.

visceral or sensory emotion. Such emotional and sensory responses, are examined in ‘Pwllpeiran’ as the poem explores environment less as a resource and more as a place of attentive dwelling. My poem also develops Marvell’s version of ecological writing, as it uses the voices of people who cultivate landscape, who, like the reader, are also set in a shifting, mobile world, to which the reader will bring their own anxieties.

The central conceit of ‘Pwllpeiran’ concerns the creation of landscape as an exploration of energy. The notion of ‘dwelling’ (the eighteenth century being rigidly materialist) is considered, and the characters who inhabit the poem experience the same landscape from different perspectives; Johnes himself, and the landscape architects Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price. Reflecting as well as extending key eighteenth-century ideas of enlightenment, Hafod’s creation was approached through both science and art. The enlightenment tenet that wild nature should be controlled, though could also offer an ideal way of thinking and living. Responding to the idea that Johnes viewed nature as a tutelary guide, the characters are caught up the garden and the landscape beyond and are, for different reasons, unable to move on. In Heideggerian fashion, the voices in the poem stand in the site and become open and attentive to its possibilities and ecologies.<sup>55</sup> ‘Pwllpeiran’ explores the process by which as humans we negotiate our imagination and the realities of nature, arguing that sensory responses can move us beyond physical boundaries, the metaphorical movement of the environment being conditioned by our preconceptions and moods. To illustrate this point, at the beginning of the poem Johnes is aware of himself and others in the landscape:

pine

resin

evening

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<sup>55</sup> Heidegger was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party from 1934 until it disintegrated in 1945, which is obviously problematic in terms of his influence on ecopoetics.

clouds

pinpricks of light soft

sleeves

rolled back

sap and water that speaks

what is the summer season?

shadows of woodlands and a running brook

what is summer?

borders of sleeplessness high sun

a season?

scent clustered in spinneys

gathered in voices sifted through fog

(lines 1-15)

The voice in the poem senses the past rising up and that the landscape will have been perceived, experienced and interpreted by others in the past. The tone of anxiety alerts the reader to the danger of the picturesque. As if in recognition that other voices haunt the place, it observes,

farmers children shepherds gardeners women miners robin kite chaffinch fox moth butterfly

(line 18)

The poem sets up these dynamics to suggest that, as humans, although in our nostalgic retreat to relocate ourselves in utopic or Arcadian landscapes to find hidden spaces, it is possible to skew these projections and evince strangeness, and so resist the desire, to romanticise by eschewing the visual, by listening in instead. My poem returns at this point to creative prompts from Marvell's 'Nun Appleton' and its ideas of broken enclosures and destruction with the voice of Johnes, who is heard considering seeds, 'rain etched pollen and the setting on of seeds voices of the forest' (line 16). Thus the poem's progressive, though somewhat conflicted, central voice is aware of the necessity of moving away from a view of the world as an inexhaustible resource or as something to be contained or controlled. Here Forrest-Thompson's notion of the relationship of the perceiver and the perceived becomes helpful, in that the voice of Johnes shifts and acknowledges that his utopia depends on the seed itself. The physical environment becomes a linguistic one: language is nature and vice versa. The intention is that Johnes is conscious of how the weather exists as a dialectical pull between his plans for planting and building, deliberately holding spaces within the form of the poem to remind the reader to think of the landscape as a text to contemplate, just as Johnes does his next move.

Throughout the poem there is movement, an intertwining, between the various boundaries of voice as well as in the transitory nature of Johnes' aspirations:

A foreign country blotted and kissed with sea-salt and floating distances of blue trimmed hills

(line 19)

As a maker of buildings and managed landscape, his eye is drawn to the horizon that he has made; the vastness of the landscape suggests his control over nature is dismissed, albeit temporarily. The opening move of the poem is one that places the view of humanity as de-centred and develops into something more demanding, 'reminders of stone lock out light...' and the light not real or new, but



‘congeal[ed]’ (line 34), as if decaying. My ambition here is to immerse the reader. As Denise Riley suggests, allow ‘A speaker’ to ‘imagine herself threaded through by language, as if a ribbon were pierced with eyelets; she might feel herself gathered and folded, drawn up in pleats by words.’ This drawing in is combined with choking sense ‘pieced not plotted’ (line 43) - via the plosives - to suggest something darker and more sinister about nature. The intention is to draw attention to what may have always been there, but never seen before. The implied vigour and energy of the landscape’s own associative and assertive diction inclines towards a response that is not entirely focused on the self, but endeavours to re-engage or attend to something other than ourselves. The fluidity of my approach in ‘Pwllpeiran’ is presented where house and garden thread through – and are threaded through – with the contested views of the environment occurring in Johnes’ perception; ones that ‘can enfold dust and air’ to make ‘strawberry and husk’, and where the human and non-human are held as in ‘peering into the garden [...] the indifference of lilac overhead and moss underfoot’ (lines 336-337). The surprise comes in nature’s indifference and the uncertainty of the world that we think of as being outside, coming in. This unnerving surprise is the Möbius concept at work. For a reader, it is an imaginative push to move within the interior of the poem itself; also reflecting on the indifference of the ‘lilac overhead’ and the ‘moss underfoot’ that have no sense of their collective beauty. Such a move develops the fragmenting lines and voices of earlier parts of the collection, and is a key development in the construction of my poetics. This technique of juxtaposition does in some sense reflect the Heideggerian sense of being, in that it opens itself up to other voices, but this is the first intimation of breaking down the objective observer stance.

Whilst from a pastoral angle, shepherds may be seen in Marvell’s poem as extensions of a supremely managed landscapes, ‘Pwllpeiran’ does not attempt to gloss over the dispossession of other individuals who work the land; they are not elided from the landscape and their voices are likewise heard, deserving of attention as the non-human, and their conflicts weave themselves

through the ideals of Johnes' arcadia, though he too resists the sentimental view of the landscape offered by Poussin's picturesque; as in, 'when tools are broken, he mends them unless unserviceable' (line 219). The underlying hint of the sentimental - 'teacups for conversation - the garden diary laid out to plan the day's transplanting...' (line 334), echoes Morton's playful advice about kitsch. The increasingly difficult relationship between human and natural, and the nostalgic view of rural retreat that lay at the heart of the Renaissance pastoral, which was beginning to surface in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, becomes a lived anxiety in 'Pwllpeiran' and is used to imbue it with a sense of transience and the ambiguities and compromises inherent in the choices we make about how we respond to nature. In order for both to flourish, there must be balance.

Although Johnes figures throughout the poem, the third person is used at intervals as a device to extend sympathy and insist on a necessary detachment from the other human characters in the landscape. His voice is not a central nor defining voice. There are other voices in the poem that seem to inhabit the pastoral mode that sentimentalises rural life, though as we have seen with Marvell and with Morton's suggestions about kitsch, something more ironic can lurk beneath the surface, acting as a go-between for these two conflicting attitudes to the eighteenth-century landscape and of course, in the present time as there are more contemporary voices that intrude, disrupting the picturesque view. The poem moves forward in time to the First World War and works to police the borders of sentimentality and otherliness, acting as a reminder of Marvell's possible warning against overly 'anthropocentric architecture' at Nun Appleton.<sup>56</sup> The intrusion of this voice into the soundscape of the poem makes the poem seem disordered; this otherliness does not mean utopia. The oscillation between voices is more about encounter and less about stopping to regard. To hint at the danger of stopping to look at the landscape, I explore Johnes as someone who was

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<sup>56</sup> A.D. Cousins, 'Marvell's Re-Imagining of Anthropocentric Architecture in "Upon Appleton House"', *Marvell Studies* Vol.1 No.1 Spring 2016, pp.12-30. <[papertiy.org/.../marvells-re-imagining-of-anthropocentric-architecture-in-upon-appleton](http://papertiy.org/.../marvells-re-imagining-of-anthropocentric-architecture-in-upon-appleton)> [accessed June 2018].

haunted by the loss of bygone pastoral images – a presentation that simultaneously contains and acknowledges the fact that such scenes never really existed. His voice also wants to acknowledge a deeper web of relationships between humans and nature, knowing the dangers implicit in the picturesque view of nature. Johnes and indeed all the voices throughout the poem try to resist the sentimental pastoral idyll and ideas of Arcadia, weaving a more social view of the natural world. The shift to more prose-like form from time to time reflects my attempt to reposition the debate: the search for the contingent is not always easy, of course; the voices in the poem are searching for more self-reflexive language by allowing, acknowledging and witnessing their own thoughts. In developing this approach, I found Gary Snyder's insights particularly helpful:

language is a form of energy trap and that particular kinds of communications ... tiny energies in precise forms released at the right moment amount to energy transfers that are much larger than their size would indicate, which is what poems are, from an ecological energy-systems man's point of view.<sup>57</sup>

The energy emerges in the synthesis of archaic and contemporary elements: 'where hath been digging for Leade, the smelting whereof hath destroyed the woodes that sometimes grew plentiful thereabout' (lines 110-111). John Leyland writing in 1535, foreshadows different forms of destruction as in; 'the ice-cream van left behind a trail of half eaten cones' (line 86). This deliberately produces a dystopia-utopia that bleeds into language, not merely to lend an atmosphere, but to unsettle the text from its eighteenth-century discourse. The tourists hover between worlds and words; their own and others', both in the past and in the future.

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<sup>57</sup> Lee Bartlett 'Interview: Gary Snyder', *California Quarterly* 9 (1975), pp.43-60, quotation p. 48, cited in Allan Johnston, 'Ecology and Aesthetics: Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.2 (Summer 2001), pp.13-38, p.17.

In order further to adjust the lens and avoid an unconvincing simulacra of rural life through what might be termed over-literariness, I turned – reading though Timothy Morton’s insights – to John Clare’s poems ‘To the Snipe’ and ‘Sand Martin’, works that assume both the stance of self-reflexive observer and also acknowledge the importance of closely observing nature; the voices in ‘Pwllpeiran’ have something of John Clare’s sensitive persona.<sup>58</sup> Both Clare’s poems address the respective birds directly and ‘To the Snipe’ is a meditation on place: the bird is referred to in relation to its habitat as ‘a lover of swamps’ (line 1). Clare’s poems conjure a desire to be present in the world of the creatures he writes about. Prompted by Clare, the voice in my writing shifts between empirical detail (‘a farm a swallow’) to abstract detail (‘Moonlight and old seas breathed silver through these cracks and folded rocks’ (line 246)). These are expressions of longing to belong and to dwell, and are significantly unlike Clare’s snipe, which is perfectly suited to its habitat, in its capacity for ‘thriving on seams’ (line 14), and its ‘bill’ being ‘suited by wisdom good’ (line 19), to ‘delve and drill’ (line 19) for food.

As we have seen in the earlier comparison with the opening of ‘Nun Appleton’, ‘Pwllpeiran’ continues Marvell’s questioning aesthetic, deploys Morton’s technique of juxtaposition and Clare’s concerns about the relationship between man and nature. The voices that weave themselves throughout the poem are intended to achieve a disembodied sense of place-swapping, and represent an attempt to prise away at any superficial witnessing of Arcadian vision through experimenting with different personae and voices. These vocalisations might be from the eighteenth century, but they merge with other voices found in and around modern Pwllpeiran. As my poem progresses, the reader encounters different voices that, as Christian Elling puts it, ‘shift from one place to another

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<sup>58</sup> John Clare, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, (London: Methuen, 1986), p.109 -138.

entail[ing] a spiritual expansion and surrender to a new kind of mood'.<sup>59</sup> In the eighteenth century pastoral there was an expectation that the wanderer would know what s/he was supposed to feel and how to focus her/his feelings in response to the various elements of the garden. This oscillating conceit is used in 'Pwllpeiran' to move the reader back and forth through the landscape and each character's view of the same place, but also through time. Taking advantage of this loosening allows other voices from other contingencies to emerge. The poetry of place in 'Pwllpeiran' suggests through its employment of otherliness something more uneasy, something ragged, more likely to ingress, a sense that points to or suggests a state of being rather than a state of activity, the resultant unease chimes with the relationship between an individual and a particular spot in time. The poem reflects this dialectic via the change in poetic perspective and tone as other voices are heard. Some are contemporary and the intention was to suppress the picturesque, and put a different spin on Elling's spiritual mood. The contrasting images and shift from past to present move the poem away from a surfeit of nostalgia to a modern concern with the long-term effects of managed landscapes by juxtaposing the pastoral idyll with the potential pernicious effects of modern land management.<sup>60</sup> In response, 'Pwllpeiran' seeks to invite imaginative responses to the empirical views that held sway in the eighteenth century, equally prompting the modern reader to consider their own concepts of value when it comes to land and agriculture and their own sense of dwelling.

It is evident, therefore, that in teasing out interiority and fluidity of language and form, the exchange between the human and the non-human and in the crossover between constructs and representations of nature, whilst there is resistance, there is also reciprocity. Certain images recur in rhetorical manoeuvres in the poem; light, water and buildings are forms of apostrophe. This, and the

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<sup>59</sup> Christian Elling, *den romantiske have*, Copenhagen, 1979, p. 48, quoted in Horace Walpole, *On Modern Gardening in Anecdotes of Painting in England*. <[www.ub.uit.no/baser/septentrio/index.php/nordlit/article/download/2202/2054](http://www.ub.uit.no/baser/septentrio/index.php/nordlit/article/download/2202/2054) [accessed May 2017].

<sup>60</sup> [www.wildculture.com/article/george-monbiot-feral-sheep/1211](http://www.wildculture.com/article/george-monbiot-feral-sheep/1211) [accessed May 2017].

use of pronouns, has a somewhat coercive effect and tends to restrict the tone by introducing a set of relationships that is suggestive of a damaging hierarchy. In 'Pwllpeiran' the I finally disappears when a voice records that the man who managed the landscape is now (perhaps) 'an owl [that] works the now silvered hedgerows' (line 397). The note-like structure of the poem hinted at in the beginning reappears, leaving nature as the only thing that remains.

## Chapter Two: The Coordinates of Dwelling

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The World becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated...  
T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', *Four Quartets*

Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling.

John Burnside, *The Asylum Dance*

'There's definitely personal experience that goes into a poem, but the 'I' of my poems is never me. The really important thing is to get away from being a person.'<sup>61</sup>

My own eco-poetic agenda has been shaped by an ongoing dialogue with the conceptual 'wholeness' of Alice Oswald's writing (whom I discuss in a subsequent chapter), which in turn has received inflections from the tangled abstractions of John Burnside's work, to develop an exploration of 'otherliness'.<sup>62</sup> Unlike Oswald, I do not live all my time in the countryside; indeed, in its most recent phase, my poetry shares affinities with the subject matter employed by Burnside, namely reflections on the tone and significance of life in a semi-suburban landscape. Consequently, domestic detail rubs against the forms of nature that have earthed and unearthed themselves in the urban landscapes that constitute my local vicinities. Continuing the creative inflections from Marvell, I look at how Burnside's poetry informs and develops utopian ideas and anxieties in my writing.

Burnside has attained status as a major poet currently exploring fundamental spiritual and ecological issues about the nature of dwelling on earth. His work is characterised by a visceral

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Volsik, 'Somewhere between the Presbyterian and the Tao' (Kathleen Jamie): Contemporary Scottish poetry, *Études anglaises*, vol. 60, no. 3 (2007), p.24.

<sup>62</sup> Lucinda Jarrett, (ed.), *Engagement in Palliative Care: New Perspectives on User Involvement*, (Oxford: Radcliffe Publishing, 2007) p.153

combination of deep craft and guesswork that produces philosophically and emotionally dense poetry. For Burnside, poetry is ‘both the account of, and the map by which I navigate my path on this journey and, as such, is an ecological discipline of the richest and subtlest kind’.<sup>63</sup>

Burnside’s keen eye for detail that so often sums up the everyday is also foregrounded within metaphysical conceits, and as Jem Poster observes, ‘sensitively registers both the gravitational pull of the mundane and the attractions of the obscure immensities he [Burnside] succinctly characterises as ‘otherlife’.<sup>64</sup> It is this metaphysical concern with the ‘otherlife’, suggesting other ways of being where there are glimpses of solitary perceptions, that has helped in the shaping of the group of poems, ‘Wan Under Wolcan’. These poems are an attempt to investigate the liminal or private realm, suggesting that order and stability are illusory. The poems are also an account of the provisional and transformative and are underpinned by an idea of home.

Burnside’s poems are full of glimpsed presences. His language, too, is always placed somewhere between the concrete and the abstract. It is as if Burnside sees a poem as a means of moving between these two opposites, where ‘the lyrical impulse begins at the point of self-forgetting.’<sup>65</sup> The significance of Burnside’s poetry for my own writing lies in his experimentation not only with ideas of dwelling, but how he realises these ideas through his particular use of form and language. The poetic form in Burnside’s writing seems initially quite arbitrary where momentary flashes of light makes it possible to reflect on abstractions. This double movement, as it

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<sup>63</sup> W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, (eds.) *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p.260.

<sup>64</sup> Jem Poster Review: *Selected Poems* by John Burnside/Books/Guardian <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/apr/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview22>> [accessed 12 May 2018].

<sup>65</sup> W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, (eds.), *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p.260.



were, creates a strange sense of doors that open and close onto something else, a sense of estrangement in Burnside's lyric, an enriched interpretation of Heidegger's meditation in *Poetry, Language and Thought* (1971). Heidegger invokes poetry as an ideal form of building and dwelling, suggesting that 'cultivating and caring are a kind of building'.<sup>66</sup> The concept and the act of building are explored in various ways in his complex and self-complicating text, but central to my understanding of Heidegger's argument (and Burnside's uses of poetry) is his emphasis on the selection and crafting of specific combinations of words in poetry as in itself a kind of tending – a curatorial act that enables a writer to deploy words in the right way. Heidegger observes:

The thingly character that all works of art have [...] is like the substructure, into which and upon which the other authentic element is built. And is it not this thingly feature in the work that the artist really makes by his handicraft?<sup>67</sup>

'The thingly character' or 'substructure' represents for Heidegger the poet's intuitive response to nature that (re)appears in the subtle, underlying patterns of form, and is also apparent in the ways in which language can make the writer more alert to nature, its cyclical patterns and repetitions. At the heart of Heidegger's concept of dwelling and 'thingy-liness' is his sense that the poet should identify and calibrate a language that can locate and record the atmospheres and tonal variations of nature that go beyond mere descriptive representation. Responding to and developing Heidegger's definition, and embedded in the term 'dwelling' is the notion that the etymology of the word  *dwell*  in Old English means precisely 'to lead astray'.<sup>68</sup> Such a definition seems contrary to the idea of permanence: it implies getting lost, even being abandoned. Implicit too in its definition is the sense

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, Albert Hofstadter, (trans.), (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p.213.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Heidegger, *Poetry Language and Thought*, p. 20.

