

We Sigh for Houses

A Collection of Poems

and

Harmonious Discord: Modern Metaphysical Poetry

A Critical Dissertation

Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing

Presented to Royal Holloway, University of London

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby certify that all I present for examination, a collection of poems and a series of essays, is my own original work. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

.....
Aviva Dautch, 18th September 2015

ABSTRACT

For this practice-based PhD in Creative Writing my thesis is presented in two parts. Part 1 is a collection of my own poems with a modern metaphysical aesthetic, entitled 'We Sigh For Houses'. Part 2, 'Harmonious Discord: Modern Metaphysical Poetry', is a critical dissertation composed of an introduction, conclusion and three chapters.

T.S. Eliot saw both literary and historical resonances between the Seventeenth and Twentieth Centuries, claiming, "this poetry and this age have some peculiar affinity with our own poetry and our own age", utilising *Discordia Concors* as a model for his own writing. According to Samuel Johnson's famous complaint about the Metaphysical Poets, "the most heterogenous ideas are yoked by violence together" but in Eliot's understanding, heterogeneity is "compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind", a desire to unify what is fragmented which seems driven by his religious sensibility. In my dissertation I argue that, while the task of the contemporary writer is not necessarily to compel into unity, the mode of *Discordia Concors* is a useful one for a religious poet writing in the modern world.

In the introduction I trace the history and usage of the terminology "Metaphysical Poets" and outline characteristics of a modern metaphysical aesthetic. Then, in a series of essays titled with quotations from Eliot's poems, I read modernist and contemporary religious poets against their metaphysical predecessors in order to explore different dimensions of "harmonious discord". Firstly, I describe war poet Isaac Rosenberg as an embryonic modern metaphysical, due to his biographical circumstances and deliberate artistic choices, as well as his reading of John Donne. The second chapter compares the prayer poetry of Israeli poet-soldier Yehudah Amichai to that of poet-priest George Herbert, weighing up the countervailing tensions in their work created by the pull between faith and politics. The third analyses the use of biblical images in the eco-poetics of John Burnside and Andrew Marvell, tracing how they employ Judeo-Christian conceits in long poems mapping bodies of land that carry the scars of both real and symbolic wars. I conclude with a summary of how I employ modern metaphysical techniques and consider my poetic praxis in light of my reading.

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We Sigh for Houses

A Collection of Poems

Discordia Concors

That I didn't have to be *either/or* I didn't understand.
My favourite place, the green velvet settee – unravelling
its fringe slowly, twisting out the knots until each tassel
separated into component loops. My mother taught me

I was made from helixes and sequences, nucleotides
and codes. My father pulled me on his lap and told
the fable of a Rabbi who kept words in his pockets:
I am but dust and ashes. For my sake the world was created.

That was before, when black and white films made clear
who were the goodies and baddies, when I didn't know
how I'd spend years willing myself to bridge an ever-
widening split between fallible soul and failing body.

I

'Tis then we sigh for houses
And our departure take

– Emily Dickinson

On Returning

Oh I could have stood for days in the doorway, positioned
between cracked wood and cracked wood, inert in my frame

like the pictures I'd scrutinized in white-painted galleries where
I used to spend afternoons, not for the art, but for the feeling

of empty space. Under my feet, the porch hummed with beetles –
shifting, I heard the crunch of a shattered carapace. It was a world

I hadn't entered for years, no human had, other than my mother,
my brilliant, desolate mother, small among her decaying hoard.

I could have stared and stared at the matted newspapers
carpeting a narrow path between the piles – their grimy print

an accidental collage – or at the tower of teetering bottles
full of indeterminate liquid, the broken-spined novels,

red bills spilling awkwardly down the stairs. I was trying
to measure her madness by her cache. Futile! Stand still

long enough and everything degrades. The stench that pushed
against me, sweet with rot and mould, became the air I breathed

whose strangeness began to fade. This was home. Sunlight
warmed my back but in front of me the hallway was dark and cold.

The Emptying

After the fire I spoke to the house,
saying *I'm sorry* and *I'm leaving you*.
With each armful I took, charred and damp,
onto the lawn for sorting, I chanted
sorry, sorry, sorry but inside I was gleeful

that this was the end. I saved financial records,
unopened envelopes with blackened edges
and corners chewed out, any photographs
whole enough to keep. The rest went into the skip –
what wasn't burnt was infested and anyway

I just wanted to get rid. In protective clothing –
shower cap, mask and white babygro –
I became a large child stumbling around.
The world shrank to piles of salvage and
a search for the necklace with my Hebrew name

Grandma brought home on the last trip she made.
Thirty-two tonnes filtered, then taken to the dump
before I admitted defeat. In Jerusalem
my best friend found me a new one,
this time in silver, but when I wore it

I saw my golden name melting in the fire
or buried in decomposing refuse or wind-born
like the paper scraps that blew into the road
which my mother, raincoat buttoned
over her pink nightie, chased vainly down the street.

What She Kept

My baby photos, school reports, The Famous Five and Winnie-The-Pooh. Gray's Anatomy in three separate editions. The Manchester Evening News, Jewish Chronicle, Jewish Telegraph and Jewish Gazette. Adverts and leaflets, tokens for money-off. Cardboard boxes and plastic bags, seedlings in yoghurt pots. Fluffy toys bought for her great-nephew and nieces, rejected and now infested with fleas. Food on every surface, all kosher but past the sell-by-date. Copies of everything, a broken photocopier in the hall no one could reach to fix. Bandages and sterile strips, burn-bins full of used needles and bloodied cotton wool. Books piled around the chairs and tables, in stacks along the stairs. In the glass-fronted bookcase – bibles and candlesticks, wine glasses and holocaust memoirs, a bottle of nail-varnish remover separated into layers of sediment and oil. Pink varnish, to paint her festering nails. Hundreds of melted lipsticks shading from magenta to red. Clothes in all different sizes, never-been-worn cardigans and dresses hanging from door-frames and banisters, laid out like people on each of the beds.

The House

Her mother barricaded her in behind household goods, newspapers, rotting vegetables, until the house became its own creature in the child's mind. How wave builds upon wave, a crowd roars to hear its own voice, worms halved multiply, and sound expands into silence. *Silence*. The way the piles of stuff swallowed her voice. The house was eating her: toenails thickening with fungus, red rings on her body expanding from pinpricks to a target. Books gave her temporary escape: books with tooth-marks, books with tears, crumbling spines, books burning – feeding the blaze the day the squirrels chewed through the electrical wires – books that had charted her way through the years blackened, covered with melted plastic, words disappearing before her eyes, going, gone. And then, nothing was quiet. The walls clattered as they settled into the earth. The bathtub she'd slept in sank gurgling into despair. The building retracted into itself. She – soft flesh – edged her way out. It's two years now. Two years since her mother buried herself past saving. There's no gravestone yet. Just clean grass, waiting.