<sup>68</sup> 'Dwell' in *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble, (eds.), 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.439.

of borders, of going beyond a line, beyond the familiar. If we are to explore and go beyond the boundaries of the everyday, we must find a means of going beyond the dwelling place.

The sense of repeated transgressions, of moving back and forth over margins of thought and experience is a preoccupation of Burnside's. In my own creative practice (responding to both Heidegger and Burnside), the idea of crossing into the less nostalgic or more unfamiliar borders of nature occurs as a process of posing questions to myself, my intention being to pinpoint a language capable of representing and exploring eerie and shadowy aspects of nature – an otherliness conceived as a counterpart to Heidegger's notion of a thingly-ness of nature. My reading of Heidegger's sense of 'at-homeness' is of that state of *being* in the natural world.<sup>69</sup> It is, as Kathleen Jamie contends in *Sightlines*, existing 'where the human and the nonhuman brim together is to find yourself in a place where all the distracting world is banned'.<sup>70</sup> From this post-Romantic positioning, it might be possible to draw together the demands of the imagination and the technicity of the modern world.

The making of a poem, particularly one that summons borders and nature whilst bringing things into space, means that space becomes a locus of transformation; as Burnside points out in *Poetry and Sense of Place*, a boundary is 'neither one place nor another.'<sup>71</sup> However, poems of place are not simply poems *about* places. Sten Moslund's argument is helpful here: he suggests that 'a topo poetic reading examines how physical dimensions (such as topography, horizontality, verticality, earth, wind, water, light, vegetation density or scarcity of matter) and elements fill out

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<sup>69</sup> Magda King, *A Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2001), p.96.

<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Jamie, *Sightlines* (London: Sort of Books, 2012), p.193.

<sup>71</sup> John Burnside, *Poetry and A Sense of Place*. Available at:<http://www.hu.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html>.

the work through its language'.<sup>72</sup> The poet must experiment and reconnect language with an embodied experience of the thing-world. As Greg Garrard points out, the challenge is 'to keep one eye on the ways in which nature is culturally constructed and on the other hand, the nature that really exists'.<sup>73</sup> The challenge for any writer is to avoid accusations of literary artifice and literal reference, as suggested most notably in Dana Philips's *The Truth of Ecology* (2003) and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007). Writing about nature is fraught with danger; both Philips and Morton warn against 'eco mimeticism'.<sup>74</sup> In setting out to write about, nature, there is always a risk that nature ends up being used a means of metaphoric construction for representing something, despite our good intentions to reconnect with the sublime. Moslund argues for moving from a mode of representation to presentation: words are no longer symbols, standing for something, but instead call forth the presence of sensations. Acknowledging Buell's insights that such commentators as Philips and Morton 'tend to work from a reductive model of mimesis', Garrard offers help to prospective writers.<sup>75</sup> He advises the use of terms such as 'shaping', 'elaboration' or 'inflection' to conceptualise and describe the complicated exchanges and developments between nature and culture, and between real or imagined versions of nature. Similarly, in warning against historicising nature, Buell offers advice in his discussion of 'The World, the Text and the Ecocritic' in *The Future*

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<sup>72</sup> R.T. Tally, (ed.), *Presenting of Place in Literature: Toward an Embodied Topopoetic Mode Of Reading; Geocritical Explorations* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), p.30.

<sup>73</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p.29.

<sup>74</sup> Timothy Morton argues in *Ecology without Nature* that the modern idea of nature is, in large part, a product of the Romantic reaction to the despoliation wrought by European capitalism from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. This idea, he argues, still has a hold over us – as evidenced by that widespread genre of writing, visual art and sculpture he calls 'ecomimetic'. Historicizing this form of poetics permits the politicization of environmental art and its 'ecomimesis', or authenticating evocation of the author's environment, such that the experience of its phenomena becomes present for and shared with the audience. See Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.32.

<sup>75</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), p.32.

of *Environmental Criticism* where he defends ‘mutual construction’.<sup>76</sup> His advice might be distilled into a willingness to keep the duality between nature and culture in mind, and to attempt to reconcile warnings about representing nature by acknowledging that humans apprehend the world in registers that have been highly prescribed and as such we are always prisoners of our own histories of thought and practice. Burnside’s strength as a poet is that by grounding his attentiveness to ‘specific textures of our experience of the world’, through calm and poised writing, he navigates through ‘our own preconceived and received understanding of nature and to comprehend non-human perspectives.’<sup>77</sup> Burnside moves his reader towards what Charles Bainbridge accurately describes as a series of ‘fragile arrivals.’<sup>78</sup>

My own writing fits into the neo-lyric of Burnside’s attentive mode of writing by using a number of voices that first emerged in the writing of ‘Pwllpeiran’. The voices that appear in this work and in ‘Wan under Wolcan’ are a response to Burnside, in that the poems that form this part of the collection are concerned with thinning out subject matter and removing the constraints of metrical choices in an attempt to move across boundaries of feeling and language. The voices in the writing continue the exploration of the latticing effect of relationships and dependencies on landscape as home and the sense of a home self as textural features.

In a 2012 essay for the *London Review of Books*, Burnside describes being lost in the Arctic tundra after having strayed from the marked course:

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, pp.29-61.

<sup>77</sup> Jonathan Bate, ‘Eco Laurels’ *The Guardian* November 23 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/23/featuresreviews.guardianreview8>> [accessed 29 April 2018].

<sup>78</sup> Charles Bainbridge, *The Shape of the Wind: review of the Good Neighbour by John Burnside*, in *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jul/09/featuresreviews.guardianreview26> [accessed April 2017].

At the time, however, my first recognisable emotion was a quiet sense of actually being *in* the world, a thread of its fabric, stupid and vulnerable perhaps, but alive and more alert than I had been in a long time. Certainly, I felt more real than I ever felt at home. I was a lost creature, happily coming to his senses, even though I was in a place that I didn't understand in the least and into which I might, quite literally, disappear.<sup>79</sup>

Burnside's fascination with disappearing, with being in the still centre of the moment, is a recurring theme in his writing. His apparent aim is to revoke, as it were, his material self by succumbing to his vulnerability and weakness. The implicit 'he' of Burnside's writing disappears. For Burnside, the condition 'going astray' means acknowledging that despite being 'stupid and vulnerable', perhaps he was in fact 'more alive and alert than [he] had been in a long time'. (2012) Burnside's explanation, 'stupid', might suggest that he was dazed and unable to think clearly, altering his sense of navigation and orientation whilst being lost. The duality of being lost and immersing himself in disorientation becomes the means by which Burnside unlocks the hidden and the visible. His exploration of borders brings with it an irremediable fragmentation of the I and a relaxing of traditional poetic strategies. As he says himself, he wants to 'replace the idea of duality, which suggests two separate things, with the idea of the binary, where the two things complement each other.'<sup>80</sup> Fiona Sampson expands on Burnside's observation to suggest that he sees the 'material world and the world of thought as two sides of the most fragile membranes'.<sup>81</sup> As Diana Whitney comments, 'Unconcerned with cleverness, he lets himself be vulnerable'.<sup>82</sup> Burnside acknowledges Heidegger's concern that modernity and technology made dwelling more difficult and threatened

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<sup>79</sup> John Burnside, 'Alone: Lost in the Tundra', *London Review of Books*, 9 February 2012.

<sup>80</sup> Attila Dosa, 'Poets and Other animals: an interview with John Burnside' *Scottish Studies Review*. Vol.4. no 1 Spring 2003, p.12.

<sup>81</sup> Fiona Sampson, 'Twilight Zone: Fiona Sampson on John Burnside's double life', *New Statesman*, 15 February 2017 <<https://www.newstateman.com/.../twilight-zone-fiona-sampson-john-burnsides-double>> [accessed May 17 2018].

<sup>82</sup> Diana Whitney <<https://www.sfgate.com/.../Poetry-John-Burnside-Jane-Hirshfield-Rebecca-6401935.p>> [accessed May 17 2018]

human life with inauthenticity.<sup>83</sup> In *The Asylum Dance* (2000), Burnside explores this anxiety and what it is like to navigate the hidden and the visible.

Burnside's outlined his approach to lyric and place in an essay that develops the paradox of being lost by linking it to notions of the particular and universal:

It may be a very idiosyncratic and personal view, but I would maintain that the purpose of the lyric is to stop time, by somehow conveying the timelessness of the chosen place: paradoxically, this attempt to break the flow of time is achieved by focusing very specifically on the moment (i.e. on transience, which is the space in which linear time disappears).<sup>84</sup>

His emphasis here lies with the personal experience of time: stepping into a breach in time, so to speak, and disappearing. Burnside argues that by being solitary, standing on the threshold or focusing on liminal moment, becoming self-forgetful, allows him to push away from the regular social order. Similarly, Seamus Heaney talks of his realisation that 'the one simple requirement – definition even – of lyric writing is self-forgetfulness.'<sup>85</sup> The grounding terms of self-forgetfulness, which it is possible to interpret as representing one facet of the condition of being lost, reflect the use of liminality and in-between-ness that Burnside expresses as being able to get away from being a person:

The spaces between the self and the other where everything takes place have long been a source of fascination for poets and myth-makers. [...] a boundary that is neither one place nor another.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

<sup>84</sup> John Burnside, 'Poetry and a Sense of Place', *Nordlit* 1 (1997), pp.201-22. <<http://www.hum.uit.no/nordlit/1/burnside.html>> [accessed 21 May 2016].

<sup>85</sup> Seamus Heaney, quoted in Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux: Faber, 2008), p.88.

<sup>86</sup> John Burnside, 'Poetry and a Sense of Place', *Nordlit* (1996) < <https://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/article/view/2208>> [accessed May 2016].

To find oneself at such boundaries has meant, in the development of my own poetics, that of being in the landscape, confronting its alterity, but at the same time looking for ways to make the landscape mentally habitable whilst always sceptical of the nostalgic affinities celebrated by post-Romantic writers such as Robert Macfarlane. Rather, my practice seeks to uncover and recover the livingness of nature. For Burnside, the ‘moments when we can disappear’ leave us ‘susceptible to change’, representing the point ‘where being is raw’.<sup>87</sup> Creatively, these moments are, Burnside contends, metaphysically empty, but also contingent and stochastic spaces in which anything can happen. Burnside is most at home in places where he is *least* at home.

There is a temptation to read Burnside in ways that move between affirmation and negation. In my reading, I sense that for his speakers and fictive personae, the act of inhabiting the space of the poem frequently appears to be a temporary undertaking. The voice seems suspended, as in;

	He'd walked less than a mile
when	
settled upon its haunches	as if it had recently
stopped to rest	
he found a carcass: one of those feral	
cattle that wander the dunes	a long-forgotten
ghost of husbandry	
(‘The Asylum Dance’, lines 101-109)	

The landscape of the poem is strange and disturbing; a place of loss becomes one of findings and a good example of the syncretic at work in the poem. This impression of interlacing experience is considered and presented as a discrete manifestation of pain in my poem ‘Blueprint’:

thoughts alight in trees

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Burnside, ‘Poetry and a Sense of Place’.

swings the flat earth round

keeping a handful of you  
airtight

but here  
where the light is aluminium silver

or here  
in the autopsy of my hand  
(‘Blueprint’ lines 7-14)

‘Blueprint’ is a poem that explores grief as an expression of ‘in between ness’. The poem takes as its prompt the scattering of my brother’s ashes in a landscape we had known as children. The poem begins at the edge of worlds, allowing several identities to exist simultaneously, as adults and as children. The voice of the poem moves back and forth across invisible boundaries, not necessarily stopping in the contingency between loss and its aftermath, but trying to probe into the realisation of the point of change, as in, ‘or here in the autopsy of my hand’, (‘Blueprint’ line 14): there is a hope conditioned by experience and social expectation that loss will in time generate growth, but the tone and abruptness of the poem suggests that renewal is not a given certainty. Trees and the sky become listening posts or co-ordinates that help the voice to navigate memory and somehow stitch itself to the landscape. The poem concludes with the Blakeian idea of sensing all that is invisible. This poetic gesture of listening in, honed in connection with Burnside, is also found in Alice Oswald. In her introduction to *Thunder Mutters*, for example, Oswald writes that working outside in the garden allows ‘you to *hear* right into the non-human word ... as if you and the trees had found a meeting point.’<sup>88</sup> Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s term ‘poematic’, which describes a phase-state in which the poem is both self-protecting and vulnerable, ‘the poetics of withdrawal’, I

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<sup>88</sup> Kate Kellaway, ‘Into the Woods’, *The Observer*, 19 June 2005 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jun/19/poetry.features>> [accessed January 2018]



(like Burnside) enjoy the paradox of losing home in order to find it.<sup>89</sup> Particularly helpful in crafting is the idea of the vulnerability of the poem, as it suggests its ongoing evolution. The absence of formal structures in ‘Blueprint’ is intended to prevent the poem being constrained, and the blank spaces are used to confront the mysterious, with a sense that by closing in on the fading sense of memory and of self, the response is not of being small or insignificant, but perhaps being part of some rich and complex narrative of encounter.

As poet-traveller, Burnside’s encounters are studies in what being lost means as an essential definition of what it means to dwell. The way in which Burnside resists the nostalgic Romantic I that so troubles Philips and Morton is through his unsettling use of place, and, by means of encounters, the fictive personae shifts and seems to grapple with where they are, suggesting that his poems might at any moment head off in different directions, into different substances, organisms, places and times, as so often occurs in the fragmented structures of Burnside’s poetry, and in the following moment from his poem ‘Ports’:

or one of those

underwater shapes we sometimes glimpse  
 through hairweed and clouded sand  
   a shifting form  
 that catches the eye for moment  
 then disappears. (‘Ports’, lines 190-95)<sup>90</sup>

Here Burnside reminds us to look. If we do, we will see things we have not seen before, but that were always there. Encounters with other creatures are the subject of the following poem. ‘In Wan under Wolcan’, seeing swans on a river in the winter whilst driving home from work, informs the

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<sup>89</sup> Scott Brewster, “John Burnside: Poetry as the Space of Withdrawal”, in *Poetry and Geography, Space and Place in Post-war Poetry*, Neal Alexander and David Cooper (eds.), (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp.178-89.

<sup>90</sup> John Burnside, *The Ayslum Dance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p.7.

poem, acknowledging both the unexpected and the importance of ‘paying heed’ that Kathleen Jamie describes in *Findings* (2005), attending to ‘the care and maintenance of our web of noticing’.<sup>91</sup>

sceaduhelma gesceapu scridan  
cwóman wan under wolcnan

Beowulf ll

642 -51

it happens every time

waters swell  
recede

swans – absurd and sentimental –  
slow down winter water’s mirk  
splashed flecked  
black-legged spirals of light with well-oiled sails  
like the mind’s intended space they find new water

through the pulp of twilight  
i saw them  
a sprinkling of salt

the white had made them

(‘Wan Under Wolcnum’, lines1-16)

The poem responds to the importance of sensing nature and the unexpected assertion of the beauty and mystery that can occur in the commonplace. The quotation that opens the poem is from *Beowulf*, and roughly translates as ‘stealthy night shapes came stealing forth under cloud-murk’.<sup>92</sup> The deliberate disorientation begins the sense of going astray because the language is unfamiliar, but also hits at something, being as it were, translated; a border is established and from here an unfamiliar side emerges: nature. The poem argues for immersion in the moment of encounter, with

<sup>91</sup> Kathleen Jamie, *Findings* (London: Sort of Books, 2005), p.109.

<sup>92</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf*, (London: Faber& Faber 1999) (lines 646-651).

the swans acting as a link between the human and non-human worlds, to erase and reinstate our sense of interconnection, but also to suggest that it is possible to find the unexpected amongst the discarded plastic bags, and not to ask questions but to become involved in the world of the encounter. Perhaps because of the twilight, the swans emerged out of the gloom and so the setting became liminal where I felt something primal: less of what I thought and more of what I felt physically as an animal in the world. Consequently, an alternative perspective opens up by the reader being invited to wonder whether there are strict delineations between human and non-human. The poem is certainly not about oneness with nature, but rather asks the reader to question their own ways of seeing and being in relation to others. Whilst the poem is an analogy, and the need to draw analogies does seem to be hardwired into our cognitive processes, nonetheless it contains energies and a responsible desire to transfer that energy into something living and reflective of a richer potential that can lead to a re-ordering of priorities. The poem operates via a creative association of past and present, misprision and the incorporation of an unexpected alignment with the other, which, with careful attention to something that is radically other, allows us to see by means of insignificant detail into the fabric of the world (ideas that will be discussed in a subsequent chapter on William Wordsworth).

Such encounters with the non-human/animal highlight the creative possibilities of exploring the borders of the human and non-human. Burnside reflects that;

As human creatures, unable to bear very much reality, we feel wonder, awe and panic when space opens up for a moment and, in meeting with an animal [...] we see into the fabric of the world itself; a vision that both affirms the continuity of that world and leaves us doubtful of our own place in it, other than as creatures to be transformed into new lives, new forms.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> John Burnside 'Mind the Gap: On Reading American Poetry', *Poetry Review*, 96.3 (2006), pp. 56-57.

So, these animal encounters offer an opportunity to view the world in terms of interconnectedness and potentiality that may also be defined in terms of points of arrival and departure and is deliberately unsettling. It is perhaps how Burnside resists the dangers of control and artifice by allowing the reader to enter the poem through the small-scale and details, and thus into his definition of dwelling and adherence to Heideggerian dwelling or ‘letting be’.<sup>94</sup> Burnside defines this sense of dwelling still further by engaging the reader, decentring both the I of the poem and the reader in solitude and silence through an unsettling sensory immersion in a wider nature in a leap from our dwelling place, which sets the theme of ‘Ports’ as ‘the handful of birds and plants we know by name’ (line13). The use of small-scale details helps to develop a sense of the particular, and challenges the view of science, or the ‘objective view from nowhere’: that the omnipotent, god-like view is the one established as the universal, but curiously is known to no-one.<sup>95</sup>

Burnside's attention to detail and the value of the mysterious informs my poem ‘Blank Five’. The poem acknowledges Jonathan Bate’s observation that, ‘The business of literature is to work on consciousness and the practical consequences of that work – social, environmental, political in the broadest sense – cannot be controlled or predicted. They [the poems] will be surprising, haphazard, indirect, and long-term’.<sup>96</sup> ‘Blank Five’ positions itself alongside Lawrence Buell’s definition of an environmental poem:<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> This concept suggests that freedom is essentially related to truth, and truth is seen as the opening in which this relating is possible and occurs. In order for there to be truth, there must be this freedom relating to beings, or a letting-beings-be. See *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*, (eds.), Francois Raffoul, Eric S. Nelson (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.438.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>96</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 23.

<sup>97</sup> 1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; 2) the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; 3) human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation; and 4) some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is implicit in the text.

'the rain' you said 'of a day of a night of a day will wash an orange eye into green grass'

you were right; flowers a bleed of copper

half transparent in the sunlight swim thin as fish

unfurling under thin walls of water; snail shells;

wraith-like under trees;

between blades of grey green grass moss  
a mechanical bird;

hops;

listens;

hops...

chrome green sap torn from hazel and from thorn stares out through the starting rain

white orange tipped like scorched fern

a butterfly

straggles;

bobs;

zig - zags...

if it settles;  
you will stay;

it does not

(lines 1-18).

The poem's commitment to the non-human environment is established from the outset. Beginning *in medias res*, it places the reader in a state of uncertainty, concerned with the strangeness or unfamiliarity of silent nature. There are several potential readings rather than a single didactic meaning, keeping the poem fluid and vital; to a certain degree, because of its fragmented form, it

resists more traditional interpretations. At the same time, the poem is held together by a repeated sense of silence, suggested by the restraining influence and anticipatory tension of the semicolon. This tension intends to keep the poem (and reader) out of the reach of more formal poetic strategies when writing about nature. In other words, the poem is not intended to be immediately accessible to either poet or reader; this is Heaney's 'glimpsed alternative', so to speak. The processes of nature are veiled at best and the poem demands (as does nature) further readings<sup>98</sup>. The poem seeks to suggest that the complexity of nature has been 'compressed', as Max Oelschlaeger describes our relationship with the natural world.<sup>99</sup> The compressed ecological dimension of 'Blank Five' is apparent. Although, as Camilla Nelson has written, the poem possesses 'vigorous imagery [that] maintains colourful mediations', she also points out, 'how are we able to bring colour to the mind's eye when we are blinded by black and white'?<sup>100</sup> Nelson seems to be reminding us of the importance of memory and its role in firing our imaginations. With her observation in mind, to reinforce the imbalance of the way in which we view nature, the punctuation disappears altogether in the last line and nature. Reader and poet are suspended in the negative, supposing a realisation of loss and uncertainty. The poem's second-person 'you' (lines 1-3), is mobile and unpredictable, reinforcing an atmosphere of menace in the finality of the poem's ending and its fragmenting structure. The human voices that dominate the poem ask why it is that in our culture only humans have status as speaking subjects. The poem presents this potential loss of connection with the non-human world in its fragmentary appearance of spare lines, use of white space and despairing voices; its spatial and sonic relationships echo Foucault's warnings that power structures marginalise alternative views and knowledge.

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<sup>98</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry : Oxford Lectures* ( London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p.5.

<sup>99</sup> Max Oelschlaeger, (ed.), 'Wilderness, Civilisation and Language' in *The Wilderness Condition: Essays on Environment and Civilisation*, (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1992), p.273.

<sup>100</sup> Camilla Nelson, 'Poetry Editorial: Seeing Words', *The Goose*, vol.15, Article 27 (2016) <<http://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol15/iss1/27>> [accessed 19 June 2018].









the uncanny and indeterminacy in his outlook as a poet. What is traditional and habitual in our thinking remains unsynthesised, and so we are in danger of missing the ambiguous and the unexpected; nor does one state of mind supersede the other. Rather, the enigmatic and ever-present sense of possibility is an important part of the crafting of the poem, and this preoccupation in his writing about environments resists the usual routes of description. Nevertheless, despite the sense of under-meaning in his work, the lack of resolution is a part of creating an accessible world for the reader. Syntactically, words are easy to follow, and creates an emotional world that the reader can participate in whether or not his meaning is accessible. Take, for example, 'Ports'. Moves through the white space of the poem take the reader from 'the walleyed plaice freckled with spots', to the surprise 'colour of orangeade' (lines 15-16), emerging too in Burnside's use of phenomena such as fogs and tides, and elsewhere snow. These take us in and out of both time and the poem itself, by amplifying the idea of gaps and liminal moments:

and you sit  
 quiet  
 amazed by the light  
                                   aware  
 of everything  
                                   aware of shoals and stars  
 shifting around you  
  
 endlessly  
 entwined  
  
 (lines 62-69)

In my poem 'Twelve Moons', the breakdown of traditional lines is intended to disorientate and the sense of dropping through space and time is elaborated by the blank space between the lines. This fragmentation of lines and form creates a sense of otherliness, visible in the shifting architecture of the poem, and as such is an inflexion from Burnside's work. The gaps and syntactical

breaks show hesitation in locating the co-ordinates of thought or feeling and intend to show the restlessness within the margins of both place and poem.

early morning twists and scrabbles

a different silence at five

distant milky water  
filled with an unfamiliar moon  
just as a blade of china presents itself in soil

listening skin things the eye can't quite see  
breath held

and a world that breaks

aches

laps

from veins until a shimmering appears from  
things looking up not lost but in a  
pause

a hoverfly

or  
prismatic hues of gnats coaxed  
from earth to perform an ancient asymmetric bobbing dance

watched

by a  
starling

who pipes  
keen notes in waxen forms

this lividity of heat

makes blood tremble until its voice becomes something like water

later on somewhere between the potting shed and home

a sliding screen between here and there somehow makes colours weave and shift,

roll in their sphere

birds

inflorescences painted complexities  
released wet by iris-barbed feathers

something else glimpsed through nets of light and pigment-

illusions of substance swelling

in green ropes

resolve themselves into staring eyes of dew (lines 1-34).

The poem maintains a keen focus on sensory description in concert with a disconnection from the human and environmental aspects of the world. The intention is to avoid narration, creating a series of sensations that examine the disconnection in a vertical sense. Certainly sounds, smells and visual textures inhabit the poem and its ekphrastic features lean back, disturbed by the speaker's voice as a mediating presence, identifying the borders of otherliness in the use of words such as 'their', 'something', 'twists' and 'scrabbles', resulting in a form of poetic downsizing that is intrinsic to the crafting of the poem and the poem as a place in itself.

The shaping of these ideas of as a means of attempting to understand home in a material and spiritual sense draws on the Romantic cliché of entangling nature in long sentences, and can be refurbished, Burnside implies, if we locate our sensibilities in immediate and everyday places. In order to explore his point, my poems are irregular and haphazard in appearance. The first line of the poem 'Twelve Moons' uses a dropping sense of space to slide through the layers of the poem. Like Burnside's poems, there are many indented lines; the use of open field is one of the means by which

I make the space work to show the particular or the small-scale, and how it is connected to a much bigger idea (dwelling). Once again, the spatial turns within the lines, from the generality of the early morning to the view from nowhere, then on to a view from somewhere and culminating in the sideways move of metaphor into ‘dew’ means that, as reader and poet, we move out of time and place and back again.

In ‘Two Gardens’, Burnside’s understanding of emotional restraint and artistic invisibility is a more precise means by which to create awareness and has echoes of Marvell’s warnings about utopian gardens. The use of the metaphysical mode, ‘At times the ghosts are almost visible’ (line 32), takes on a political edge as it finally grounds itself materially: ‘the land was measured out in bricks and weeds’ (line 25). Nature and spirit are not separate in Burnside, but rather binary, adding to the sense of fragmentation and ambivalence in his work. Equally, he uses fragments of ritual and myth to animate his solitary speakers’ frequent sense of displacement. Non-human encounters, too, as in ‘Kestrel’, reveal the poem as a place of subjective redefinition. The poem turns on the chance discovery of a dead hawk. Borders and textures abound in lines 4-5 and in the connections that follow (‘a light that lingers/a sunlit field/the wind that stains the plumage blue-black’, (line 26-28), Burnside suggests that by engaging with the myth, we might cross over briefly into otherliness and, on our return, make sense of habiting our own world. My poem ‘Aphrodite’ explores this concern and the ghosts that come and go are felt as something on the shore line; the border between land and sea is the central context of the poem.

the horses are asleep  
 so Aphrodite slips in through the loaded sea  
 comes ashore and looks around

oystercatchers  
 i’m run aground with my tottering rosary of shells  
 the air swirling with the grief-stricken calls of  
 so at first, i don’t see her

but then  
 her slipper prints pearl beneath the bladder-wrack tell me  
 that she's here

didn't you know that she writes messages  
 and leaves lugworms to post them in the sand as the tide goes out?  
 that she salts breezes tails and flanks with a clear day bright as a needle?  
 bobs orphaned rock pool weed out on a turquoise sea?  
 best of all she shines the blue glass bead of a cormorant's eye.

just as the horses wake and the sky resumes its call  
 she huddles into air- borne seeds to become  
 thrift wall pennywort roseroot

white billows

i tie the shells around my ankle  
 and begin to walk

(lines 1-21).

As in Burnside's poetry, here the sensual encounter with nature is achingly brief: focused not on sensing or seeing, but on the disappearance and limitations of human understanding. Any desire for a closer kinship with the mythic and the animal world is chastened by the realisation that as humans we remain on the periphery. Our sensory and intellectual limitations mean that what might appear restorative or compensatory can never be wholly such: accordingly, the human figures that inhabit the poem appear to be lost or distracted. The poem explores a desire to see beyond the regular social order which, as Seamus Heaney explains, is 'an alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances'.<sup>106</sup> The best we can hope for, Heaney seems to suggest, is a semblance of connection.

In response to Heaney's suggestion about pushing the boundaries of our socially conditioned selves, the next poem has an anecdotal antecedent. It does not engage with myth in the sense of gods and spirits as Burnside's work so often does, but reveals an instinct for the 'creaturely life' that

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<sup>106</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), p.4.

can be found and is recalled in the following account of the uncanny intersection between place and otherness.

Out walking with a friend, we travelled to a location we thought unfamiliar. The outward journey on foot did not reveal any surprises, but on the return, I had an overwhelming and very disorientating sense of being deeply lost, prompted by my companion's insistence that, contrary to expectation, we were in fact on very familiar ground; something that he recognised but I could not. In his introduction to *Cartographies of Culture*, Damian Walford Davies, acknowledging Franco Moretti's contention that 'geography is not an inert container', agrees that place does indeed pervade both writer and, subsequently, the poem itself.<sup>107</sup> Responding to a sort of cartographic summons and scrutinising this experience, I was aware of being caught in a geographical and neurological paradox. How could I not *know* where I was? The writing that resulted from the experience entailed trying to recreate the accumulation of nuanced feeling through a discourse between the voices of the poem, trying to recalibrate to the vocabularies of the surroundings;

'Here, 'you said,

'sometimes'

'the gap between worlds grows thin    becomes    inverted    like a pin

if you break the glass    and face the wrong way'

you said

wet air glints tides into salt pebbles

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<sup>107</sup> Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture, New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p.12.

on the road an inlaid marquetry of bright crystals shoals the weightlessness  
of this spring afternoon into moss fraying pools; there lie shadows of our  
common skin; a blade of eels; frogs basking

night wakes them

stars admire them into flax weed and water

'here is spring' you said 'blister of sequins left behind in water;  
atoms fizzling into grass'

i

blunder

stumble through un-pleated latitudes

my ears sting dreaming of longitudes hiding somewhere

frightened you have erased the scale

how little is seen

from

the

a

i

r

(lines 1-24).

In writing this poem I wanted to interrogate the experience of getting lost. I hoped to engage both myself and the reader in intense acts of context, place and to attune the ear and eye to how we feel



in and out of place by locating co-ordinates of a heightened sense of reality. 'Arrival' is about fragility, paying attention and trying to re-calibrate oneself to live among the non-human. This poem falls into a sort of poststructuralist loss of self: rather than place allowing me to feel a sense of myself, space pervaded me in such a way as to achieve a complete dissolution of self and a deeply uncomfortable sense of being outside my own terms of reference. Landscape and nature within it at this point of interchange felt hostile and certainly no longer metaphoric. There was something kinetic, and this poem is a sort of haunting door, a way in to the otherliness that I felt. The disturbing nature of this encounter with the limits of myself and the dark intangibility of nature defines the creative importance of resisting nostalgic ideas of nature. The way that the poem has appeared on the page is perhaps most telling: it is less written and more a spontaneous utterance. The surfaces of the experience appear and disappear, particularly in the latter part of the poem as in, 'how little is seen/from/the/a/i/r'. The fragmentation of the language can only point towards meaning and this epiphanic moment, characteristic of Heaney and Hughes, suggest that nature has a dark sense of itself; here I think I was least at home, but perhaps creatively 'Arrival' is a more interesting poem because of my sensory and geographical dislocation.

This experience, both physically and creatively, echoes Burnside's warning that when one collaborates in borders, there is a considerable sense of danger. However, such danger as there is to be found in going astray must be considered integral if we are to explore boundaries and the intangible. Like Burnside, I do not return to the theme of dwelling to find closure, or some sort of single answer, but rather to ask questions: I would further argue that in its influence upon my own writing, the strength of Burnside's work is that his 'running on the spot' (Richardson, 2003), is actually stressing the importance of stopping to consider what it means to be earth-haunted: to respond to a physical location by developing a process of experiencing a place as a resource that sustains our humanity. Burnside's approach is significant precisely because he responds critically to

and engages with the psychological complexity of human relations to place relayed through lineation and word choice. Furthermore, it also shows that modern sensibility is damaged when estranged from nature. Burnside clearly recognises through his writing the damaging consequences of environmental collapse. Most of all, it is the edginess between the real and the imagined, the at home and the wandering, that so accurately reflects my own preoccupations. In the following chapter, I explore how the work of William Wordsworth has been vital in shaping my architectural and poetic imagination and how he examines the importance of memory in defining our imagination and sense of place.

### Chapter Three: Wordsworth's Interior Landscape

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length  
 Of five long winters! And again I hear  
 These waters, rolling from their mountain springs  
 With a soft inland murmur. Once again  
 Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
 Which on a wild secluded scene impress  
 Thoughts of more deep seclusion, and connect  
 The landscape with the quiet of the sky.

(Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13th, 1798, ll.1-8)

First encounters with Wordsworth's poem often result in the reader being struck by his apparently detailed and emotional response to nature. Most likely, we will consider the lines quoted above to be the opening of a poem that is explicitly about nature, precisely because they appear to refer to natural elements such as 'waters', 'mountain springs' and 'lofty cliffs'. Furthermore, as readers we seem placed outside the poem. Yet, a closer examination of the poem poses the question as to whether this work is actually about nature at all. After all, Wordsworth appears to speak not to us the reader, but to himself, as if he were collecting and gathering up thoughts and feelings, as if retreating from something fearful, and possibly traumatic, and there is an eagerness in the poem to identify time and place in his response to locale. This chapter will argue that there is a particular sort of interweaving that occurs in Wordsworth's lived experience. Rather than writing from an acceptance of subject/object separation, his - and subsequently my - creative practice explores and draws on creatively nourishing examples of between states: on states of 'otherliness' where resorting to tight binary definitions is unnecessary. In response to Wordsworth's ideas, the 'Tintern' section of my collection develops a distinct mode of critical thinking that takes as its prompt the sensations and thoughts about the immediacy of place and its effects on the imagination.

My own anxiety about current nature writing is that it can, on occasion, place nature as somehow distant from us. We stand in front of the landscape and write about it as if it were somehow separated from us. Despite its resonance as poem about nature, interestingly, if read in the context of its composition, Wordsworth's famous poem exhibits, a somewhat alienated sense; and not one that suggests nature is somehow separated from human attention. The poem is not alienated in the sense of being over there: the poem is not wholly about the woods, but rather about memory, and the creative-critical link for my own poetry lies in the title 'Lines written a few miles *above* Tintern Abbey...'. As a preposition, 'above' suggests a space between the words in the title. It also suggests the need to create a place or state that can take part in both the world of the poem and in the non-human world, and exist between. True, Wordsworth's poem falls into a difficult-to-define category generically, because environment seems to move in and out of the changing locations of the poem, even if creatively.