Tahara

*Tahara (heb.): lit. 'purification'; the process
of ritually preparing a body for a Jewish burial.*

On the table, carnations.
I hate them. These furred, crimped pinks
my mother would buy.
Even now
she is tightly wound –

the women twist the sheet around her,
over her face,
before letting me into the room,
give me dirt from the Holy Land
to sprinkle into her plywood coffin,

read the Hebrew prayer with me
in their shtetl accent.
I slow them down,
too tired to translate sense
as well as sound.

We lift the lid together, nail it closed.
It's a good deed to care for a body,
to accompany a soul to its grave.
It takes time to learn how to wash
each fold of skin,

how to fold a shroud.
They had studied for this.
They had taken their time.
Longer than promised, than usual.
I'd waited with a friend –

we were meant to recite psalms,
instead we stared
at the linoleum,
could only imagine
what they worked to cleanse.

The Bottle Lid

Hoarders seem to process information in unusual ways, e.g. categorizing possessions by shape or size, rather than by use.

-Professor Randy Frost, 'Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring'

It's metal with fluted edges, the kind of cap
you find on a bottle of beer or old-style cola,
which in its own way is strange: she hated fizz;
advocaat with a bleeding heart of cherry brandy
was more to her taste and then only on festivals.
It lies in a plant pot, alongside the inner-tube
of a toilet roll, handfuls of coins, a kosher salami
rancid in its plastic skin, Great Aunt Bertha's
eternity ring. But this isn't a random collection –

like playschool, today we're heading through
the round window. In my mind, the lid becomes
a porthole, an expanding pupil. In hers it's valuable,
protectively covered by a doily (another frilly thing).
As a child I'd watch her work, sketching family trees
to trace trails of genetic disease. Shading signified
illness then death, dots meant carriers uninfected
themselves. Carefully, she drew squares for the men
and empty circles to represent healthy, female lives.

DNA

Was I just your first quantifiable experiment? Motherhood,
our double helix of relatedness,
a risk, a hopeful libation. You became more known to yourself with
each teaspoon of serum and plasma,
your hold on reality loosening for a moment, making
your eyes dark with the consequences of your numbers.
This is what I remember, Mother: you (half mortal, half divine)
always working and nothing allowed to distract.
You didn't care about dinner or bedtime, reading
while I sat doing homework in the corner of your lab,
reading – scans, test-tubes, graphs – with a scientist's finesse,
so concentrated on the centrifuge spinning its vials of blood
you forgot how to speak to me.

You forgot how to speak to me,
so concentrated on the centrifuge spinning its vials of blood,
reading scans, test-tubes, graphs, with a scientist's finesse
while I sat doing homework in the corner of your lab.
You didn't care about dinner or bedtime reading,
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This is what I remember, Mother: you – half mortal, half divine,
your eyes dark with the consequences of your numbers,
your hold on reality loosening for a moment – making
each teaspoon of serum and plasma
a risk, a hopeful libation. You became more known to yourself with
our double helix of relatedness;
was I just your first quantifiable experiment: motherhood?

Double Helix

From behind black railings
 fencing in the balcony,
we watch molecules of dust drift
 in sunlight over the park

where joggers loop the paths
 trying to suspend the body's
inevitable decay. Iron bars
 keep us from falling into air –

casually we gesture over them
 and our fingers create
shadow birds swooping across
 the white wall at our back,

their dance twisting
 like the falcon's gyre
or Dorothy's tornado, dragging
 her from her Kansas home.

There's No Looking Back

Escape for thy life, look not behind thee
Genesis 19:17

Even here, lodged against a rock
on a bank of unremitting stone,
leaning her whole weight forward,
she feels insubstantial; the wind

whipping tears from her eyes
could reduce her to solids: the trickle
of crystals left when liquid evaporates
into the air. Leaving is impossible.

She'll be found rooted to the spot:
hollow, livid, shrunk to socket
and bone, granulated as the sea's
sodium sting, its residue of pity.

Estrangement

Each time I convince myself
I'm only a distant observer
of your inviolable
self-contained narrative,
some small detail – your scent
drifting on a gust of wind,
strands of auburn in my blonde,
your weariness, perhaps,
as framed in my reflection –
breaks the fourth wall.

The Foundry

Weathered as the house
which went to ruin

and took her childhood
by the throat,

she would lift
a head that wasn't hers

from the table and cast it
in plaster, pour liquid

bronze into the mould,
hollowing it out

to decrease the weight.
This is what she called

patination: weeks
of chemicals and heat

stripping away layers
for the praise of strangers.

There was always
the possibility of harm

but her art came easily,
bleaching the shadows

she exhaled
with each long breath.

Bialik Street

On a street named for the poet who planted
its first garden, past peeling walls and up
a staircase where a desiccated cockroach
grows more beautiful by the hour, blacker,
more angular, stands the apartment
I've chosen for my temporary home.

It looks down on the prow of another block,
vines growing from the balconies around
water heaters and antennae, opposite a disused
synagogue covered in red graffiti, shocking
against the white stone like blood on sheets.
Bialik loathed these buildings, 'luggage'

he called them, but they're near the bank
that holds *Eema's* account, dormant since her death.
I spend hours filling out forms I don't understand,
figure out the word for 'cost' from its liturgical root:
accounting for the soul. Usually, I work hard
not to remember my mother but here,

in this branch, she's a giant and I'm waist height.
At the end of each holiday she would empty
her pockets, coins pouring onto the counter.
She always left Israel lighter. This time,
when I landed, I went straight to Baggage Claim,
carefully translating: claim, *aisoof*, like *Assif*,

the festival when the harvest is gathered,
or *asaf*, how Ruth gleaned leftovers
from the corners of the fields to bring to Naomi;
baggage, *c'voodah*, from *caved*, heavy,
or *cavod*, honour – something you should
give weight to, like the fifth commandment.

II

The loss of Eden is personally experienced
by every one of us as we leave the wonder and magic
and also the pains and terrors of childhood.

– Dennis Potter

The Doorless Closet

All your clothes are laid open, naked, proud –
dresses ranked by colour and length, trousers folded
and hung, shelves with bras and neatly rolled knickers
visible to everyone – and as I lie curled
against your splayed hip I wonder

who dares to be so bold?

I lie there, muscles tensing as the clock
counts minutes since our last release, your breath
bruising my neck until the small slackenings
that signal sleep. It's the hour when knowledge comes,

when the hot stickiness of the body
spills into the feverish mind, sprouting
memories like trees. What I want is to peel you
from my skin as I peel an apple: a careful paring
that savours the flesh. I foresee our separation

in the line of light under the door, scoring one world
from another, and slide my feet to the floor,
bringing the sheet with me,
clasping it to my body like Eve
leaving Eden, conscious for the first time.