Wordsworth's reaction to nature is encoded in his poem and though it appears on first reading to be uncomplicated, Wordsworth lays the scene before us and allows us to get beneath the surface of it because he is *revisiting* the Wye and sees it differently from how he did in 1793. As Stephen Gill points out,

in revisiting Wordsworth was bringing his past work into conformity with his present thinking. To Wordsworth poems were not discrete objects [...] but emanations of a mind which needed to register its evolution not only in new work but in continued contact with old. His continual re-writing stems from a determination to treat his poems as living presences and to change or discard whatever seems adequate.<sup>108</sup>

The creative impulse or 'living presences' that Gill describes suggests that Wordsworth found in setting up a dialogue with himself a form of evolution in his writing. The idea of 'continued contact' marks an important turning point in developing my own approach to the process of

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<sup>108</sup> Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.81.

thinking and imagining. To understand this a little more we can turn to the importance of walking as a means of informing his compositional approach. Wordsworth's accounts of walking offer me as a contemporary poet a method of sounding and evolving a relationship with what might be thought of as invisible. He found a deep physical connection to water and land through the act of perambulation, reading and feeling the landscape through his feet and through the rhythm of walking, which, when structured as a poem, becomes a form of investigation of his own personal sense of place and its relation to his writing. Wordsworth's focus on his sensory faculties represented an important starting point for my own analysis of nature writing, and for Wordsworth the cracks in the poem's smooth surface may suggest, as Stephen Gill points out, an element of autobiographical haunting from 1793.<sup>109</sup> However, whilst I am certainly sympathetic to the horrors that Wordsworth experienced, the particular biographic details do not concern me here; rather, I am interested in how cracks in the surface of the imagined poem allow him to employ his intellect and memory in transformative ways. His use of reflexive questioning as in 'these *forms* of beauty' ( line 24) and 'nature's lovely *forms*' ( line 141) turns the experience into concepts so thoughtful that engagement with nature engenders a more profound perspective. Wordsworth's intellectual responses allow him to set up the language of nature as a contrast to the 'dreary intercourse of daily life' ( line 132). In his subjective response to the riverscape of the Wye valley, Wordsworth was addressing what it meant to be living in a time when attitudes and understandings about landscape were undergoing profound shifts. Changes and conflicts in attitudes towards climate change and the long term consequences of human activity sort taking place today, and in that respect my work represents a post-Romantic response to crisis in the mould of Oswald, Burnside and other proponents of New Nature Writing.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., Stephen Gill, p.153.

The Wye Valley was and remains a uniquely unsettling place. It is, after all, borderland country – at once pastoral and industrial, characterised by both ruins and technology. As a picturesque site, it had attracted tourists since the French revolutionary wars effectively closed Europe to the travellers of the 1790s. On revisiting this site in 1798, Wordsworth compares the past and present appearance of the valley and identifies how his perceptions have altered when compared with his earlier memories. Importantly for poetry, his ideas contrasted with those of his contemporaries such as Thomas Gilpin and Richard Warner, for whom it was one of the most striking tourist attractions of its day. Contemporary late-eighteenth-century accounts indicate how the strangeness of the Wye valley seemed to suggest a new kind of beauty, an aesthetic aligned away from the agricultural norms of the period. Indeed, the picturesque was preoccupied with the pictorial values of architecture and landscape in combination with one another. For example, at Symonds Yat, the Wye combines both the sublime (the cliffs and the cataract) with the pastoral (orchards and farms). Wide enthusiasm for this style developed in direct opposition to neoclassical values, with their emphasis on order, proportion and precision, encouraging the spectator to look upon the world as if it were a framed picture. Today, understanding experience through images is ubiquitous, whereas in the 1790s the radical blurring of art and life could be disorientating. The modern use of the term picturesque suggests aesthetic and artistic failure; yet, it is this notion of artistic failure that provides a crucial compositional instruction for me as I have developed my writing practice for it introduces the idea of contingency; that something exists to be discovered between the aesthetic and the artistic.

The Wye valley was of particular imaginative significance for Wordsworth, but (crucially) unlike other landscapes it features a river, and more particularly the Wye, suggesting a process of visual change as it passes through the valley. While the received impression of the picturesque is not untrue as such, it is simplistic. For Wordsworth and my own practice, the contingent blurring of nature (defined in this case as the river) as a historical consequence and an ever-moving entity

becomes a significant compositional element. Referring to my opening comment that the scene is set a few miles above Tintern Abbey, it seems to me that Wordsworth was drawing attention to the length of the river and its changing scenery, as well as his own sense of existing on an emotional brink or liminal state of impending change. If Wordsworth observed the river in an immediate sense, then his anti-picturesque response may also help to explain why he felt compelled to return to the Wye valley. The cliffs and farm plots are side by side: this scene, as David Miall explains, ‘embodies maximum contrast with maximum coherence’.<sup>110</sup> The effect of the contrast was perhaps to engage Wordsworth in the geography of the valley. Ironically, perhaps, his sense of emotional distance allows him to achieve a new form of intense poetic response. The first part of Wordsworth’s title, ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’, suggests that the composition of the poem began on site. While it clearly has an addressee: Wordsworth states in his preface of 1802 to the *Lyrical Ballads* that it is spoken by a man to a woman (Wordsworth to his sister Dorothy); yet, the responses from the other person are missing. Acknowledging and pursuing the absent voice in Wordsworth’s poem, I use this absence in my own writing (as in the homonymic Wye in ‘Opening Wye’) to make a developmental link to Wordsworth’s impressionistic and temporal responses to the river. Wordsworth’s evasive contemplation of space is also significant for my own work in my poem ‘Opening Wye’, The second part of his title, ‘on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13 1798’, points to a deeper, more internalised relationship to place, seen through a recollective lens (that is, his first visit five years earlier). In my effort to understand Wordsworth’s recollections, Thelwell’s prefatory reflections suggested that Wordsworth seems to have absorbed a number of experiences and perspectives, some not his own, in the composition of ‘Tintern Abbey’. These influences (the discussions and writings of his friends) may be regarded as deliberate attempts to avoid the danger of spectatorship by thinking through and sharing their

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<sup>110</sup> David S Miall, ““Tintern Abbey” and the Community with Nature”” *Romanticism on the Net*, 20 (November, 2000) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005949ar>> [accessed Jan 2018].

reactions to the landscape of the upper Wye. Wordsworth and his companions seem to achieve this by inhabiting the place. Fascinatingly, there continues to be uncertainty as to be the precise date of composition. Although this lack of clarity and historical absent-mindedness might frustrate the literary critic, for my own poetic practice, it provides an invisible architecture that assists in the making of a poem. The foregoing evidence is significant. The shared reactions to place suggests that Wordsworth, his friends and companions had a less didactic physical and emotional connection with the land. According to Noel Jackson, self reflection was a key component of Romantic psychology.<sup>111</sup> If we take the return to the Wye Valley and the evidence that Wordsworth began the poem ‘upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye’ on 13 July, completing it as he arrived in Bristol (as affirmed in a note dictated to Isabella Fenwick), then his act of writing becomes a self-conscious attempt to plot their responses: to evoke a place for the imagination to inhabit; and, at the same time, recognise the need to adapt language and form to illustrate the ever-shifting relationship between place and language. As if in confirmation of this psychological attachment to place, in the dedication to Robert Jones at the beginning of ‘Descriptive Sketches’, Wordsworth writes, ‘You will meet with few images without recollecting the spot where we observed them together; consequently, whatever is feeble in my design, or spiritless in my colouring, will be amply supplied by your memory.’<sup>112</sup>

As a writer, the words ‘observed’ and ‘memory’ are, in terms of composition, significant. Wordsworth’s advice appears to be that acute and individual observation constitutes memory, and that he associates the acquisition of sense data with the act of imagining. The earlier quotation

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<sup>111</sup> Noel Jackson, *Critical conditions: Coleridge, “common sense,” and the literature of self-experiment in Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.103-131.

<sup>112</sup> T. Hutchinson and E de Selincourt, (eds.), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), Wordsworth editions 1994, p.10.



offers further guidance, in that self-consciousness provides imaginative ‘colouring’. Wordsworth also seems to be advising a prospective writer to distance themselves emotionally: his point about ‘whatever is feeble in my design’ is, I take it, an expression of Wordsworth’s desire to withdraw in contemplation of the landscape and may have not been in keeping with extolling the picturesque virtues of the landscape, a resistance that is reflected in the colloquial simplicity and looping sentences of his writing. As if to confirm the struggle Wordsworth experienced in trying to resist an entirely subjective response to the landscape of the Wye, Thomas McFarland remarks that Wordsworth was ‘virtually hypnotised by the idea of running water’.<sup>113</sup> McFarland’s point is that Wordsworth concentrates on the immediacy and independence of place and he endeavours to involve the reader in that experience in his writing process. It seems, then, that Wordsworth’s poem attempts to locate space and its meaning in such a way that it is ‘textual, material and imaginary – not in the drawing of boundaries, but the flow and eddy of habitation.’<sup>114</sup> My poem ‘Flag Iris’ is a direct response to this technique of text, material and imagination. The poem attempts to attune itself to shifting geographies and changing histories:

the abbey moans  
 shifting its weight in the wind so at least we know still  
 alive  
 (‘Flag Iris’, lines 6-8)

it rains harder a spear of flag iris parts the morning’s blue bubble  
 sap  
 (Ibid., lines 9-10).

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<sup>113</sup> Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.40.

<sup>114</sup> Angharad Saunders, ‘Literary geography: reforging the connections’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 34 (2010), p.447.

The mood shifts and the narrative pauses bring the reader to a ‘spot in time’; ‘the flag iris’ echoes Wordsworth’s ‘meditative stand’ observing ‘the wanderer through the wood’, (line 58). The material concerns of Wordsworth are to be found at work in its emerging sense of anxious utopianism in trying to locate the elsewhere in ‘where the abbey *moans*’ (line 5) [my italics], which echoes Wordsworth’s ‘still, sad music of humanity’ (line 93). My argument is that if we sense the continual flux and renewal of our surroundings, landscape (and architecture) can help to delineate space and locate the contingency between the seen and the unseen: ‘of all the mighty world /of eye and ear, both what they half create’, (lines 107-108). By feeling and recording the movement of water and light, the imaginative paradigms of my poem attempt to turn the reader’s attention to the idea of incipient place and so resist the confining attitudes of the picturesque.

Wordsworth’s crossing of compositional and creative borders has been criticised. For some commentators, ‘Tintern Abbey’ fails to focus on human presence, though it does acknowledge human activity near the river. The compositional debate is fuelled, as David S. Miall points out in *Locating Wordsworth: Tintern Abbey and the Community with Nature*, by the considerable critical discussion about Wordsworth’s poem that arose out of New Historicist readings of the poem in the 1990s, most notably those by Kenneth Johnson, Marjorie Levinson and Jerome J. McGann.<sup>115</sup> In particular, in *The Failures of Romanticism*, McGann discusses what he describes as Wordsworth’s poetry of ‘evasion’.<sup>116</sup> For McGann and others, Wordsworth has failed to make the poem human-centric. In other words, a sense of place (for McGann) should come from the human identification of place. McGann famously argues that Wordsworth strategically suppresses the vagrants near the

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<sup>115</sup> David S Miall, “‘Tintern Abbey’ and the Community with Nature”, *Romanticism on the Net*, 20 (2000) <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005949ar>> [accessed 16 September 2017]

<sup>116</sup> Jerome J. McGann. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. (London: Univ. of Chicago Press 1983), pp.158-159.

Abbey and furnaces, and whilst identifying loss, displacement, materiality, in his references to the ‘vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods’, he fails to offer a solution; but I do not think Wordsworth’s intention was to offer the homeless any sort of poetic compensation.

Leaving aside McGann’s reading of Wordsworth, my reading of McGann is that he considers Wordsworth’s poetry to have failed because it does not say anything about our place (or indeed the place of Wordsworth’s missing vagrants) in the world. I do not think that it was Wordsworth’s intention to comment on the human. If anything, I think he was trying to leave the human to one side in order to re-examine and revitalise the relationship between nature and the human mind by resisting the damaging effects of a society controlled by the industrial commodification of time. He was, as I pointed out earlier, more interested in retrieving the underlying processes in nature and its effects on the human mind. Wordsworth’s transgressive approach seems to deliberately ‘lose’ (line 14) the ‘pastoral farms’ (line 17): the focus on the human element is brief, not dismissive but anxious to concentrate on something else, something stranger in the landscape. In an attempt to reconcile the strangeness in ‘Tintern Abbey’, Levinson and McGann agree on their shared sense that one of the easiest ways to legitimise or retrieve sentimental poets is to suggest that the poet in question departs or transgresses from the norm. The transgressive tendency in ‘Tintern Abbey’ is, as Walford Davies remarks, that its poetic construction is such that in crossing creative boundaries, it, ‘prompts the doubleness, the gesturing elsewhere, of all figural language’.<sup>117</sup> Wordsworth’s approach has been crucial, in how its inflexions have shaped my own approach despite its potential divisiveness. ‘Tintern Abbey’, in its half-turns, caesurae and enjambments, urges me as a writer to experiment with both the textual territory of the poem and the emerging topography of incipient place. McGann’s argument is that Wordsworth’s poetic language

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<sup>117</sup> Damian Walford Davies, *Cartographies of Culture, New Geographies of Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p.34.

only provides compensation for the loss it registers, and that a meaningful sense of place is static. It is here I think that McGann's argument stalls, for as Gary Snyder points out, 'Our place is part of what we are [...] even a 'place' has [a] kind of fluidity: it passes through time and space'.<sup>118</sup> Like Snyder, the political geographer Yi-Fu Tuan is helpful here in his affirmation that the nature of place is fluid and is inseparable from what can be thought of as space<sup>119</sup> From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, from a creative poetic perspective, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause, where each pause in movement makes it possible for location to transfer into place. It is this sense of pause, anticipation and gathering that, I suggest, gives 'Tintern Abbey' its nervous energy. In 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth acknowledges that place is often privileged because of its associations with human knowledge; however, he challenges the idea that only human-centred definitions of place have a more authentic kind of dwelling. McGann's suggestion that Wordsworth was denying the human element in 'Tintern Abbey' is curiously enough a helpful one since the ruins of the abbey itself were a source of interest to Wordsworth as evidence of an earlier more interrelated relationship between humans and nature. Wordsworth seems to be looking for a way of renewing the sensibilities destroyed by the impact of the industrial landscape. It seems to me that in this poem, Wordsworth predicts the question John Burnside poses in 'History' from *The Light Trap*: 'how to be alive/in all this gazed-upon and cherished world/and do no harm'.<sup>120</sup>

However, reconnecting the particular and the general is not without difficulty. Writing through a Romantic sensibility about place can lead to overly-aesthetic or quasi-religious writing.

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<sup>118</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p.29.

<sup>119</sup> See Yi-FU Tuan, *Space and Place, A Perspective Of Experience* ( Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

<sup>120</sup> John Burnside, *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), 'History', p.42.

The power of the politics of language was not lost on Wordsworth, and Richard Marggraf Turley is perspicacious in arguing that the theorist and visionary Jakob Böhme's philosophies of language 'fired the imaginations of several Romantics'.<sup>121</sup> In Wordsworth's case, the encounter with Böhme's theories resulted in the urge 'to democratize language and poetry.'<sup>122</sup> While Wordsworth developed the notion of 'spots of time' ('The Prelude', line 208), to consider and clarify his place in the world, he also sought to balance the different expectations of two types of audience: the ordinary reader and the elite of print culture. My writing attempts to engage with the tension that exists between my inner and outer ecologies and thus reflects a similar dilemma in terms of audience: namely, how to write in order to activate a tactile and sonic experience of nature that urban modernity might have overlooked. For the imagined reader, it is hopefully an intense and concentrated encounter based on perception and sympathy.

The tension of this demanding approach is, as Jonathan Bate points out, familiar to Wordsworth, since, Bate suggests, he was the first poet to record in detail the circumstances of composition, and to intuit that 'the poetry of place' was 'inspired by place itself'. Bate continues, that Wordsworth 'refuses to carve the world into object and subject.'<sup>123</sup> Here Bate identifies the Cartesian tension felt by Wordsworth in his two visits to the Wye. Wordsworth, may have made the second visit to the Wye his mind teeming with the conflicts of the aesthetic failures expressed by Thomas Gilpin. Indeed, the tone of Gilpin's approach suggests that the traveller is the subject, and

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<sup>121</sup> Richard Marggraf Turley, *The Politics of Language in Romantic Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.6.

<sup>122</sup> *Die Natursprache*: Böhme's linguistic philosophy was first published in German in the 1630s. At the core of his thinking lay the idea that words could be relied on to reveal or perform their own meanings: the physical sound of a word and the act of forming it with the mouth were closely bound up with signification. Of equal importance for Böhme was that speakers valued their mother tongues, for it was here that the Language of Nature resided, rather than in Latin and Greek.

<sup>123</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p.147.

the environment he visits, the object: nature is quite clearly ‘over there’, rationalised as a place to study human activity;

We travel for various purposes – to explore the culture of soils – to view the curiosities of art – to survey the beauties of nature – and to learn the manners of men; their different neatness added to every part of the current politics, and modes of life.<sup>124</sup>

Here, Gilpin sees nature only as something as being brought about by *human* agency and as such he is also keen to *simplify* the ways of seeing beauty. Separating beauty from the picturesque is difficult, for as he points out in the same essay, his disappointment verging on irritation with some of the ruined architectural features of Tintern Abbey itself, commenting that;

a number of gable ends hurt the eye with their regularity, and disgusted by the vulgarity of their shape...particularly those of the cross aisles, which are not only disagreeable in themselves, but confound the perspective.<sup>125</sup>

Gilpin regards the Abbey’s ruins as an offence to the eye, or at least to his eye. However, despite these architectural and picturesque failures, Gilpin was favourably impressed by the picturesque qualities of Tintern Abbey: not only was it a ruin, but it was also built into a valley:

The woods and glades intermixed; the winding of the river [...] the splendid ruin, contrasted with the objects of nature; and the elegant line formed by the summits of the hills, which include the whole; make altogether a very enchanting [sic.] piece of scenery.<sup>126</sup>

The difference in attitude towards the ruins between Gilpin and Wordsworth is that Gilpin responds to them as a focal point and, as such, affirms human activity as being of greater importance that

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<sup>124</sup> William Gilpin, ‘Observations on the River wye, and several parts of South Wales, &c. Relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty: Made in the Summer of the Year 1770’, p.1. <https://archive.org/details/observationsonr00gilpgoog> [accessed July 2015].

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., William Gilpin, p.47.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., William Gilpin, p.46.

that of nature. Wordsworth, by contrast sees and senses the nature *amongst* the ruins as something much greater and more mysterious.

Wordsworth was acutely aware of the danger of oversimplifying and separating the two entities as is evident in ‘The Prelude’ where his fear of the enormity and the strangeness of nature is keenly felt. In ‘Oeillet’, I respond to this idea of strangeness through the presence of the river detected through the broken lines of the poem. The absence of punctuation, lines being held (but only just) by whitespace is prompted by the metaphor of a compound eye. This image resonates as a driving and creative link, as it seemed to echo the complexities of Wordsworth’s writing patterns as well as his artistic intentions and creative influences: namely, that whilst there are many viewpoints as to how the landscape may be situated in relation to the human form.<sup>127</sup>

coloured earth and milk water become half glazed windows, the ground sulks and curdles  
under the listing columns

the pocketbook drawings once a splutter of hallelujahs now a green twilight  
of clerestories half heard

(‘Oeillet’, lines 18-19)

water shadows the path with silver seeping into the moment. To  
find them we took the bridge

(‘Oeillet’, lines 21-22)

The preceding lines take on what Gilpin identifies as beautiful: not the landscape, but rather the ruins of the abbey, which are man-made and therefore, according to Gilpin, represent the most picturesque aspects of the landscape. My poem seeks to question the dominance of human activity and its effects on the landscape. Gilpin also noted the industrial developments and their effects

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<sup>127</sup> Harriet Tarlo, *Nab* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2004), p.140.

along the Wye, though not with the dismay that a modern visitor might experience at the environmental consequences of the mining industry. As Bate points out, visitors on the Wye saw no contradiction in praising the valley's seclusion from the bustle of commerce and the wonders of the great ironworks at New Weir. This divide between the human and the non-human is, for me, one of the essential ruptures in thought that Wordsworth senses and seeks to explore in 'Tintern Abbey'. He is changing the focus from the human-made to something in the landscape that is not static, but rather partly mystical: the sublime. In terms of my own practice, he sounds a warning note. I sensed that Wordsworth, already in retreat from his past, may have felt overwhelmed by the technological domination of the landscape, whether by building, development or resource-extraction, and so he writes in a state of anxiety, attempting to find 'repose/[...] under this dark sycamore', (line 10). This anxiety is expressed in the way that my own poem 'Oeillet/Tintern' uses the whitespace to break up the conventional layout of poetry. As Hinchman and Hinchman observe, 'it is from the Romantic conviction that external landscapes shape the inner person that the modern enthusiasm for wilderness derives'.<sup>128</sup> The longing that Wordsworth identifies is one we feel in our own relationship with nature. This point is picked up in my poem 'Unseen Wye':

old light

long gone reappears in this morning's frost where  
trows once paddled the river's patience

light moves on  
picks up the scent of someone's thought shaking out their light  
marks a footprint in the puddled sand

(lines 3-6)

This part of the poem engages with and acknowledges Wordsworth's convergence of the subject-object argument in the following lines from Tintern Abbey:

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<sup>128</sup> L. P. Hinchman & S. K. Hinchman, 'What We Owe the Romantics', *Environmental Values*, 16, No.3 (August 2007), pp.333-54 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30302160> [accessed May 2015].



...and I have felt  
 a presence that disturbs me...  
 ... a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns  
 And the round ocean and the living air  
 And the blue sky and the mind of man

(‘Tintern’, lines 94-100)

Wordsworth draws the reader’s attention to an essential aspect of his compositional thinking in the crucial line ‘something far more deeply interfused’ (line 97) and questions the prevailing picturesque presentation of nature, assessing it quite differently and with additional subtlety. Here I would take issue with Alice Oswald’s deprecating sense of Wordsworth as harbouring a ‘picturesque view of nature’.<sup>129</sup> In fact, he anticipates her concerns of sentimentality in his warning against making landscape something static against which human dramas are acted out. Wordsworth identifies the danger of visually framing a landscape and ignoring what lies outside its framework. It is a caution I have heeded in my own work, in ‘Opening Wye’ and ‘Unseen Wye’. By not standing in front of the Abbey and by not referring to the vagrants, Wordsworth is able to listen and hear, as George Eliot puts it in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ‘the speech of the landscape’. In the same essay Eliot points out that ‘our land shows [this] readiness to be changed’<sup>130</sup>. Yet, as Wordsworth’s compositional anxieties reveal, he understood the dangers of ‘an appetite’ that,

had no need of a remoter charm,  
 By thought supplied, or any interest  
 Unborrowed from the eye  
 (lines 83-85)

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<sup>129</sup>Maureen Cleave, ‘Going with the Flow’, *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2003, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books3588888/Going-with-the-flow.html>> [accessed April 2017]

<sup>130</sup> George Eliot, *Theophrastus Such* (Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2017 ), p.14.

As a poet, Wordsworth anticipates Eliot's insights and, contrary to Oswald's unease about what she regards as the confining aspects of his writing, Wordsworth recognises that the responsibility of the poet is precisely to identify this 'readiness' and to record 'the presence that disturbs' (line 96), in a way that is immediate, meaningful and accessible. To ignore the dangerous nostalgia of the picturesque mode to which Gary Lee Harrison alerts us is to risk using a landscape for aesthetic pleasure, or worse still the 'naturalisation of poverty in picturesque scenes'.<sup>131</sup> Wordsworth moves in close to aspects of poverty. His allusions to poverty and the dangers inherent in the picturesque attitude have affected my own work in that 'Tintern Abbey' sets out revisiting as being, in and of itself, compositionally significant. Reflecting on the passage of time and memory allows Wordsworth to reinvestigate nature. Furthermore, it preserves his personal history, and, when used as an intellectual tool, memory replaces basic responses and prompts the need to find a new more imaginative way to raise awareness about the human relationship with the non-human world.

The definition of landscape that Wordsworth seems to have been exploring is one of sympathetic re-encounter. At the time of Wordsworth return visit to the Wye Valley, the physical environment was undergoing industrial transformation and consequently it was, in a sense, on the move. The same can be said of our own time, where landscape has become a complex and debatable zone. Furthermore, by relocating himself in the landscape of the Wye and by composing the poem whilst on the river, the estuary and elsewhere, he attempts to analyse the significance of the river in the siting of the Abbey. He was using the river as a way of recording the hardships and complexities of a dramatically changing landscape, and focusing on its non-human aspects affected his sense of Tintern as a built landscape: a psychic fall from innocence to experience as the outside world penetrates the senses and enters the mind and emotions. The River Wye and Wordsworth's

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<sup>131</sup> Gary Lee Harrison, *Wordsworth's Vagrant Muse, Poetry, Poverty and Power* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p.49.

treatment of the abbey and its environs as a *locus amoenus* warns against idealising the landscape for the sake of self-gratification.

Wordsworth's exquisite listening in to the non-human world dominates the poem, with a despairing sense of the struggle to find a more balanced relationship with the landscape that would include the social as well as the natural. A sense of catching the voice of the landscape also emerges in my own poem and reflects the circumstance that, for the reader of 'Tintern Abbey', between the poet and his or her own self, there is something else that exists within the potential of the sensuous world during the process of composition. This notion of listening in is reflected in the awkward breaking up of lines and the tension created by a sequence of end-stopped lines, as in, 'gathers in broken calyxes of plastic cups' ('Flag Iris' line 5). The rhythmic and consonance of 'broken calyxes of plastic cups' is an attempt to jut in between the content and the frame. The imagery is pale and minimalist: a distillation of my understanding of Wordsworth's de-aestheticising approach of revisiting, re-encountering, disconnecting and listening in. This is an approach that has become an important tool in my own practice in understanding and representing nature, both human and respectful by recognising first and foremost its otherness. In terms of writing about landscape, it is an approach that tries, in Snyder's words, to 'discover the grain of things...uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world'.<sup>132</sup>

Wordsworth, it seems, has physically and imaginatively tried to make sense of things, to organise and compartmentalise experience.<sup>133</sup> As I reflect on my own writing activity, I am struck again and again by the contingency of nature's indifference – by its otherness. It may be that one of the biggest dangers a writer faces when using nature as a focal point is that as humans we tend to

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<sup>132</sup> Gary Snyder, 'Unnatural Writing', in *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds* (Counterpoint LLC: 1995), p.168.

<sup>133</sup> Matthew Wickman, *Literature After Euclid: The Geometric Imagination in the Long Scottish Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p.139.

personify and over-sentimentalise its various forms as extensions of ourselves (the pathetic fallacy). An emotional response to post-industrial landscapes needs to be overridden by the understanding that, no matter how remote they might be, we need to remember landscapes are created by predominantly capitalist forces and are discarded as new ones are created.<sup>134</sup> The resulting economy of feeling emerges as a sense that I am (that we are) missing something. The sensation that I have overlooked or left something behind is very much a part of my outlook and practice. It represents a key element of my imaginative and aesthetic engagement with the world through poetry and is addressed in the subsequent section on Steven Holl.

### **‘Tintern’ as Steven Holl’s Architectural Envelope**

Utopia, on the other hand, is not [a] place at all. It is the sum accord of a community of human creatures: what they trust, what they believe, what they see, what they know. Needless to say, animals have no need of Utopia.<sup>135</sup>

John Burnside’s ‘sum of accord’ is a helpful phrase to describe the sensory and intellectual link between Wordsworth and contemporary architect Steven Holl. Architecture, like poetry, speaks for itself, or for a space. Poetry like architecture, can depend on metaphor to communicate its ideas. For his design of St. Ignatius’ Chapel, a Jesuit Chapel for the University of Seattle (1994-1997), Holl conceived this building as a metaphorical gathering of lights. This metaphor was intended to describe the University’s mission as an educational institution. It also refers to Ignatius’ vision of the spiritual life, which he conceived as comprising many interior lights and darkneses called

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<sup>134</sup> Henri Lefebvre pioneered the idea that capitalism produces certain kinds of space and spatio-temporal relations. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (trans.), Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974, repr. 1991).

<sup>135</sup> John Burnside, *Havergey* (UK: Little Toller Books, 2017), p.8.

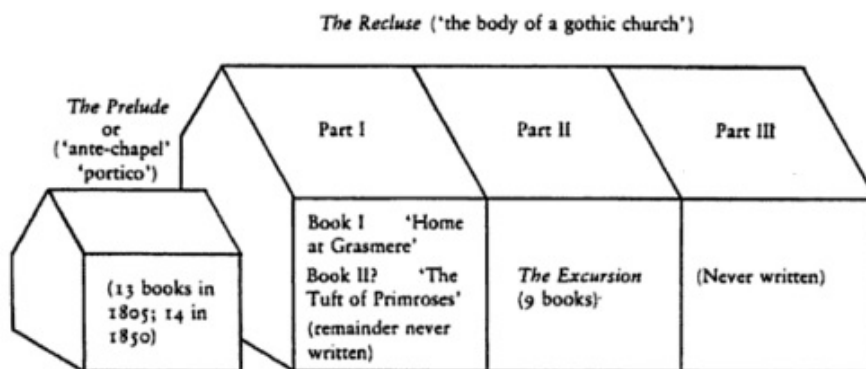
‘consolations’ and ‘desolations’. Holl’s architectural design for the chapel was as ‘seven bottles of light in a stone box’.<sup>136</sup> Each bottle or vessel of light corresponds to a focal aspect of Catholic worship. Light passes through each bottle in a specific area of the building to define physical and spiritual spaces with pools of clear and coloured light. In response to Holl’s thinking about light and space I began to re-read the poem ‘Tintern Abbey’ as an architectural structure responding to light and space. I realised that geometry could help me to imagine and organise a progression of composition; a sequence of memories and writing that moves through a series of stages. This geometry of revisiting intuition, memory and acts of listening occurs in the first poem in my collection, ‘Tintern’. During my research in trying to understand my own poetic relationship with the divergent spaces I have outlined, I found that Holl’s phenomenological practice a key link in developing my creative dialogue with Wordsworth.

As humans we are, in a very fundamental sense, dependent on nature for our survival; re-imagining nature as architecture, as something local rather than universal, can assist us in avoiding acts of over-romanticising nature, and begin a process of attentive re-engagement. Equally, architecture recognises that there are certain contingencies that characterise local conditions. Furthermore, the architectural metaphor acknowledges that, whilst humans are dependent on nature, the image of the wilderness and its appeal derives from an historical and literary inheritance that in architecture has created a source book or vocabulary that has inspired architects and presents nature as something other. Decisions about how to respond to wilderness are complex, as such spaces are more likely to be imagined places and so conceal rather than reveal the associations that make nature so important to our survival. Wilderness is remote, literally and metaphorically.

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<sup>136</sup> Architectural Review November 1995 <<https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/1995-november-chapel-steven-holl-architects-,seattle-usa/861897.article>> [ accessed April 2017].

In *Architecture and Spectacle*, Gevork Hartoonian invokes Walter Benjamin, who suggests that architecture is a stage set.<sup>137</sup> Everyday life can take place and is historically appropriated in a distracted mode.<sup>138</sup> The principal task for any architect is to set the stage or contingency for the fragile encounter between place and architecture; rather than *imposing* itself, its function is to guide and direct, to be generous, to have an opinion, whilst encouraging other opinions. This architectural notion of anticipating and setting the stage has had an important influence on my creative thinking, most notably in Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and his design for 'The Recluse'. 'The Recluse' is a consequence of Wordsworth's partnership with Coleridge, and was the framing of a poetic design. The ambition behind this poetic project, conceived 'architecturally' is it consisted of an 'antechapel' as Wordsworth termed the 'The Prelude' that led into the 'gothic church', 'The Recluse'.<sup>139</sup> The



1797–99	The First Drafts: 'The Ruined Cottage', 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', 'The Discharged Veteran', and 'A Night-Piece'	1,300 lines
1798–99	The Two-Part <i>Prelude</i>	1,000 lines
1800	The Beginning of 'Home at Grasmere'	500 lines
1800–02	'Prospectus' to <i>The Recluse</i>	100 lines
1803–05	Main Composition of <i>The Prelude</i>	8,000 lines
1806	Completion of 'Home at Grasmere'	400 lines
1808	'The Tuft of Primroses', 'To the Clouds', and 'St Paul's'	700 lines
1809–12	<i>The Excursion</i> , Books II–IV	3,200 lines
1812–14	<i>The Excursion</i> , Books V–IX	4,700 lines

<sup>137</sup> Gevork Hartoonian, *Architecture and Spectacle: A Critique* (London: Ashgate, 2012), p.226.

<sup>138</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction' in Hannah Arendt, (ed.), *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp.217-52.

<sup>139</sup> Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth The Recluse Project and Its Shorter Poems*, (Oxford: OUP 2015), p.345.

diagram hints at what may have been Wordsworth's 'architectural' arrangement of his poetical ideas, and most importantly and creatively for me, not least his feelings for this building coheres with the influx of visual and sound metaphors of Holl's architectural settings, and used as imaginative prompts in my poems 'Oeillet' and 'Unseen Tintern'.<sup>140</sup> Wordsworth and Holl do not passively seek to restore and then store history. Instead, they actively deploy memory as a tool to reveal a renovated sense of self: in Wordsworth's case, as a means through the reception of words and buildings, that are analogous to memory. Wordsworth's conscious employment of memory in 'Tintern Abbey' is combined with the development of a response to a scene over a passage of time in order to recreate a version of the past, suggesting that he is reaching out to a sense of something that lies between these two forces. Imagination being the vital core of Wordsworth's work, this argues for a process of composition that uses an interconnected or locality of design that is also found in Holl's architectural philosophies.

For Holl, architecture is 'a[n] art of duration, crossing the abyss between ideas and orders of perception, between flow and place, it is a binding force.'<sup>141</sup> His ideas share many of the outlooks, subtleties and complexities of perception with Wordsworth. Holl's work is directly influenced by phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, being grounded in the specifics of the lived experience. A central tenet of Holl's approach is that 'architecture needs to be completely anchored in its program and site.'<sup>142</sup> Its meaning must be so deeply rooted in the conditions of its inception, 'by fusing the objective with the subjective, architecture can stitch our

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen Gill, (ed.), Reprinted from *The Cambridge Guide to Wordsworth*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p.71.

<sup>141</sup> Steven Holl, 'Phenomena and Ideas', Matthew Mindrup, in *The Material Imagination: Reveries on Architecture and Matter* (London: Routledge 2016), p.47.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., Steven Holl, p.50.

daily lives together by a single thread of intensity'.<sup>143</sup> Here Holl points out that architecture does not intrude upon a place as serve to explain it. In other words, there is a poetic link between architecture and site. Holl argues that:

architecture bridges the yawning gap between the intellect and senses of sight, sound and touch, between the highest aspirations of thought and the body's visceral and emotional desires. A multiplicity of times are fastened, a multitude of phenomena are fused, and a manifold intention is realized.<sup>144</sup>

Interestingly, Holl is also a poet. His architectural writings recognise that like a poet an architect has the tools of narrative and in creating an architectural design, refined and detailed responses to place and space are vital:

The horizon is porous, percolating with our movement, under construction, or eroding in time. At night solids and voids reverse themselves in a spatiality of darkness. A kaleidoscope of colo[u]r, a misty night in New York is a marvellous liquid matter of green beyond yellow; reddish ridges underlying a blue haze; orange blurs slowly, unfolding from shapeless marks to precise white glows. The spaces, buildings, window walls, signs and colours intertwine. The glow of night's spatiality in the metropolis, a depth formed from shadows, colours and a light of sight, differs from the depth of daytime spatiality formed by the sun.<sup>145</sup>

Like Wordsworth, Holl tries to move beyond the immediate subjectivity of his own response to his physical surroundings, recognising and recording that he is the conduit for the changing and shifting sensations and experiences of landscape. These sensations will in turn inform his architectural practice and the buildings that he creates. His work recognises three levels of interest: the intellect, architecture and perception. Despite the intellect and the senses existing as separate phenomena in his system, Holl uses architecture as a connecting device. Sensory experiences are arranged around

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., Steven Holl, p.50.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., Steven Holl, p.54.