Berlin

My 'cubism', call it rather, if it must have a name, 'prism-ism'.
- Lyonel Feininger

Daylight, and the flatness of space
 it gives rise to, is ending,
we no longer see the full glare
of surfaces, dusk is raising different shadows,
 ours blurring as we walk the length
of the Landwehrkanal,
stopping to photograph each other
 in front of a back-lit bridge.
 We cast reflections in the water below –
they're mutating into the corpse of Rosa Luxemburg
 tumbling into the canal
 here and again here,
shifting with the current, settling in the murky silt.

 In the silence, I still hear
our taxi-driver's *dankeshoen* when we paid him
 for the airport ride,
 his raddled skin cracking
 with his smiled *dankeshoen, dankeshoen,*
head swinging around so he could look us in the eye,
 dankeshoen, dankeshoen, dankeshoen,
merging with the spitting cries
 of llamas stretching
 for leaves at the back of the zoological gardens.
The wall is low enough for us to reach over
 and stroke them but, further on, the birds are caged:
scarlet ibis and pelicans
 in a hatched wire aviary.
All their beaks are long, whether curved or flattened –
 long fine hooks and long flat paddles –
lines, slats, edges everywhere, black against the greying sky,
 sharpened, cubist.

We follow the path under the S-Bahn – a train rattling over us –
to a beer-garden strung with Chinese lanterns
 where the pianist is playing *New York, New York*, his friend
shilling for tips with an upended tambourine.
 The coins we throw in skate over its surface
and my right thigh is pressing your left –
 blue notes, the friction of denim against velvet –

as we take out our maps, guide-books, an iPhone,
our fingers sliding across images
of things we've just seen.

Tomorrow you'll stare at a mannequin,
at the shop window refracting her in multiple directions,
then pick up your pencil and draw her hollow eyes,
the curve of her neck,
how her form gathers warmth with the light, gathers depth,
draw the people staring through the glass,
how their gaze bounces
off the planes of her face.

The Picturehouse

And it's a rush into the Ritzy,
discarding layers over the empty seats –

red velvet, just shabby enough –
either side. This is a place built

for silent pictures with its stagey
proscenium arch, walls lined

with plaster panels and swag.
When the lights dim before the Main,

the screen turns transparent
and we see, simultaneously,

the film's certification and
behind, a gap where the organ

should be. Ah, now *The Artist*
is beginning, its first scene

a movie audience reflected back
so we become the screen, watching them

watching us. The music doesn't mask,
as words might, the fabric shifts

of your body when you hinge
forward from the waist.

I catch you, unmediated, with sly
side glances. There's the projection

of course – it flickers over
your skin in all its chiaroscuro glory –

but, although I'm sure
the same shadows fall across me,

for once we aren't mirroring each other
since you're intent on the screen.

Later, when we run for the bus,
the moon always ahead, it's you

who follows me home to my flat
where lamp-lit, top to tail on the sofa,

we talk through what we've just seen,
lift the blue blanket over our heads,

examine how our faces change
in the net cast by its loose weave.

A Study Of The Natural World

for J. I-H.

i. Flow

In front of me: a low, brick wall and then the hill falling away to tree-tops and a river. Sheer drop. Vertigo! I have lost all sense of proportion. Am I staring at the slow-flowing Thames or at a snail's residue across an overgrown yard? Is this your body, trailing its chemical drip-feed? One week, day, hour, minute, second at a time. I can't bear the vastness of the sky, don't dare look out to the horizon, need to keep my gaze low and close. Near my feet, an ant skitters across the pebble-dash; my boot hovers an inch off the ground – how easy it is to end a life. What work its legs are doing, picking themselves up over and over again.

ii. Lawn, Grass

Afterwards, I lie on the grass, the damp creeping through my jeans. I bring my nose near as I dare to the ground; my vision is narrowed to an inch or so, contoured by strands of my hair, as split, as variegated, as the lawn below. There is straw, plush moss, something that looks like a miniature fern, three-leaf clovers, as well as classic blades, erect with desire. Here is a tiny flower with thirteen rust-specked petals – each spiking a stubble of white down, coarse as re-growth. I think yours lies flatter on your skull now, is less mottled, but you are too self-conscious to let me come this close. It's easy to say *lawn, grass*, less so to chart the complexity of weeds. Each time friends ask, I describe your progress in the most general of adjectives: *wet, green*.

iii. Your Belief In Miracles

In our garden you've planted two young olive trees. Folly or faith? Where their trunks meet earth, there is dry moss; the dirt beneath is matted, dry; each stone, marbled white or terracotta, is dry but porous, is stippled with holes, the light filtering through, the sun's heat killing the organisms living inside. Daily, a concentrated shaft targets your skin: your sacrum is marked by four dots (a diamond of black pinprick tattoos at the base of your spine) guiding it in. Over three weeks old leaves, shrunk to grey corkscrews, fall to the ground. I prefer them this way – the fresh green clusters were painful with hope. This is how I imagine the olive branch brought to Noah in the dove's beak: dried, twisted, silver. Announcing the flood is over.

iv. Blue Hydrangea Petal

Having spent time detached from its stem, the petal leaks colour until faded to beige, stained around the edges as if ink has been spilled then hastily wiped away. It has the texture of veins and flesh, is thin as the wings of the moth that drowned in the toilet bowl but wouldn't flush – each piss running yellow through it like a blush seeps through skin. It's thin as skin: the stretched pale skin of your skull with its fretwork of soft new hairs. The moth wasn't torn by the pressure of water and this dried flower is tougher than it looks, has the sheen of dyed polyester. I pull it taut and it spreads to my touch. Now I see its suppleness, its grain, its limits.

The Current

I followed her route, quietly, one Spring afternoon
sweet with crocus buds. She'd careened on her bike
across the Heath, now singing show-tunes to herself,
now biting the trailing ends of her hair blown
by the wind against her teeth. Eighteen months on
I don't know what I expected to learn, not that seagulls
sometimes come inland, pecking at the city grass,
all shriek and bravado until a woman cycles towards them
in the hurrah of her journey. *I'd float* she'd said once,
when I told her about my Halloween on Pendle Hill
playing at witches, *you should never choose to sink
of your own volition*, and that day it seemed she was
floating downstream, letting the wind swing her
between the trees. I followed to the place she laid
her bicycle down on the ground (this was the first fact
we were certain of: her bike was found here, definitely hers)
and along this street she kicked off her shoes
for the vendor at the fruit stall was next to spot her,
a girl with a long skirt and swirling hair, running barefoot
past him and onwards, across the bridge, down the stairs.
I thought about unlacing my boots and treading her path
but couldn't bring myself to let the skin of my feet
be debrided by gravel as hers were. Instead, I leaned over
the bridge and stared at a train stopped at the open platform,
its doors clanging shut, the engine gearing itself to drive
forward again, when – for no reason I could see from a distance –
a pigeon slipped off the edge, flying for a moment
as the train dashed forwards: body and metal colliding.