<sup>145</sup> Steven Holl, 'Edge of a City' in *El Croquis*, revised and extended edition (Mexico: Arquitectos Publishing, 2003), p.77.



an intellectual idea that is then realised architecturally.<sup>146</sup> Holl's rich ideas about contemporary architecture have a direct correlation to my own writing, in that the process of looking at things through the lens of Holl's theory has deepened my sense of the 'outer' reality with which my practice seeks to connect and aspires to animate. Even static things, I discovered, can become caught in the very act of being, on the very edge of balance and topple. As I have developed my practice, Holl's intuitive and deeply sensuous relationship to nature, which uses light to pick out detail in a landscape, has offered further insights into understanding Wordsworth's legacy, taking into account too, Oswald's warning that the 'soundproofed ears, the double glazed eyes prevent us from making contact with anything outside ourselves'.<sup>147</sup>

What draws me creatively to Holl's buildings is that they deliberately accommodate conflict, disturbance and tension. Holl considers architecture as a potential, not as something already given, working in response to the site rather than from a preconceived architectural language. Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that the process of making the architectural image comes about more as an 'excavation and an exploration than an invention [...] True architecture spans the ancient and the novel.'<sup>148</sup> It would be commonplace to refer to Holl's buildings as enigmatic, and the nature of his buildings, such as the Knut Hamsun Center, Hamarøy, Norway (1999-2010), foregrounds enigma by being built among forests. The Centre stages its own engagements with text, including Knut Hamsun's writing in its architectural designs. Thus, self-recursively, the building becomes a portrait of its subject, and at the same time acts as a camera obscura for revealing particular aspects of

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<sup>146</sup> Helen Dorey, 'Exquisite hues and magical effects: Sir John Soane's use of stained glass at 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields', *The British Art Journal*, Vol.5, no.1 (2004) *JSTOR*<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4161514>> [accessed August 2018], p.30-40.

<sup>147</sup> Alice Oswald, "The Wild Things" *The Guardian*, 3 December 2005, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/dec/03/poetry.tedhughes>> [accessed 28 February 2017].

<sup>148</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image, Imagination and Imagery In Architecture* (UK: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), p.102.

landscape and setting that feature in Hamsun's own compositions. The notion of the camera obscura is a lively and creative link, reaching back, of course, to Wordsworth and beyond.

The significance of this architectural metaphor (the camera obscura) is that it divines that the collaboration between poetry and architecture allows both disciplines to operate within the gap between what we think, and what we believe we know; existential knowledge and cerebral understanding. As Joseph Brodsky argues, 'the [creative] process must take precedence over its result'.<sup>149</sup> If we apply Brodsky's argument to Holl's work, then the conclusion is that intuition is the reflection of intimacy, past experiences and associations. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Holl's design for the Hangzhou Music Museum, Hangzhou, 2008. Here, Holl communicates his opinions as interrelated languages.<sup>150</sup> As China experiences one of the world's largest urbanisations in history, (like the Wye Valley in the eighteenth century), this innovative building explores the creation of collective urban space, as opposed to single object buildings. Rather than presenting mono-functional buildings, there are new hybrid buildings with rich programmatic juxtapositions. The project investigates the phenomena of light and tactility through material development and experimentation. The Music Museum makes use of voids to unify the campus, rather like caesurae in poetry, and is based on the idea of the eight sounds in traditional Chinese music.<sup>151</sup> Water is also central to Holl's design, recalling the importance of water to Cistercian structures such as Tintern

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<sup>149</sup> Joseph Brodsky, 'A Cat's Meow', *On Grief and Reason* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997), p.302.

<sup>150</sup> Jeffrey Kipnis, 'And Then Something Magical' in *Steven Holl Stone and Feather: The Nelson Atkins Museum Expansion* (New York: Prestel-Verlag, 2007), p.30.

<sup>151</sup> The ancient Chinese incorporated cosmology, numerology, philosophy, spirituality and aesthetics in their classification of musical Instruments. These ideas significantly influenced the development of various musical traditions of the Han Chinese majority, who have dominated the stylistic development of most performing arts in China.

Abbey.<sup>152</sup> The interplay of space, light and time are integral to the success of Holl's designs and in the final outcome.

The use of watercolour in his initial drawings explore the movement of light across surfaces, reflecting Heidegger's observation that artistic meaning in its most fundamental sense rests on a back and forth between showing and concealing:<sup>153</sup> the embodiment of truth as *alētheia*.<sup>154</sup> Holl's use of voids suggest a development of moving between showing and concealing as the Music Museum is designed on the *transparency principle*.<sup>155</sup> This principle shares an affinity with Wordsworth's 'spots of time' and Holl's luminous spaces extend Wordsworth's argument; using the language of architecture, he questions the legitimacy of mathematical logic as 'both the original and ultimate ground for a universal language'.<sup>156</sup> Holl seeks to create buildings that rather than reflect a state of action, see architecture as a state of being. His use of architectural language is crucial to his postmodern thinking, to an understanding of history as being neither linear nor cyclical. Whilst Holl's practice allows for the recognition of new angles and sense of space, he is drawing on multiple traditions to construct an 'ethical praxis'.<sup>157</sup> In *Pre-Theoretical Ground*, Holl refers to

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<sup>152</sup> Terry N. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe: Architecture of Contemplation* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002) p.26.

<sup>153</sup> Vladislav Suvák, 'The Essence of Truth (alētheia) and the Western Tradition in the Thought of Heidegger and Patocka' in *Thinking Fundamentals*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 9: Vienna 2000.

<sup>154</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *To the Task of Thinking* (1964), David Farrell Krell (ed.), (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp.143-88.

<sup>155</sup> Paul-Alan Johnson, *The Theory of Architecture: Concepts, Themes and Practices* (London: John Wiley and Sons, 1994), p.79.

<sup>156</sup> Alberto-Pérez-Gómez, *Built upon Love: Architectural Longing after Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006), p.188.

<sup>157</sup> Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.79.

Eastern philosophy and cites, and in particular, Japanese poetry.<sup>158</sup> This poetry puts forward a correspondence between thinking about building as a poem: Kaijitsu, which is described as the poem's aspect and form. *Ka* is 'the beautiful surface of the poem' and 'the *jitsu* is the substantial core'<sup>159</sup>: Once again I am reminded of the cracks in the smooth surface of Wordsworth's perception of the process of writing a poem. This approach, which would be reductively characterised as 'Zen', means that neither a building's sense of place nor a poem's depth can be conjured by packing them with allusions and implications. Surface and core are useful terms of reference for the construction of both art forms, since Zen theory also advocates an idea of truth as articulated in a spontaneous effect: so Zen, so Wordsworth.

What seems, then, to be a deeply felt preoccupation for both Wordsworth and Holl, can be summarised as seeking a terrain of personal psychic origin – of something known and yet strange: a desire for an uncanny knowledge that repairs the feeling of rootlessness and homelessness, or vagrancy as Wordsworth experienced it on returning to Tintern in 1798 after the disappointments and personal setbacks of revolutionary Paris. It is as if in creating a sense of place, Wordsworth and Holl both begin to negotiate space through a distanced view: Holl through his poetic and sensory outlook in the Music Museum, Wordsworth by composing 'Tintern Abbey' a 'few miles above' the Abbey itself. Both, however, move intuitively into the contingency of space and place. In the context of my own writing, this movement towards and merging and intermingling with the subject object view has been vital: both compositionally and figuratively speaking, it has helped to break down human hierarchy or overly sentimentalised response to nature. Significantly, Holl's work addresses both the dangers of being overtaken by metaphor and space by encouraging my writing

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<sup>158</sup> Steven Holl, 'Phenomena and Ideas', in *The Material Imagination: Reveries on Architecture and Matter* Matthew Mindrup (ed.), (London: Routledge 2016), p 50.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, Steven Holl, pg.50.

self to begin the process of developing a multi-sensory, multifaceted approach. This method is explored in my poem ‘Hilversum’. The title of the poem identifies on the one hand, the immediacy and gregariousness of the radio, and the possibility of listening in to other worlds and times, yet at the same moment the listener is immersed in the sensory dynamic of their own surroundings:

clapping pours in  
 like heavy rain and  
 reaching through water  
 the lady announcer clears her throat  
 (lines1-5)

Sound and memory are left behind because of the dominant aural experience of radio. Through the disconnection of ‘the dial swoops Chopin dies’ (line 6), the immediacy of separation is detected and everything is suspended in the moment of silence before the animal sense of ‘in the *pelt* of afternoon light’ (line 9), moves the reader to consider the gaps between the human sense of the world and the imaginative possibilities of space. Here, the influence of Holl’s attention to the movement of light is explored, to reveal both liminalities and the possibilities of what is hidden in the elsewhere.

Holl's own response to place entails acknowledging each location as unique, and in some sense bespoke, requiring a corresponding tailored response. Each response as an architect to new space is a new opportunity for experimentation: ‘The way spaces feel, the sound and the smell of these places, has equal weight to the way things look’.<sup>160</sup> Holl’s work urges us to experience the world through our other senses: not only our eyes, but our skin – an idea I have made central to mention of sensory experience of environment and poetic setting. Two of my poems that take their

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<sup>160</sup> Steven Holl in the Preface to Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture of the Senses*, (London: Wiley-Academy, 2005), p.7.

cue directly from Holl's provocations *vis à vis* more tactile responses to our surroundings are 'The Secret of Brightness' and 'Here's the Thing'. Both prompt the reader to reach across the boundary of sight, to that of touch – the only sense, perhaps, that integrates our experience of the world with ourselves. I resist (I hope) the hegemony of computer vision, that mode of digitally-assisted seeing that which makes our sense of the world a retinal one only and thus depthless. In 'A Secret of Brightness' the world is read through the skin and architectural playfulness of light refractions :

a button sewn into the linen of your shirt

a tiny iceberg between twists of snow  
white facets cut to blue and gold,  
its oily planes daily kiss skin and sleeve as  
your hand brushes through arcs of space and time

forgetful at first like a hand in ice  
(lines 6-10)

Similarly, in 'And Here's the Thing':

my skin recovers from your hands  
maps and tides that have turned

floating wefts and light  
coloured books read after dark.  
(lines 1-5)

Fascinated by ideas of light and dark in their ability to pick out sensory connections for the reader, I experienced a continual battle to resist the conventional expectations of the metaphor. The deliberate jarring and strangeness in the button being compared to an iceberg in 'The Secret of Brightness' is an acknowledgement of the limitations of descriptive language. There is also a Hughesian nod to forgetfulness in 'my skin recovers': an attempt to be supplanted and hope that the self is forgotten, and that the idea of border spaces is never very far from the poem, so that as a reader it is possible to move beyond a habitual response to elements of the landscape to starting to

evoke the voice of the landscape as more than human agencies. This is the argument of these two poems: that poetry lies in the meeting between the poem and the reader, in the same way that architecture should thrill the senses to achieve wakefulness. The eye engineers separation, whereas touch conveys sensitivity and affection. The effects of chiaroscuro are, I hope, to be sensed in both poems, resulting in a breathing in of light and dark in order to strengthen a sense of in-between-ness, by evoking smell, sound and touch. This quality of in-between-ness has another more disconcerting dimension: being somewhere, and yet wishing to be somewhere else. The effect of these combined influences on my work is a means of conditioning the imagination to make it more receptive to the irrational and to move out of the mechanical responses to the natural world.

## Chapter Four: Writing ‘Pwllpeiran’: Alice Oswald, Peter Zumthor and Imprisoned Language

Writing in 2011, Alice Oswald commented:

Wordsworth had a picturesque view of landscape which I hate. He writes about it in huge imprisoning sentences. You can only create meaning if you have physically put yourself through something.<sup>161</sup>

Oswald’s remarks evidently harbour a suspicion of Wordsworth’s compositional methods. Yet despite Oswald’s reluctance to ally her writing with the Romantic literary tradition, remarkable similarities are discernible in the two writers’ attitudes towards nature. For a start, both share an explicit – and explicitly articulated – environmental outlook. In Wordsworth, nature and the recollection of natural scenes helped to set in motion a loop between seeing and reflection, which, as Andrew Michael Roberts points out, is a ‘complex and resonant term’.<sup>162</sup> Wordsworth rejected an aesthetic emphasis of turning the world into a series of pleasing pictures: thinking about nature was a process of reflexive thought, though Wordsworth had a distrust of the imagery of reflection. Similarly, in her interpretative resistance of pleasing landscapes, and suspicion of the dominance of the visual, in her poem ‘Dart’, Oswald records conversations with people who work with or on the river and reflect her desire to include the human and non-human as well as a desire to ‘see into the life of things’.( ‘Tintern Abbey’, line 50). So far, so Wordsworth. In this chapter, I argue that these ostensibly different poets engage in a dialogue, in part with each other and in part over the environment of rivers, that offers crucial – and, in my practice, instructive – insights into making distinctive use of the visual and aural aspects of the poem itself, and how multiples of

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<sup>161</sup> Maureen Cleave, ‘Going with the Flow’, *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2003, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books3588888/Going-with-the-flow.html>> [accessed 5th April 2017].

<sup>162</sup> Andrew Michael Roberts, ‘The Visual and the Self in Contemporary Poetry’: Modelling the Self: Subjectivity and Identity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Thought and Culture’, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, Issue 51, August 2008 <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019263ar> [accessed 12 April 2017].



representations allow us to reflect upon the process of seeing and listening: a play of presence and absence. Oswald engages with the Romantic legacy by associating the act of seeing with understanding and self-shaping, and uses this legacy to reconfigure her relationship between text, self and the visual in the expressive use of sound and visual layout. Only through the dialogue of the speakers in *Dart* does Oswald's work identify the ground, literal and figurative, in which her work diverges from that of Wordsworth's more visual and loping use of language, suggesting a continuity between humans and nature, whereas Oswald prefers to be enthralled by the contrariness of nature.

In *Poetry for Beginners*, Oswald describes the process of making a poem: 'Poems are written in the sound house of a whole body, not just with the hands. So before writing, I always spend a certain amount of time preparing my listening'.<sup>163</sup> A poet so 'sound-centred' as Oswald shows a desire to interrogate.<sup>164</sup> In *Dart* (2002), we see what Jacques Rancière called the partition of the sensible: 'parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)'.<sup>165</sup> Intertwining poetry and prose, Tom Bristow describes her approach as 'a concept of building through sound and listening'.<sup>166</sup> The ironic distance created by Oswald's attitude towards Wordsworth's use of language and the attentiveness to the non-human, that is such a distinctive aspect of her writing, offers a model of processes of writing about nature – together with Wordsworth's poetics, Oswald reinforced my thinking about nature as local space. Equally, her

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<sup>163</sup> 'Poetry for Beginners' *BBC Get Writing*, 23 June 2008, [www.bbc.co.uk/dns/getwriting/module18](http://www.bbc.co.uk/dns/getwriting/module18)

<sup>164</sup> David Farrier, 'Like a Stone': Ecology, *Enargeia*, and Ethical Time in Alice Oswald's *Memorial*, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 4 (2014), pp. 1-18, [www.environmentalhumanities.org](http://www.environmentalhumanities.org).

<sup>165</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Julie Rose, (trans.), (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.vii.

<sup>166</sup> Tom Bristow, 'Contracted to an Eye Quiet World: Sonic Census or Poetics of Place in Alice Oswald', *Symbiosis* 10.2 (2006), p.175.

disquiet at the more ‘imprisoning’ aspects of Wordsworth’s style offered a sharp warning about the conceptual steps that I, as poet, might take within the poetic labour of building (poetry as architecture, as a structural excrescence into a space). It is possible that Oswald is taking issue with the vastness – the epic shape and scale – of Wordsworth’s sublime version of nature; and it is certainly the case that his language and forms struggle to encompass nature by gathering all biological processes and human imagination into a distinctly Wordsworthian interfusion – the motion and spirit that ‘rolls through all things’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, line 103). Where the two poets’ covalency is to be found is in their shared interest in folklife as linguistic blueprints for their poetry. Where they part company is where, as in her poem *Dart*, Oswald attempts to create a plurality of voices, and Wordsworth focuses on only one; his own.

The thread of definition that runs through my critical commentary has sought to identify nature as something local – the *genius loci*, the spirit of place – rather than general. It is important, too, to conceive of the figure of the poet as inherently local. The desire to let things dwell has important connections with Heideggerian phenomenology, a form of longing that in turn has a clear cognisance to Oswald’s poetic apparatus. The nature in the form of the river we find in the moving sonic world she explores is what is most consistently inconsistent in the Heideggerian sense of ‘to come and stand and remain standing of itself’: rivers, after all, are both here *and* somewhere else.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, she is anxious to extend Wordsworth’s interfusion by reframing it through the diverse singularity of the shape of the river Dart itself. Shapes abound in ‘Tintern Abbey’ - the hedgerows, the ‘plots of cottage ground’ (‘Tintern Abbey, line 11), - and here, then, Oswald might argue that the words used to identify these shapes are put down as a symbol of nature. Wordsworth carefully describes the process of his seeing as it happens, interfused with the subjectivity of his memory and awareness of time passed: ‘Five years have past’ (‘Tintern Abbey’, line 1). Instead of this

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<sup>167</sup>Albert Peter Pacelli, *Being and Intelligibility* (Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2017), p.252.

Wordsworthian subjective usage, Oswald senses shape in the appearance of a word, put down for itself and listening reflected in the streaming of different voices; part of the whole, but at the same time aware of its own stance. Such an approach to writing requires a different mode of reflection and writing. Likewise, listening in to the stance or viewpoint of plants, water, darkness, light or the details of a building occur, perhaps because of our dependence on light. Writing about light, architect Peter Zumthor suggests the following:

Thinking about daylight and artificial light I have to admit that daylight, the light on things, is so moving to me that I feel [it has] almost a spiritual quality. When the sun comes up in the morning – which I always find so marvellous, absolutely fantastic the way it comes back every morning – and casts its light on things, it doesn't feel as if it quite belongs in this world. I don't understand light. It gives me the feeling that there's something beyond me, something beyond all understanding. And I am very glad, very grateful that there is such a thing.<sup>168</sup>

His comments reveal an important link between the poetic building of Wordsworth and Oswald in that, first and foremost, inherent in the act of creating a sense of place is the ability to single out and identify sensory details. Previously in this essay, I wrote about the sensory dynamic of darkness and light as shaping influences on my work. The idea under consideration in this chapter is that of the river existing as a form of subterranean dark – ‘the black gland’ (Oswald) – and that it functions as part of the human psyche.<sup>169</sup> Darkness provides a fertile set of possibilities to describe the ways in which ideas and feelings emerge from the self and can cross boundaries. Darkness requires light to isolate and explore individual details of thoughts. Elements of dark and light are used as tools in my writing, along with the varying sensibilities and changing cartographies of water, to help define the aesthetic process, the passage of digging and excavating that is the act of my writing. Details – in architectural terms, often intimate memories of place – are derived from intricate details that form bonds with space and place, as in the following lines:

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<sup>168</sup> Peter Zumthor, *The Light on Things*, from *Atmospheres*, <https://arcSPACE.com/bookcase/atmospheres>; pp. 60-61 [accessed 12 May 2016].

<sup>169</sup> Alice Oswald, from ‘River’ in *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.41.

52°19'50"N / 3°53'47"W

cloud: gold foam.

Undo this rope  
 tributaries criss-cross  
 tides once lithe  
 now heavy with sweeps of amber  
 it shivers and whines at my legs.  
 Arrives highly tuned  
 redoubles itself darkens my hem  
 ('Pwllpeiran', lines 1-9)

The river becomes a landscape that is both interior and exterior; the river is reformulated, starting from its source, and pictured as something in continuous movement, process and transformation. This process of democratic transformation can be seen in the way that *Dart* establishes a dialogue with the landscape, whose voices should be heard as concomitant with the voice of the river. The human voices in *Dart* are inextricably linked with origins, the declaration that 'I know who I am, I come from the little heap of stones up by Postbridge' (*Dart*, p.4), shifts away from the Wordsworthian trope of the river as having a profound effect upon the mind, the 'mighty world/of eye and ear' and what it might 'half-create' ('Tintern Abbey', lines 105-106). By means of development, Oswald's sense of origin does not involve reflections upon time and space, but something more mundane, though no less important: a pile of stones. The singling out of specific details for their commonality implies that although the river may have one single source, the plurality of voices suggests that the river has many beginnings. These details as observed in the work of Oswald occur in architecture as well as poetry, and go beyond the physical use of space to become an experience and a memory, structures that are internalised and personal. Like Steven Holl, Zumthor also believes that the sensory experience in architectural encounters should be

critical and complementary. There is a strategic elasticity, he argues, between human perception and architectural rigour, and as an architect Zumthor's responsibility begins with his response to materials and their ability 'to contribute ... to the atmosphere of places and spaces that kindle our emotions'.<sup>170</sup> In that sense our most vivid memories occur through the expression of material and texture, a characteristic found in the work of Steven Holl. Likewise, Oswald's tools and recognition of nature's materials in the case of *Dart* allow her to record the 'unselfconscious' voice textures of her interviews that form individual sections of the poem.

Oswald's process of making a poem bears a further similarity to Zumthor's creative process, in that whilst teaching at Harvard he set his students a project to design a house without a form. The objective was to design a new sort of space, described essentially by sounds and smells. The important guide here in the production of my own writing is the shared desire between these two practitioners to create an emotional space through sensing the localised details of nature. Both Zumthor and Oswald seek ways of recording the immediacy of the conscious and the unconscious: something that, as Zumthor says, is a 'capacity given to us as humans ... to survive'.<sup>171</sup>

The atmospheric interrelatedness of Oswald's approach to *Dart* was to map the river over the course of three years in her poem, or 'songline'.<sup>172</sup> We encounter several voices and personalities existing alongside currents, sources and river-markers. As the poem progresses towards the sea, these figures gather to become an authentic integration of selves. The river-poem can be understood as revelling in its own consciousness of the process of making. Oswald discloses

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<sup>170</sup> Peter Zumthor, Maureen Oberli-Turner, and Catherine Schubert *Thinking Architecture* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2006), pp.85-86.

<sup>171</sup> Peter Zumthor, 'Seven Observations on Presence In Architecture', *Arch Daily* (2013), <<http://www.archdaily.com>> [accessed 7 April 2017].

<sup>172</sup> Oswald (2002), prefatory note.

the self of the poem through the listening self, for as the poem progresses, it is trying, through the recording of various voices and mutterings, to realise its identity. This complex and varied relationship is suggested when, in the opening lines, Oswald presents the reader with an old man, who is 'seeking and finding a difficulty' (*Dart* p.1). The old man consults his map and is responded to by the river: 'The Dart, lying low in the darkness calls out Who is it? trying to summon itself by speaking' (*ibid.*). Although *Dart* constitutes a collection of voices that are variously attuned to each other, the poem is also a model of poetic reformulation that correlates to an atmosphere of otherliness, defined as the river being unknown to itself, so it tries to summon a voice by calling out to the old man; both old man and river are trying to transform the distance between them into nearness, where a sense of dwelling or at the very least shelter can be reached. My own response to this idea of reaching out and sensing shelter and or dwelling comes in the following lines:

Sheep had strayed into a quiet land,  
beside a stream, the bridge of the blessed ford  
and through the stuttering mud they led them to find  
a tramp frozen to death.

He sleeps now in dreams of endless fine summer weather  
the thrum of rain far off and never quite arriving  
it falls elsewhere.  
He can sense it but now his feet are never wet.

The cold too has stayed away.

He dreams on through the dark and light of seasons  
that have no inkling of why the leaves are tired  
or why the coracles of rowans at their reddest now  
must fall.

(*'Pwllpeiran'* lines 333-345).

This interrogation of place, position and perspective is precisely what I set out to record and, like *Dart*, *'Pwllpeiran'* is written in several voices and takes as its subject matter the landscape, buildings and ecology of the grasslands of Pwllpeiran and the surrounding area. The poem,

commissioned for the Pwllpeiran Writer-in-Residence project 2013, set out to record the effects of time and human activity in the Cwmystwyth Valley. Similar to *Dart*, the key relationship with place that runs through the poem is the activity of work, and the river Ystwyth. Oswald describes her own preoccupation with work as a means of uncovering words from the river-dwellers on the river Dart, words from their respective occupations that have flare. A two-month time constraint meant that for my research I turned to historical letters and documents sourced from the National Library of Wales to help me conjure the dead inhabitants – the past social ecologies – of the valley. This research was accompanied by a number of interviews with individuals, all of whom had a connection with Pwllpeiran Research Centre, either because they had worked there or lived in the valley. Whilst I can appreciate the compositional modernity of interviews with the living, my response, in a sort of ventriloquist's act, was to imagine a walker, map in hand, visiting the various locations, intending that, rather than feeling divorced from the landscape, this imaginative carapace would allow me to create an intense juxtaposition of scene, sound, imagery and memory, with the map acting as both a historical document and a route-finder (hence the longitude and latitude measurements that head each phase of the journey). It was envisaged that a prospective reader could use these figures to guide them by entering them into their mobile phone or other navigation device, to be able to stand in the location and hear the voice associated with the place as it occurs in the poem itself.

The poem is characterised by its broken, episodic form, comprising poetry, prose and historical records to continually shift the stance, trying to mingle both human and non-human voices. I took on both Zumthor's ideas about materials and Oswald's single entity of the river: how its movements affect a person's internal thoughts as a starting point for the composition of 'Pwllpeiran'. The prompt for this part of the collection was Oswald's advice to:

put your ear to the river you hear trees  
 put your ear to the trees you hear the widening  
 numerical workings of the river<sup>173</sup>  
 ('River' from *Woods etc.*, lines 3-6)

Listening to the waterscape, and the mathematical references linked neatly with both Zumthor and in particular, Oswald's insights about how listening to the sounds of a place would help to avoid the spectatorship or 'imprisoning' effects of language and enabled me to engage fully with the soundscapes of the Ystwyth valley.<sup>174</sup> Both these practitioners seem clear that if, as a writer, I were to engage with the decay and organic growth of place, then a 'direct' encounter with nature could occur, and that this action would counter any preconceived intellectual awareness of that environment. My investigation into the auditory soundscape of the valley was further encouraged by Oswald's early poem 'Song of a Stone' (2005). This poem's chant-like, almost quasi-religious rhythms (something I found deeply unsettling for its keening, grief-like quality) are the result of Oswald's subjective ear; she describes the process as one of 'naming through listening'.<sup>175</sup> It is here that Oswald perhaps invokes Wordsworth in her use of the human sensory system, and here that nature exists in its own terms but can also become part of the human cycle. Her advice to listen for sentences and distinct grammatical waves emanating from things is something I set out to explore as part of my larger project of responding to the landscape of Pwllpeiran.

The river Ystwyth runs through my poem as narrative backbone; inspired by the idea of Oswald's 'river's mutterings', my aim was to conjure the same inclusiveness of voices<sup>176</sup>. As a

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<sup>173</sup> Alice Oswald, from 'River', *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.41.

<sup>174</sup> Maureen Cleave, 'Going with the Flow', *The Telegraph*, 22 January 2003, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books3588888/Going-with-the-flow.html>> [accessed 5th April 2017]

<sup>175</sup> Alice Oswald, in the introduction to *The Thunder Mutters: 101 Poems for the Planet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.ix.

<sup>176</sup> Oswald, 2002, prefatory note.



corollary to this effort, it seemed vital to make the reader aware of the historical calculus in terms of social needs and relationships. In this larger cumulative effect, 'Pwllpeiran' bears an influence from Oswald's otherliness, reflecting historical, political and social relationships. To introduce this sense of otherliness, 'Pwllpeiran' begins with the sound-sense of someone breathing:

Pine  
 resin  
 evening  
 clouds  
 pinpricks of light soft  
 sleeves  
 rollback  
 sap and water that speak  
 ('Pwllpeiran', lines 1-8)

My intention was to build the poem through listening to the breathing and at the same time, smell and see the images prompted by a walker's listening list. This list marks their initial contact with the surroundings and attempts to fuse sound with locality. The river Ystwyth is located geographically and the co-ordinates mark the embedding of the self into the river-world to become part of the discourse as the river is inextricably linked to its origins and is part of the presence of nature. The sense of the river's geology and energy is both specific and intense in:

Daggers and trefoils  
 reminders of stone lock out light and congeal into slate,  
 cataloguing the properties of air and water.  
 Darts of surf make their way up river.  
 Gravel sweeps its colour to counterpoint the dark to make space.  
 Water fastens me to the land and will drown or save  
 ('Pwllpeiran', lines 40-45)

The intention is to transform the river into the central element that, as the poem progresses, becomes stronger and more identifiable as it shapes the lives that have come and gone in the valley. An assertion of the fragility of these processes and of the balance that must be struck between

inhabitants and local nature comes in the daily reminders of geological time inside the stones of the riverbed, as old light is ‘congealed’ into material and history becomes ‘air and water’. The poem moves on to realise that water is both a barrier and a liberator and always a force to be reckoned with, and so an essential part of slowly uncovering the river’s identity.

More identities appear in the development of ‘Pwllpeiran’ as it sets up, and seeks out, resonances with Oswald’s poem, stopping the movement of the river to focus on the rain. In this act of focusing away from the river itself, the poem also acknowledges Theodor Schwenck’s observations about how ‘water is thus the great exchanger and transformer of substances in metabolism.’<sup>177</sup> Ideas of the circulation of water and of how it can create very localised atmospheric conditions in its ascending and descending movements are recorded in the following lines:

to the breaking earth the sky will give  
close coverings of rain spirals of sun  
brooks  
straw and the promise of bees

the hook and eye of dawn  
bring a dulcimer of blackbird song  
and something more...

something soft  
scent of sap  
broken wood and apple

unblemished

quiescent

surfaces

into open ground

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<sup>177</sup> Theodor Schwenck, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*, Olive Whicher and Johanna Wrigley, (trans.), (London: Sophia Books, 2014), p.78.

(‘Pwllpeiran’, lines 74-87).

My aim here is to arrest the momentum of the poem and so the reader’s attention on the river itself and to divert the reader’s focus, rather as a tributary does in a falling river, and create a stilled space. As Oswald’s listening technique creates a moment of rest in *Dart*, the intended effect in ‘Pwllpeiran’ is to allow the reader to give themselves over to the water cycle: rather as if they enter into the intelligence of the rain itself. Like the swimmers in *Dart*, this act resembles the figure that plunges into ‘the fish dimension’, (*Dart* p. 22). The subjects of rain and reader vibrate against each other and the intention is that they should not need mediation. Like Oswald’s aim to re-engage with the river, my purpose is to reconnect the imagination to environment, and to encourage the reader to venture into the material realm where it might be possible to imagine a new relationship with things.

Mary Pinard has referred to Oswald as the practitioner of an ‘echo poetics’, privileging ‘the acoustics of the environment’.<sup>178</sup> In *Memorial*, in its pastoral counterpoint, there is a clear focus on the haunting aspects of climate change<sup>179</sup>. Her fusion of Homeric pastoral lyric and lament poetry is intended to make the reader think about past, present and future actions and effects. This enforced intimacy of rethinking our relationship with nature is something that I address in ‘Pwllpeiran’. The spectral echoes that Oswald achieves through the repeated similes in ‘Memorial’ are metamorphosed into Hughesian folklore in my poem, as ancient methods are used to locate the ore: ‘hazel rods for silver: pitch pine cut before sunrise on a waxing moon for lead and for tin’ (lines 264-265). The miners acknowledge their ‘silent friends’... ‘the knockers’ (line 262), for whom ‘food and drink’ (line 263) is left to help them discover the lead in the Cwmystwyth mines. Before that,

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<sup>178</sup> Mary Pinard, ‘Voice(s) of the Poet-Gardener: Alice Oswald and the Poetry of Acoustic Encounter’, *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol.10, No.2 Eco-poetics and the Eco-Narrative (Spring 2009), pp.17-32 *JSTOR* < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41210016> > [accessed 29 July 2017].

<sup>179</sup> Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).

Neolithic man used ‘stone hammers and antler horns’ (lines 265-66). The attempt here is to identify matter deep within its own world and the human desire to possess it. Absence distills into the ‘voices still calling through the tunnels’ (line 260), which may approximate to what Deborah Bird Rose calls ‘multi species knots of ethical time’.<sup>180</sup> Rose’s argument is helpful, since it suggests that there are uncountable coeval others that care for each living creature, counterpoised by a vulnerability and respect for ancient knowledge. In order to illustrate this at this point in the poem, the reader dives into the depths of the non-human earth accompanied by the sound of the river and ghostly voices, only to emerge through the next stanza into another time in which snow has fallen. The argument and warning I am trying to make is the suggestion that by moving in and out of the non-human world, the river and the voices are shape-shifters or protean, in the sense that the image of the river derives multiples selves, from inside the mine workings, to the architectural Cistercian monastery, to the present scientific working of the farming landscape. These are polymorphous, and reflective of our postmodern sense of ipseity as a process of dwelling.

As ‘Pwllpeiran’ cadences towards its conclusion, it focuses on fertility and light. The renewable powers of light and space and the connections of circadian rhythms between the human and the non-human world are offered to suggest that the resulting atmosphere is there to be experienced. They are silent interventions that can be felt through the body as well as through the built landscape. Zumthor argues for the silence of stillness and notes that, though a building itself is not necessary poetic, it may possess subtle qualities that permit us at certain moments to understand a location in a way that we were never quite able to before. The process of exploring space and place, then, forms a central logic – or anti-logic – of ‘Pwllpeiran’. The moving dynamic of the poem is, as I have suggested, the river, but it is also the buildings that line it, relate to it, and have

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<sup>180</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time’, *Environmental Philosophy* 9, no.1 (2012), p.127.

become part of the landscape. Water and buildings together, it seems to me, have a strong alchemy, and are capable as a grouping, or unit, of conveying an intense sense of their spatial quality. In ‘Personal Helicon’, Seamus Heaney uses water as a device for setting the imagination going and ‘to set the darkness echoing’.<sup>181</sup> Zumthor observes, similarly, ‘that the creative act in which a work of architecture comes into being goes beyond all historical and technical knowledge’ and ‘So, I pay all my attention in my work to conceive my buildings as bodies, building them as an anatomy and a skin, as a mass, a membrane, as matter or cover, fabric, silk and shiny steel.’<sup>182</sup> Both Heaney and Zumthor suggest that water is a unifying factor, expanding and exploring itself and landscape by moving back and forth to create as, Zumthor says ‘emotional places that really get to you.’<sup>183</sup>

In the Hafod section of ‘Pwllpeiran’, the writing enters a different phase in that it attempts to feel its way into a different atmosphere. It attempts, as Zumthor argues in *Thinking Architecture*, to absorb the traces of human life and to expose the architecture to life, in that ‘Presence is like a gap in the flow of history, where all of [a] sudden it is not past and not future.’<sup>184</sup> In this phase of the poem, I attempt to acknowledge Zumthor’s observation about ‘presence’ and the ‘gap’ in history when the walker encounters silence but is at the same time propelled through time: ‘when what was now was never now, when what was entirely here was not really here’ (Pwllpeiran, lines 308-9). There is certainly something protean happening in the encounter with the emotional space of the building: the rain has altered itself to present a threshold or liminality into which the walker has unexpectedly wandered: ‘the rain that whipped’ (line 299). The thingness of water is not predicated

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<sup>181</sup> Seamus Heaney, ‘Personal Helicon’ *Opened Ground Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998).

<sup>182</sup> Peter Zumthor Maureen, Oberli-Turner and Catherine Schubert, *Thinking Architecture* (Birkhauser, 2006), pp.85-86.