The Grieved

We learnt that week a physical fact –
both our tongues were fissured
like leaves absorbing the textures of light.

And this is what the living do to extremes:
draw out every leitmotif. Despite myself,
despite the displacements of death,

I remember predictable things – how,
standing in the tracks of other animals,
we groped in the white grass. Your face.

The vein at your temple flashing its nerve
against my lips. That I wanted to cry out
extravagantly, but choked on the dawn mist.

Torpor

Yesterday I lay in bed for hours and
breathed with the same rhythm
as my sleeping body
until the cat gave up and left
to hunt his own food. The yellow day
flickered on and off. I shut my eyes to block
the sunlight slatting between the curtain tops
and pole. My smell gathered round me.
The bathroom door creaked as the wind eased it
forward and back. I heard the postman
walking up the gravel path. Flowers dropped
their petals on the window ledge,
my mobile beeped, then rang.
I could feel the mattress hollow out,
moulding to my spine until stress
built along my vertebrae.
Hair I'd washed the night before
grew limp with sweat: doing nothing
hadn't stemmed the tide. I slept.

What the Body Knows

A series of poems after artist Anna Kiff

1. Dyslexia

‘Listen’, you say, ‘words rise from the page
and revolve, three dimensionally, in the air’,
so that *knowledge* becomes a ledge of wood
you balance upon, the range of what
we know inscribed on its grainy surface;
my *voice* a flue: a vent onto an icy world
where we are at an impasse, our cries
for rescue carrying as sound across a valley,
reflecting back like the facets of a spun cube,
a die cast between us, on which we’ll read –
me with fluency, you with care – our fortune
and our need. In our game of fetch, I throw
out meanings you reach to catch, then refine
into sculptures of a beauty we both can name.

2. Heavenly Bodies

Under her hands,
my body becomes a wax figure:
malleable. She moulds
living tissue into her design
for how a human being should function,
aligns limbs at fluid angles
to the ground and the dark sky.

We are all positioned
in relation to a single star,
rotating on our own axis
as we circle the other.

Usually I hold my distance,
wary of being consumed. Usually
she keeps her heart
an arm's length away.

3. Sculpture

Her breast is made of bitumen and wax,
pigment and wire, is the virulent yellow
of glow-in-the-dark jackets for cyclists
and dogs. Everything is a mutation –
the orange nipple hardened and reaching,
the fleshy sac held together by steel mesh.
At St George's they're planning to excise
the sentinel node, gateway to all lymph,
at UCH destroy cells with targeted radiation,
but what she wants is for her skin to soften
into the evening sky so she can step off
the tarmac and disappear into wild places.

4. Plasticine Man

His eyes are bore-holes, his nose a beak
gently up-tilted, wry furrows cross his brow
as if he knows his fate. All he is: a skull

marked by depressions, a scarred torso,
skin that bears the wrinkles of the thumb
that shaped him. He carries her fingerprints

clearly as ink, is hers uniquely, will do anything
she says, abase himself before her, pressed
to the ground pleadingly. It isn't enough.

She who sees all – our harms, our heels and
the soles of our feet – she who creates people
in her image and casts us off to make of our lives

what we will, can crush him with a casual *no*,
flatten him in one fluid gesture and spool up
the mess into a ball that rolls across letters

with the smoothness of speech, leaving nothing
behind but the smear of black marks on paper.

5. The Embryos

They breed organically, feeding off each other –
their armature skeletons encased in waxy pulp,
facial features erased by a covering of scrim
like a sniper's disguise. For a couple of months
you flesh them out: limbs budding from the axis
of their spines, new cell layers blasted and hatched,
pinprick openings, two small black dots, for eyes.

There are women whose babies quicken inside them
but yours are birthed early, unformed, grow hard
or break like young men sent too soon into war.
Numb, you stick them back together with PVA
and wire, each a capsule of loss, of desire, a child
your desperate, traitorous body is unable to hold.

III

God is nothing more than an exalted father.

– Sigmund Freud

How Do We Attach?

Don't tell me
to ask the spider –
ganglia fused
into the sensory mass
he calls a body,
nerve endings
and spinnerets
leaking need need need
with silken fluency,
leaving an echo
of himself behind
to kiss my forehead
like a father.

The day John Lennon died

he spent the morning being shot
by Annie Leibowitz. She posed him
in a foetal position, curled naked
against his wife's hip. I was a child

at the time, playing with my dolls.
The next morning they interviewed
friends, neighbours, old band-mates,
his French teacher – who was my father,

Barbie-height – on TV. For weeks
I told made-up mini-daddy stories,
dreamed he was pocket-sized, a pet.
When I was eight and he died too

I turned my bed into a barricade,
built walls of toys around my pillows
and burrowed beside them, singing
pop-song lullabies into their fur.

Habonim

Ha'Bonim (Heb)-lit. The Builders. *Habonim* is the name of an international Jewish youth group.

The day the Wall fell we played the identity game –
had to run to a corner of the room depending
whether we felt British, Jewish, like British Jews
or Jewish Brits. On camp that winter we acted out

the journeys our grandparents made from Russia,
Poland, Lithuania, fleeing pogroms. The Holocaust
should have been next but perhaps they thought
we were too young. Instead, we became refugees

negotiating Checkpoint Charlie, winning points
for our team if we smuggled ourselves safely across.
Back at school in January, studying The Tudors,
I'd switch off, daydream, remembering how we built

the Berlin Wall with our bodies, one on top of the other,
rejoicing, limbs flying, when we came tumbling down.

The Refuseniks

The neighbours crowd into our front room to hear
my father make the calls, discuss tactics for hours,

what's allowed to be spoken and what merely implied.
My job's to hand round strong tea in china cups,

bridge rolls with chopped herring, egg, smoked salmon,
the strudels and kichels my grandmother's baked –

they worry her, these meetings, but her soul insists
visitors must be well fed. We are phoning The Russians.

Afterwards there will be whisky but for now we all need
clear heads. Dad picks up the handset. I sit at his feet

untwisting the chord. My mouth tastes of salt and almonds.
There are months we can't get a dial tone and the line

beeps its morse of silent secrets. I'm sent to bed,
mouth the words of the safe code, *Shema Yisrael*.

Downstairs, Dad's on his own, whispering in Yiddish:
stories of work destroyed, of visa requests denied.

Grandma brings him mugs of borscht, blood coloured.
Three years later the Wall's torn down. After glasnost

and perestroika and my father's death, the Refuseniks visit.
Their daughter's almost my age – we share no language

so speak in signs, making phones from our thumbs
and little fingers, tracing life lines on each other's palms.

The Gathering

Bind him into the gathering of life

we pray in small voices when we are gathered
by this earthy hollow, locked by his death
into this gathering of people, sinking into a mud
that sweeps up over our toecaps and heels
staining the trousers we tuck into socks
staining the skirts we gather up to our knees
and tendrils creep out of the ground and curl
around us, binding us to this grave this time
these words this man his absence
and we are yoked together by our hands
and we are yoked together by the plaintive song
we are calling into the wind, we are a litany,
we are beads rattling on a string, we string out psalms
into the wind, and it is morning –
there is an expanse of time until the sun will set,
an age has passed since the sun rose,
yet even now that we are walking away
it is morning – and as we raise our feet to take each step
the mud sucks us back in, we are pages sewn into a book
whose binding is fraying as we strain against it –
a book of prayers and psalms lit by the sun –
and the sun is shining, its rays are tentacles straining
to catch us, we are all gathered beneath the same sun
and as we fan out into the world we are gathered still.

Passover

We transform our grief into tactile things:
unleavened bread, bitter herbs, eggs burnt to the colour of sacrifice.

Once I viewed a single drop from the Red Sea
under a microscope, magnified to twenty five times its size,
saw chains of diatoms, phytoplankton cells, green algae
with swirling rotifers, tiny crustacean-like creatures –
their pincers and antennae and staring eyes.

It's a curse to know too much. At the *Seder* we dissolve salt
into boiling water to make our bowls of tears.

Bonjour Tristesse

Stuart writes to me out of the blue after learning his illness is terminal. He wants to pass on his memories of my father: that he adored Gina Lollobrigida, served in the Western Desert,

smoked incessantly and in 1954, after spending the summer in Paris, brought back a novel by a young girl who knew more about life than she should. I read the story of Raymond,

how he excuses his affairs to his daughter by quoting Oscar Wilde, *Sin is the only vivid note of colour that persists in the modern world*, a philosophy Cécile believes she can base her life on.

Retrospective

Satyrs and nudes and hallucinogenic
landscapes where people are misshapen
and animals carnivorously open-jawed;
always too, the hunched over little man
who critics say is you, your dream-form
daemon, truncated into this vision of hell
or is it reality, how you perceive the world
with its risks? Yes I know what Jung wrote
about the psyche and animus, the folklore
of the unconscious and its healing power –
still, your sincere naivety makes me weep
for a life messier than primal archetypes,
for the daughter who couldn't make art
while you lived, for you had all the colours.

Eleven Developments of a Lithograph

In my case, a picture is a sum of destructions.

Pablo Picasso

Plate I.

Sweet-faced bull! An innocent who could charm
Europa onto your back. You are seductive and I
can't help but ride your fresh continuous movement;
neither of us awakened to our power and shy
of weight, of thought, of the cruelty love entails.
We watch each other out of the corners of our eyes.

Plate II.

Or is this shadow play, perhaps? At night
the spaces take on depth, cracks transform
into creatures – we are coming to the rim of an abyss.
How quickly you bulk up: your muscles warm
and taut from the effort it takes to balance,
push against the past. Yet I'm propelling us into its storm

Plate III.

and the lines of force follow the contours
of your muscles and skeleton, precise as the knife
a butcher might use to sever the tendons,
tear through the guts. You are blood flow, I'm still-life.
Do you know me well enough to feel the tension
shift below my surface? Art, my temptress. Art, my wife.

Plate IV.

Ah, is it all too much, too soon? Shouldn't I reveal
your bleached bones, your longing? I'll lower my stare,
silt over the canvas. Retreat to the logic of measurements
and facts. How to abstract? First, subtract. Lay bare
the major planes of your anatomy then turn up the lights –
I'll follow the outline revealed by their glare.

Plate V.

The dynamics are shifting, now you're partly erased.
We're a house of cards where each movement
is crucial and you counterweight my actions
for us to stay stable. Lean in, lean out. Accent
the front and your body bows back: a bold white line
runs diagonally across your shoulder, begins its descent –

Plate VI.

energy driving down, converging between your legs.
I want to add curves, to soften the network of tension
across your torso, adjust myself to support
your displacement of weight with my suspension
of disbelief. But all I know now are material things:
axes and graphs, your form and dimensions.

Plate VII.

It was Newton who thought that bodies and light
act mutually on each other. I could say the same
about Art and God. For when I seek one,
the other shrinks to a meaningless name.
It's black, it's white, there are limbs everywhere,
reduced to amorphous shapes. Worse. Is this pain

Plate VIII.

or something more terrible: absence?
'Nothing' can't be multiplied into more than itself,
whatever I crave. You've lost your virility,
are flat as a leaf shriveling in the sun. Should I delve
beneath? Your horns and head arc like a tuning fork,
I run my nail around their rim – manage one discordant note.

Plate IX.

How to pitch in a vacuum? For some, it may be innate
but I need a flute, a chime – at least a line.
Draw it swiftly across the white paper:
an echo trailing a wake of sound and time.
No hesitation or turning back, let it lead my eye
to the horizon, return it to a focal point. Realign –

Plate X.

is there a pause between synapse and hand
or do I move around your body instinctively, without
the involvement of brain? Let's rub away
all we have learnt. Begin again. Flout
conventions. Use the smooth litho stone
and my desire to press meaning from doubt.

Plate XI.

How can we believe in light and shade?
There are only clear lines, simply drawn:
our need to delineate absolutes.

Poster Boy

*In 1942 Abram Games was named Britain's
official War Poster Artist*

The shadow of the milk bottle was a black bomb
and when a swastika hung from a high-up window
on the Finchley Road, you commandeered the grocer's
awning pole and tore down the flag. With equal force
you ripped through the first photos from Belsen
and then couldn't eat for a week. In the war office
you saw the ribs of a boy sharpened into spikelets
of an ear of wheat, shivering under his skin
with each intake of breath, his tongue a bayonet,
his rickety limbs the memory of what he had lost.
Out of the depths, you drew the stripes of his uniform
rising like rays of the sun, drew a new land where
knife and fork transformed into shovel and spade,
showed the world this: we will live and cultivate.

Jonah's Prayer

A radical human posture between death and life.
- Avivah G. Zornberg

At the other end of the known world
a man with no credentials
but his father's name
responds to God's call
by fleeing.

His hope is to travel as far away as possible –
the theological absurdity of this
never arises,
although we question him, his flight
is a provocative
but comprehensible act.

The insistent verbs of descent carry him
downwards:
into the ship's hold,
the whale's belly,
into complete withdrawal
from consciousness.

Only then can he condense
the velocity of his flight into prayer –
for what is left
is the internal silence
at the heart of all stories
and replacing silence,
the soul's response.

My Father

after Yehuda Amichai

The memory of my father is swaddled
like a newborn
or a corpse twisted in sheets.

Just as a diver rises up in stages
to avoid the bends,
I draw him slowly into my body

and life flows like rivers
into my blood.

IV

The locus of truth is always extraterritorial [...] But when the text *is* the homeland, even when it is rooted only in the exact remembrance and seeking of a handful of wanderers, nomads of the word, it cannot be extinguished. Time is truth's passport and its native ground. What better lodging for the Jew?