<sup>183</sup> Peter Zumthor, ‘Seven Observations on Presence In Architecture’, *Arch Daily* (2013), <<http://www.archdaily.com>> [accessed 7 April 2017]. p. 6.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, Peter Zumthor, ‘Seven Observations’ p. 6.

on purity: the natural world seems somehow darker – a boundary that is routinely breached through the poem, but calls to mind Williams Carlos Williams’s ‘Hard Core of Beauty.’<sup>185</sup> Williams’s argument, picked up by Zumthor, is that there are no ideas except in the things themselves. For Zumthor, what this means for architecture is not to stir up emotions with buildings, but to let emotions emerge. If the building is conceived accurately enough for its place and function it will, he argues, ‘develop its own strength.’<sup>186</sup> He develops this perspective with reference to a thermal bath project in the mountains near his studio. He began not by forming preliminary images and then adapting them to the assignment, but by answering questions that arose from the location of the site, its purpose and the building materials: mountain, rock and water. In writing ‘Pwllpeiran’ I adhered to this approach. Immersing myself in the appearance and of the landscape of Cwmystwyth meant that I could attempt to apprehend and experience the culturally innocent (as it seemed to me) attributes of the landscape elements. The poem as a whole reflects Zumthor’s process of practice by striving to achieve a cognisance of details that interlink through the act of looking, and of stepping into space. The metaphysical aspects of Martin Heidegger’s arguments about space in his essay ‘Building, Dwelling, Thinking’ echo those of Zumthor’s reading of Heidegger’s work, which is that, to paraphrase Heidegger’s words, our relationship to place and with places to spaces is based on dwelling in them. Zumthor achieves the sense of dwelling by privileging the experiential qualities of a building over its technological, cultural or theoretical influences. In Zumthor’s pursuit of the primacy of sensory and experiential qualities of architecture, he is in keeping with Heidegger. Zumthor’s thinking reflects the importance of local detail and of sensory vibrations between a building and its location; through the detection of presence, and the emotional space, the importance of context, experience and, and not aesthetic, these are helpful approaches in the making

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<sup>185</sup>Neil Easterbrook, ‘Somehow Disturbed at the Core’: Words and Things in William Carlos Williams.” *South Central Review*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1994, pp. 25–44. *JSTOR*, < [www.jstor.org/stable/3190244](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3190244) > [accessed 23 May 2020]

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, Peter Zumthor, ‘Seven Observations’, p. 6.

of poetry. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Zumthor once explained his process: ‘When I start, my first idea for a building is with the material. I believe architecture is about that. It’s not about paper, it’s not about forms. It’s about space and material.’<sup>187</sup> Zumthor’s sensory awareness of things unseen but that exist in a landscape applies to my approach to writing ‘Pwllpeiran’. For Zumthor the process of design begins when, in starting to assemble the imaginative design for a building, images of other places start to form and to invade the process of precise observation. I heard in his account clear advice to a poet: the importance of immersing oneself in a particular location and allowing that experience to prompt an act of listening and looking, a de-centring but ongoing focus on being, similar to the arrival of what Wordsworth conceived as essence of place.

Architecture and poetry are not exclusively about form: they can both be made to build anything. The sensations of place can then be converted into the building blocks of a poetic language. Within the process of poetic building, a key device is the deliberate characterisation of moving through the landscape and to avoid landscape as a conceit that is returned to, but that remains open to the energies of the natural world that may in themselves have different centres, in that, as ‘Pwllpeiran’ demonstrates, the landscape is continually crossing over itself. The driving creative force for me, then, is an inner tension that can refer to the place itself, but moves out beyond the immediate dimension of the poem and the locale. Leo Mellor’s TLS review of Oswald’s *Woods etc.* describes this ongoing sense of de-centring and focus as ‘non-specificity of place’ achieved through listening in.<sup>188</sup> The poet, like the architect, has to extract compositional details to form strong bonding effects, creating harmonising sensory worlds. In view of this, I like the look of words that seem to be happening all at once, so there is a deliberate lack of controlling punctuation,

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<sup>187</sup> Robin Pogrebin, ‘Pritzker Prize goes to Peter Zumthor’, published in the *New York Times* on 12 April 2009.

<sup>188</sup> Leo Mellor, “Here not Here” review of Alice Oswald’s *Woods etc.* (2005) in TLS (June 3, 2005) <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/private/here-not-here/>> accessed April 2015.

and the design of my poem, like that of a building, involves Zumthorian concern for the relationship between materials, and in my case, using Zumthor's approach to help in my own re-thinking of poetic structures. I then employ this approach in thinking about, exploring and selecting physical materials for their objective sensuousness:

the track stops  
 they must have run out of breath  
 the ones who came here  
                           built this house    where soil meets dusk

it faces the sun  
 and the sea  
 far off  
 winking blades of gold

there are other tracks  
 but they seem lost somehow...  
 and in the barely moving heat of August

wait listen

                  other selves  
 ('Pwllpeiran', lines 98-111)

The speaking voice here focuses on the moment when perception is formed. The intention in paring back the punctuation and grammar of the verse is to suggest that we experience nature in a similar way to how Zumthor suggests we experience architecture, through hearing, touch, sight and smell, re-invoked time and again: put the materials together and a reaction starts. The speaking subject here finds itself in the open, looking at and listening to its own surrounds, echoing Zumthor's belief and patient attention to the location and materials for building. Combine the objectivity of listening and sensing, and the architecture of place is very similar to the way in which Oswald gives shape to the distinct grammatical patterns that she senses in her own creative methods. Both Zumthor and



Oswald tap into the geologic sensibility of their surroundings. ‘Pwllpeiran’, as it moves into its final phases, meditates on this sensibility and offers something more:

blood bone black smoke call space eye grass vetch  
(lines 417).

Grammatical collapse indicates an absence yet takes on a presence. This acknowledges the generosity of the non-human world and is concluded in:

time is filtered here conveys space like minnows bobbing in water  
a fox’s bark ribbons over green linen of late fields

an alder shredded by mist floats late moths like sycamore planes.  
(lines 427-29).

The landscape has become chthonic, *almost* haunted, and at the same time, the otherliness of seen things contains the identities of others. The intention is that by insisting upon the vocative, the reader is reminded that this more-than-human world is inherited, and that each of our lives is cited through sequences of time, the brevity of which is hinted at in the cycle of predation alluded to in the fox’s call.

The manner in which the speaking subject finds itself caught up in a pattern of non-human being in the concluding stages and in other parts of ‘Pwllpeiran’ is a mode for human existence as dwelling. The subject is in a context that defies any sense of place and over which it has no control: a non-place, but one that is absolute. The poetic language as it appears, stretches itself in both sight and sound, as does the landscape. Immersive participation in the landscape, where there occurs a sense of recognition, of grounding and of belonging, is echoed in an interview Oswald gave in

2003, in that in order to fully engage with landscape as a poet one has to avoid restricting the relationship to one sense. She comments, 'I enjoy[s] a view of the world that's participatory – that you don't look at with your eye, you look at it with your ear and with your body, your walking through it and working through it'.<sup>189</sup> Listening *in* and *leaning in* then, is connected with the origins of sensing space and open up to difference, to borders and to movement. Listening also allows the poet to access history in poetic dwellings that are both disruptive and transforming.

In the final paragraph of her 2005 collection, *Consorting with Angels*, Deryn Rees-Jones comments on the 'new, if precarious way of exploring the self and the poetic relationship between text, voice and body' that constitutes an important aspect of Oswald's writing practice.<sup>190</sup> Her use of language to take the wholeness of a subject that has an identity (a river in the case of 'Dart') and to prise it apart and then to allow for a wholeness to seal it over again, is something that Oswald believes creates oneness. To see the divide as strobe-lit (there, not there, there), allows presence to be here in place and now in time. Presence does not transcend or end in the poem, but in the actual writing and speaking of 'Pwllpeiran', the space between borders of the human and non human world can be detected: these strategies have allowed me to locate my own recognition of a shared existence with nature and also to understand in richer ways the nature of my own poetic persona.

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<sup>189</sup> Alice Oswald, 'Presiding Spirits. Oswald turns back to Sophocles' in *Magma Poetry*, vol. 26, Summer 2003, pp.28-32.

<sup>190</sup> Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005)

## Conclusion

The poets and the architects that have informed my practice have shown a similar desire to my own to celebrate alternative kinds of knowledge, and to embrace ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’, as Keats formulates ‘negative capability’.<sup>191</sup> I began from the premise that if the act of writing environmental poetry is to be self-revelatory in any sense, it must be attuned to transformations, to what lies at the borders of emotional and physical states, and will acknowledge that the agencies of nature require an articulate voice, a translator, a ventriloquist, even – but crucially one that, as Timothy Clark points out, has ‘develop[ed] critical articulacy’.<sup>192</sup> My writing is perhaps more discreet in its ecological sensibilities than some of the writers I have considered in this commentary, but my work proceeds from the acknowledgement that everything exists in time, and positions itself closely to what Gregory Bateson refers to as ‘ecology of mind’.<sup>193</sup> In other words, it has explored those marginal landscapes that Kathleen Jamie praises as the sort of nature encountered by the majority of people, recognising that in these places is found the daily fleeting nature of existence that is the stuff of life.<sup>194</sup>

The fact that such backwaters are by definition understated does not mean that the human and the non-human world are not mutually implicated in each other's experiences. Furthermore, if poetry acts in sympathy with Heidegger's claim that if technology in particular has alienated us from the world, then language and especially poetry can intervene in the socially constructed

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<sup>191</sup> Hyder Edward Rollins, (ed.), *Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, (Cambridge: MA Harvard University Press, 1958), vol.1, p. 193

<sup>192</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.162.

<sup>193</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected essays, in Anthropology, Psychiatry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p.490.

<sup>194</sup> Dave Goulson. ‘Country Files: nature writers and the books that inspired them’, *countryfiles* The Guardian 30 April 2016, <<http://www.guardian.com/books/2016/countryfiles-nature-writers-on-books-that-inspired-them>>[accessed 17th April 2017]

concepts of interiority and exteriority. The experimental nature of my writing is an attempt to avoid the nature aesthetic becoming supine. Aesthetic, in my view, should have an ethical dimension. I hope that a reader will find compelling both an awareness of the beautiful – pleasure-giving, reciprocal and lyrical – in my work.

Through an analysis of the creative process involved in the writing of the poems, I have demonstrated how poetry can tap into the otherliness of nature as expressed by Louise Glück in an essay entitled ‘Disruption Hesitation Silence’:

I am attracted to ellipsis, to the unsaid, to suggestion, to eloquent deliberate silence... It is analogous to the unseen; for example the power of ruins. Such work inevitably alludes to larger contexts... they are not whole though wholeness is implied.<sup>195</sup>

At a key point in my doctoral studies, I undertook a two month residency at Pwllpeiran as part of the Pwllpeiran Writer-in-Residence project 2013, setting out to record the effects of time and human activity in the Cwmystwyth Valley. This period of work and reflection was transformative for my creative practice. Reading and writing at this time within the theoretical frameworks of Wordsworth, Oswald, Holl, Zumthor and Burnside challenged me to experiment with space and layouts, as well as to divine a language that allowed for a means of beginning to overcome the hierarchical distinctions between the human and non-human metaphors of empirical mastery, on the one hand, and overly romantic rapture on the other. Although my writing is not overtly political, it does acknowledge the importance of active participation; and so as the collection develops, its argument evolves towards urging a form of listening in, the intention being to develop a collaborative sense or understanding between local and the marginal. In the context of ecological activism, much of new nature writing is understood as wild, remote forests or moorlands, leaving

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<sup>195</sup>Louise Glück, ‘Disruption, Hesitation, Silence’, *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 22, no. 5, 1993, pp. 30–32. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/27781253](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27781253) [accessed 9 May 2019]

out the (sub) urban environments in which people live in. Although my work has focused on liminal urban spaces and where the built environment and nature overlap, I have been keen to avoid the ironic, even celebratory tone found in Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley's co-authored work *Edgelands*. The kind of attentiveness found in this work, though keen to acknowledge the aesthetic resourcefulness of nature, can sound dangerously approving, verging on idealism.

So, although the agents of nature's alterity has been the driving force in shaping the poetry I write, and although my work has been largely cast in lyrical mode, I acknowledge that my poetry falls into a modality of non-subjective lyricism; and as there is, I believe, no such thing as objectivism, it is a form of lyricism where what is at stake is precisely what might be termed the focus of attention. What is important is neither the attending *I* nor the attended object, but rather something that is constructed in the space between, and which exists, as Marcella Durand writes, as 'a sort of prepositional mystery of whether we are *in* or *of* nature'<sup>196</sup>

We live in nature, but are not of it, because why? Because we are human? Is what we make ( manufacture) intrinsically set off from nature, because it came from our heads hands (and machines, with machines begatting machines)? Where does the line between us and nature begin and end? These are questions that poets can bring to poetry, and have been bringing for centuries ...<sup>197</sup>

The experimental nature of my poetry, fusing the semiotic with the architectural, has arisen in part as a means of examining these deep seated dualisms that Durand identifies. The experiments with language and whitespace have been engaged, to use Kristeva's terms, to help 'untangle these

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<sup>196</sup> Marcella Durand, *The Ecology of Poetry*, *ecopoetics* 2 (Fall 2002): pp.58-62. <[ <http://www/factoryschool.org/ecopoetics/>> [accessed August 2018].

<sup>197</sup> Marcella Durand, 'Spatial Interpretations: Ways of Reading Ecological Poetry in Evelyn Reilly and Brenda Iijima, ( *(eco(lang) (uage) (reader)* ) (Portable Press at Yo Yo Labs ([www.yoyolabs.com](http://www.yoyolabs.com)), Fall 2007.

intricate threads'; the intention being to recognise the fragility and changeability of nature and language, but at the same time explore the rich creative possibilities of both.<sup>198</sup>

'Tintern' was composed and received inflections from the catch-all terms of pastoral, or landscape or nature poetry, beginning with a consideration of Wordsworth's Romantic perspective of time and place. This part of the collection is perhaps for me the least satisfactory, since in parts it appears to me to be disjointed in terms of tone and direction. Any weakness of the writing proceeded from my succumbing to the lure of the pastoral, in the hope that the resulting work would provide a fruitful tension. I would also acknowledge that the act of placing my work within the nexus of Romanticism also put it under threat from sentimentality and nostalgia – in other words, I ran the risk of perpetuating deep-seated divisions between the rural and the urban. In attempting to locate my work within the generic or sub-generic pastoral mode, I also risked appearing to belong to a form of 'neo-romantic club' that Harriet Tarlo describes in her introduction in *Women and Ecopoetics*.<sup>199</sup> The writing of 'Tintern' identified an ambivalence about environmentally-aware poetry and although ecological concerns permeate the writing, I wanted to open up a different angle on my relationship with environment and narrative form. Through the intervention of architectural phenomenologies, the process of composition began to undergo a shift towards a more gender-neutral response. Whilst I wished to acknowledge the inspirational legacy of Wordsworth in terms of how he was one of the poets who began to define place and nature, in my archeological exploration of his work I attempted to avoid being subsumed by the critical debates surrounding his work, while engaging seriously with them, and moved instead towards an ecotone,

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<sup>198</sup>Alice Jardine "Introduction to Julia Kristeva's 'Women's Time.'" *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 5–12. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3173502](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173502) [accessed 9 May 2019]

<sup>199</sup> Harriet Tarlo, 'Women and ecopoetics: an introduction' in *Women and Ecopoetics*, *How2 Journal*. 3:2. Web. [https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo\\_intro.html](https://www.asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/introstatements/tarlo_intro.html) [accessed June 7 2019]

creating an edge effect where the ecologies of place, nature and poetry exist in fruitful and dynamic tension with each other. My primary intention through this process, then, has been to engage with innovative poetics. I would struggle to place my writing within a particular strand of ecopoetics, and indeed would wish to avoid limiting my practice through labels, definitions and exclusions.

Bate's presentation of Wordsworth's retreat from the city suggested to me that Wordsworth was trapped in some nostalgic and idealist relationship; that somehow the city was very much part of the poet's consciousness. However, through Bates's provocations, I was able to detect some other form of loss in Wordsworth: a loss that suggested a complex mesh of kinship and hinted at a sense of near-belonging, intensified perhaps by Wordsworth awareness of his own nostalgic impulses. His poetry informed my own approach to writing, but without making the landscape exclusive: that is to say, what is found there could be found anywhere. This is not, of course, to suggest that the idea of place – or place, locale, vicinity itself – is unimportant. My work combines an engagement with particular rural or urban areas, usually somewhere that is less than picturesque. This shift in attention occurred in a more pronounced way in 'Pwllpeiran': in other words, the tracking of things in order to follow other things, and move away from the anthropocentric nature poem as something used to represent my own interior life. In 'Pwllpeiran' the dominant lyric *I* begins to disappear and become demoted and moves away from an aesthetic use of nature to examine reflect the inner/outer model of self, as I was keen to avoid using nature to stage some form of inner drama.

Finally, the architectural influences in my practice have taken subtle forms. I have used architectural phenomenologies to shift the lyric *I* – and the reader's eye – towards a more communal rather than individual perspective, which has permitted an interplay between place and poetics: a focus that comes into play particularly in 'Wan under Wolcan.' At these stages of the collection a mode of thinking through making took over, and I began to develop writing strategies

geared towards producing unusual effects using ordinary words. My aim was to suggest that the pastoral and leisurely are everyday modalities, rather than portals of escape from everyday life. Behind this approach was the desire to interrogate the idea of architecture in landscape as poem and poem as landscape. As I have argued, the primacy of space and the opening of the field allows for a more dynamic, open-form style of writing. The use of the whole page space enabled me to engage and reflect on landscape and to render myself more open to the interrelated network of vegetation, insect and animal life.

In the final phase of the collection, the concerns of the academic eco-argument threaded through my writing come together via the idea of ‘local attachments’. The importance and repositioning of my sense of place through the recognition of local detail and the shift in romantic academic study was an important inflection in the writing of ‘Pwllpeiran’, as is its concern with eighteenth-century biodiversity, but also with the idea that we are always positioned in the midst of historicity: something else is always happening elsewhere. The imperative that has run through this whole collection is that the poems are questions that are to be fully travelled rather than answered, focusing on the moment when perception is formed rather than what follows. These poetic dwellings that occur in this collection are beginnings, encounters, transformations, otherliness and movement.

In his study *The Last of England?* for his survey of literature in the *Oxford English Literary History*, Randall Stevenson suggests that landscape is the mainstay of the poetic imagination.<sup>200</sup> By way of a response to this contention within the postmodern idiom, I have argued that our relationship to the world around us is increasingly problematic, and that there are elements of our

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<sup>200</sup> Randall Stevenson, *Oxford English Literary History, 1960-2000* Vol. 12 ‘The Last of England?’ (Oxford: OUP 2004), p.3.



experience that are outside language. Poetry is a way, a vital way of gesturing at the other. Anne Michaels puts it succinctly in an essay entitled 'Cleopatra's Love', where she suggests that the real power of words (and nature) lies in its ability to 'make our ignorance more precise'.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Anne Michaels 'Cleopatra's Love', *Poetry Canada* 14 (1994), pp.14-15.

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