– George Steiner

True Voice

Friday afternoon in Streatham. Sunlight
in winter, a weight of snow above us
on the glass conservatory roof. We should
have been cooking but instead we tuned in
the new LG TV with its *True Voice* advanced
technology. The channel didn't matter,
what we cared about was clarity and pitch,
the digital dialling down of background noise,
homing in on the frequency of the newsreader's
voice: far off famine, wars, a politician sacked,
another celebrity whose phone was hacked.
We sat in the sweet spot, the speakers concentrating
sound, the timbre of the reporter's words
so resonant it could only be called prophetic.
This was what we'd paid for but even so
what pleased us – a quality of tone richer
than veracity – left me terrified. All that evening
as we transformed secular time into Shabbat
everything seemed heightened: the candles,
bread, wine, vibrating; each molecule distinct
in its own sacred world. The room oscillated
with prayer, bouncing off the glass walls until
the snow shifted over our heads, making the music
of our daily lives seem muffled, a quiet counterpoint
to the defining Hebrew. Was this epiphany?
Or auto-tuning our reality to one perfect note?

Lullaby

Night is another earth
layered with negative terrain –
its rooms spread like roots
into the widening twist of air

where clouds oscillate against the skies
and roofs tunnel crevices
into the dark. Below we hear bodies:

their clay, their dampness,
how, prone, they lie stepped
as the city's stairway, or move together –
houses, rising to each other.

Our ears are the doors we worm through,
the ceilings from which we hang
like night, like another earth.

Bedside Lamp

Bought not for what it was
but for the land the glow recalled,
its halo astigmatic, curved
and pearlised, forty-watt softness
backlighting walls
into Jerusalem stone –

I carried it home, to London.
The lamp has a crack now, its arc
fractured, making each page I read uneven,
jagged. My pillow is a surface
that touch and sight describe
differently; my bed is partitioned

by light: one half sharp-edged
as ice, the other mercurial as the body.
Sometimes I choose
where to lie, split myself
vertically. Sometimes I can't bear my own
clear-sightedness, turn my face away.

Boiling Point

This is what we call an egg: membrane and shell,
yolk a miracle of suspension in a spheroid unable
to balance. Grandma held hers above candles,
let flames turn the hard case translucent as albumen,

cursing in Yiddish when bloodspots made one unclean,
adding only the pure to the pan. We, on the other hand,
toss three into boiling water and turn up the dial,
tune the radio to news about Gaza. I can taste the bile

rising in my throat, rub my face with my sleeve,
remembering taking the Hadera train from Tel Aviv
one Sunday evening as soldiers returned to barracks
after their weekend leave – there were girls in khaki

wearing flip flops and ballet pumps, machine guns slung
casually across their bodies the way I carry my handbag.
We cry and argue as Jews argue, ‘for the sake of heaven’,
about tunnels and rockets and proportionality, burden

ourselves with shame over decisions that are not ours
and guilt that we’re distant, choosing not to be there
but in England where we know we can do nothing
and what would we do if we could? A body is a loving

but fragile thing and when our peace is disturbed
by the bang of eggs in a cast-iron pan boiled dry,
we look up in horror at the mess on the ceiling,
clean what we can then bend, exhausted, over the sink.

Yeridah

Hebrew, lit. 'descent' – used to describe someone who was born in Israel but moves to the diaspora

The only prayer you ever said was the Traveller's Prayer for the start of a journey: *May it be your will Eternal One, Lord our God and God of our ancestors that we reach our desired destination.* The days lengthened as you paced the rooms of our upside down flat, its kitchen attic-high with a view falling from rooftops to the still, black canal where Hasidim strolled the towpath in their heavy coats.

Young enough to have nothing to do but idle away hours with a slowly cooked meal, I brewed tea from mint leaves, watched you washing up the Israeli way, under a torrent of running water. I loved the space we made in the heart of London's Jewish ghetto, a photograph of your land above the bed where you tore my Englishness from me then slipped through my fingers to your next home.

Diaspora

And thou shalt be a dispersion into all the kingdoms of the earth

Deut 28:25

But God only curses us to become a *diaspora* (alt. dispersion, scattering) in the Greek Septuagint. Of the seven times it appears, this is the first, the origin not just biblically but ever. I look up the corresponding verse in the Torah, expecting the Hebrew to be *galut* – which here I’ve had to transliterate into the Roman alphabet – literally meaning ‘exile’. The word is not *galut* but *l’za’ava*. Translations of the phrase directly from Hebrew into English say something like, ‘you will be terrifying to all the kingdoms of the earth’. And ‘terrifying’ is a fudge too, a sloppy translation of a participle from the verbal root, ‘to tremble’. But ‘thou shalt be a trembling’ isn’t a cogent sentence, wasn’t even for King James. Is it that our fate shall be a warning, the cause of [fear and] trembling, for who would want to suffer it? Or that once we’ve endured the trauma of being uprooted and scattered, the further trauma that is regathering and return, we will, because this is our home, our promised land, turn on intruders, make others tremble?

Harmonia Axyridis

O my theatrical Harlequins!

My multicolored Asian Ladies –
all sweetness and seduction
with your white-painted faces,
so tiny
in proportion
to your chunky patterned coats.

I love your very beetle-ness!

Your sharp pointy legs,
how the gossamer of your wings
seems to split
your shells.

The way you congregate
in the corners
of my window frames
and call to each other
with your scent.

We brought you here
to fulfil our whims.
And now you flit in and out
when you need
the comforts our homes offer,
devour the native species
when resources are scarce.

They call you pests, interlopers
poisoning the country,
sing *Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home,*
but I love
the way you shame me
with your resilience,
how each time I strike out at you,
more of you return.

The Persimmon Tree

Why am I caught by the persimmon tree,
tall against the Spanish campo?

Drawn by the hard fruit bowing
its branches to the ground, I circle its trunk,

creeping around it at a distance like the moths
corkscrewing the citronella candles.

It's that the fruit seems so foreign, solid,
no trace of the squished blush, the *sharon*

that I know by its Hebrew name.
In Israel my grandmother would quarter

it onto my tongue saying *suck*,
soft sweet seeds filling my mouth

until my cheeks blistered on the acrid skin.
Suck, she'd command, *suck!*

Scent

This is smell, speculated Lucretius, that atomistic Roman philosopher, how different aromas must be attributed to the shapes and sizes of odour molecules that stimulate the olfactory organ: let's call it, for ease, the nose. My nose, hooked to a line descending from Shylock and Fagin, sniffs out trouble a mile away, knows the bathwater's scald by the metallic tang rising above lemon-fresh disinfectant and mould. I'll sink in my foot for the burn, the quick flush of rouge patterning my leg, the reek of flesh. A pound of flesh, but my blood is weightless, thin. What's left is blubber and the rich inhale of meat, the peppery reek of chicken soup. Stir too fast and it shades to nostalgia, the where we are not, the always lamenting had-been, acid texture of reflux and shift. And bloodhounds must sense each whiff like a lover's touch against delicate folds of skin. Oh Lucretius, Lucretius, my man of science and scent and rational thought, who a love potion did in!

Grasshoppers

*We were in our own sight like grasshoppers,
and so we were in their sight.*

Numbers 13:33

Light falls on water at an angle:
midday and the art-deco panes
 refract sun onto the bath
until meniscus becomes mirror
and the curve of your knee describes
a complete arc. You jam your feet
 flat against the side of the tub and
the surface of water intersects
 with joints, making toes
simultaneously above and below the line:
 an imperfect reflection wavering with each movement
 so you strain to be still
and stillness means silence.
 All there is: the body's hollows,
its valleys and folds, landscape of fleshy murmurs,
 and your intruding heartbeat
insistent as a locust
 snapping its wings in flight.

*

Rustle of paper – flicking pages –
 The Grasshopper, perhaps?
You read yourself as Olga Ivanova
 on a moonlit night in July,
standing riverside with Rybakovsky who
sweet-talks you away from your husband
 with whispers of shadows and mortality,
who has a thousand reasons for crying yet sheds no tears.
Your lover is mercurial, crushing –
beside him you feel shame,
 not an artist but an insect,
 small, unfaithful,
dreaming of rain
 on the Volga.

*

Why do you let time drift
 until the water is tepid
and you're all wrinkles and flexion?

*

According to Aesop

Grasshopper has no fear, no forethought.
He whiles away the summer playing
as Ant works hard.

Winter comes and Grasshopper
begs for shelter but Ant leaves
him starving, exposed.

*

Toes are a miracle of articulation,
providing us with balance and thrust.

You turn their weight-bearing
into metaphor: where the whole individuates
it can carry the rest.

*

The Rabbis define community

as 'ten'. Twelve spies sent
to scout out Canaan, flowing with milk and honey,
with grapes and olives, pomegranates and figs.

Only two return with a positive view,
the rest too scared to enter their (already occupied)
promised land. Ten –

a community who challenged their leader
and mistrusted God. In their own eyes
they were frail creatures:
grasshoppers among giants.

*

The moment of disconnect occurs when you
float out of your body

and see from above:
flesh as canvas, as fields and fruit,
as biblical abundance, *nature-mort*.

*

Your American friend tells you that this year
the bugs are swarming. They'll chomp down
on anything, flowing over roads, fields,
fences, barns, hanging laundry, plagues
of mormon crickets, of cannibalistic katydids,
feasting on grain until nothing is left.

You imagine the colony
blanketing the earth:
a host of single organisms.

*

A grasshopper's sense organs consist
of tiny fibres – sensilla – calibrated
to respond to external stimuli.

You are covered in goosebumps, each blonde hair
crawling from root to tip,
moving individually but as one.

*

Is this rain ricocheting off the attic roof
or the shower strafing your skin?

*

*Territory is considered occupied
when it is placed under the authority of the hostile army.*

*The authority of the legitimate power
having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant,
the latter shall take all the measures in his power
to restore,
and ensure,
as far as possible,
public order and safety,
while respecting, unless absolutely prevented,
the laws in force in the country.*

*

Within and without are one –
there is no exterior view, or perhaps it's a double exposure,
when you stare from windows
at night into the room's interior
superimposed onto the dark street
and lose yourself in water until boundaries are blurred,
until there are no boundaries.

Ghazal

after Agha Shahid Ali

Beloved, I fear the language of shame is Hebrew.
Once loss was all, now loss is hard to frame in Hebrew.

Yours is the well from which my sorrow springs,
your water, but the earth that steals the rain is Hebrew.

With you I have railed at the shuttered sky
and wept, yet know that tears are not the same in Hebrew.

In the wilderness Jews yearned for a home –
the home that we built, the home that we maim, is Hebrew.

Uprooting olive trees, scarring the soil,
we fight, crush foes like fruit, apportion blame in Hebrew.

Each body-bomb blown up and rocket fired
inscribes my anger when the land aflame is Hebrew.

Like the smear of dust on skin, grief mars me.
We brush off dust but who can brush off pain in Hebrew?

Don't protest we're not our brothers' keepers:
the tale that poets wear the mark of Cain is Hebrew!

Witness our songs – *I am yours Beloved*
and you are mine – witness Solomon's claim in Hebrew.

To resist complicity, 'not in my name!' –
how? when the root of my soul, of my name, is Hebrew.

Moorish Home

for Mimi Khalvati

In our hanging house, one wall sheer to the dry riverbank,
rooms staggering across split levels, the hours are sticky

with fever and all I see of you is a passing shadow climbing
the stairs opposite my open door. We spend our days apart

but in the evenings we walk and distribute our greetings, *Hola*,
Buenos Noches, to the people in the street, or exchange

Farsi for Hebrew: *Laila Tov*, we say to each other, *Shabékheyr*.
Last night we talked of Córdoba, alliance of Muslim and Jew,

and you pulled me back for a moment – *this is how it was, this!* –
when we strolled past a woman cooking barbeque on the steps

of the village square, a man (*her* man?) humming a cante jondo
to his father. You were wearing my gipsy shawl and I,

slipping back to the Golden Age, began to compose a gacela
as Lorca called them. How easily it built in my sleep, couplets

folding into themselves like accordion scales, rising from kitchen
to living room to the vine shaded terrace where you lay

on the rattan chair, smoking, always smoking, and in my sleep
we became Al-Ghazali and Halevi, dreaming of *this*: a new Jerusalem.

NOTES TO THE POEMS

i.

The introductory quotation to the section is taken from Emily Dickinson's poem beginning "Sweet is the swamp with its secrets" (Dickinson: 1991)

The Bottle Lid

The epigraph is taken from *Compulsive Hoarding and Acquiring: Client Workbook* (Steketee and Frost: 2007)

The Foundry

I am grateful to Chris Beckett and Isao Miura for giving me a tour of The Foundry at Chelsea School of Art and talking me through the process of making bronze sculptures.

ii.

The introductory quotation to the section is taken from an interview Potter gave about *Blue Remembered Hills*, quoted in *Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen*. (Cook: 1998) 117

Berlin

This quotation was cited in an exhibition of Bauhaus art at Moma in 2009 and some of the material was then shown in July 2011 at a Feininger retrospective at the Kulturforum in Berlin's Tiergarten. The exhibition catalogue is published as *Bauhaus 1919-1933 : Workshops for Modernity* (Bergdoll and Dickerman: 2009)

iii.

The introductory quotation to the section is taken from Sigmund Freud's article on 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' (Freud and Dyson: 2014) 123

Refuseniks

'Refuseniks' was the name given to Jews in the 1980s who tried to escape persecution in the Soviet Union but were refused visas to leave. *Shema Yisrael* (heb. lit. 'Hear O'Israel') are the opening words of a creed taken from Deuteronomy and traditionally read as a prayer last thing at night.

Passover

The 'Seder' (heb. lit. 'order') is the ritual meal eaten on Passover when the story of the Exodus is recited.

Bonjour Tristesse

The poem refers to and quotes from the novel *Bonjour Tristesse* by Françoise Sagan. (Sagan: 1955)

Eleven Developments of a Lithograph

The poem responds to 'Bull' by Pablo Picasso, a suite of eleven lithographs he created in winter 1945-6 following the end of WWII. The epigraph is a statement he made in Spanish to Marius de Zayas, published in 'The Arts', New York, May, 1923 under the title *Picasso Speaks*. Reprinted in *Picasso, Fifty Years of his Art* (Museum of Modern Art (New York N.Y.) and Barr: 1966) 270.

Jonah's Prayer

The epigraph is taken from 'Jonah and the Fantasy of Flight' in *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg (Zornberg: 2009)

iv.

The introductory quotation to the section is taken from George Steiner's essay, *Our Homeland, The Text* (Steiner: 1985)

Lullaby

Material for this poem was collaged from *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino (Calvino: 1986).

Grasshoppers

The penultimate section of this poem quotes Articles 42 & 43 of the *Hague Conventions* (1907): 'Section III Military Authority over the territory of the hostile State'. (*Final Act of the Second Peace Conference Held at the Hague in 1907, and Conventions and Declaration Annexed Thereto*: 1908)

Moorish Home

Buenos Noches (Spanish), *Laila Tov* (Hebrew) and *Shabékheyr* (Farsi) all mean 'Good Night'. The medieval Spanish Jewish poet, Judah Halevi, was greatly influenced by the Persian Sufi philosopher, Al-Ghazali. Ghazali's name means 'The Ghazal Writer', Halevi's 'The Priest'.

Harmonious Discord: Modern Metaphysical Poetry

A Critical Dissertation

Introduction
‘A Peculiar Affinity’
On Discordant Harmonies

‘How should I begin?’¹

Modernist poets and critics, in particular the Prufrockian T.S. Eliot struggling with his “overwhelming question”², highlighted what they saw as the modernity of the Metaphysical Poets and drew inspiration from them. Whether or not they were correct in depicting poets such as Donne and Herbert as “modern” in their terms, the fact remains that the writing of the Seventeenth Century was influential leading up to World War I and during the inter-war years. In 1912, scholar and critic Herbert Grierson edited a two-volume edition of the poems of John Donne, published by Oxford University Press.³ To give just one instance of how this book was valued by writers at the time: when Isaac Rosenberg enlisted in 1916, he left without taking any clothes or mementos; all he carried with him was his copy of Donne’s poetry.⁴ In 1921, Grierson published his Clarendon Press edition of *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century*⁵, one of the bestselling poetry books of the decade⁶ that inspired T.S. Eliot to write:

We have seen in the present century and increasingly within the last few years, an awakening of interest in the seventeenth century. However, this arose, it undoubtedly contains besides pure literary appreciation, a consciousness or a belief that this poetry and this age have some peculiar affinity with our own poetry and our own age, a belief that our own mentality and

1 ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays [of] T. S. Eliot*, (London: Faber, 1969). 13-17

2 Ibid.

3 John Donne and Herbert John Clifford Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).

4 Letters to Edward Marsh and Sydney Schiff, November 1915, quoted in full in Isaac Rosenberg and Jean Liddiard, *Isaac Rosenberg : Selected Poems and Letters*, (London: Enitharmon in association with EJPS, 2003).142-43

5 Herbert John Clifford Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century : Donne to Butler*, ([S.l.]: Oxford Univ. Press, 1921).

6 Jenny Stringer, *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

feelings are better expressed by the seventeenth century than by the nineteenth or even the eighteenth...⁷

Why do modernist poets at the beginning of the twentieth century find Metaphysical Poetry important, and what is the basis of the ‘peculiar affinity’ between these two ages? Is it possible to extend this affinity to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, asking how Metaphysical Poetry, as mediated by Eliot, becomes resonant for contemporary poets? Could an understanding of ‘Harmonious Dischord’ provide a way to negotiate the tensions between the Eliotic impulse towards unity and post-modern awareness of fragmentation? Does engaging with a modern metaphysical aesthetic help a poet to express religious and spiritual questions in a secular age?

Part One of this thesis considers these questions through poetic praxis, Part Two looks at them through a series of three stand-alone yet thematically linked essays. This introduction examines the influence reading poetry from the seventeenth century had on T.S. Eliot's Modernism and reflects on ideas about Metaphysical Poetry he articulates through essays and lectures such as ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1920), The Clark Lectures (1926) and The Turnbull Lectures (1933).⁸ The key notion underpinning it is that of *Discordia Concors*, which I will go on to explore in detail in the section on “Metaphysics as Poetic and Philosophical Strategies”. While Samuel Johnson critiques *Discordia Concors* as “a combination of dissimilar images”, complaining “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”⁹, Eliot advises that “the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning”.¹⁰ Through close readings of poems by contemporary poets writing in a post-Eliot modernist tradition set against poems by their Seventeenth Century predecessors, the

7 ‘Introduction to The Clark Lectures’ in T. S. Eliot and Ronald Schuchard, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1993).

8 ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ in T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1920).; ‘The Clark and Turnbull Lectures’ in Eliot and Schuchard, 1993.

9 Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings*, (Penguin, 1968).

10 T.S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets (1921)’ in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, (1953). 115

dissertation explores theoretical concepts based on Eliot's writing about the Metaphysicals in order to consider both Eliot's and Johnson's positions and open up issues of poetic form, religion, and unity.

While the amount of prior writing on Eliot's thinking about the Metaphysicals is comparatively small considering the panoply of Eliot criticism that has developed over the past fifty years, there have been a few significant pieces of research since Ronald Schuchard collected the previously unpublished Clark and Turnbull Lectures in a volume titled *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, first published by Faber in 1993.¹¹ Jewel Spears Brooker has explored Eliot's study of philosophy for his Harvard PhD and the impact of his attendance at Henri Bergson's lectures in Paris upon his literary development.¹² In 2003 Fabio L. Vericat's PhD thesis, submitted to the University of Glasgow, evaluated 'Philosophy and Style in the Critical Writings of T.S. Eliot'.¹³ It considered the development of Eliot's writing about the Metaphysical Poets between 1910 and the 1930s and the tension between his scientific philosophical training and his historically influenced rhetoric. A decade later, a second PhD thesis, presented to the University of St Andrews by Will Gray, moved past Eliot's conversion into his later thinking. Entitled *T.S. Eliot Among the Metaphysicals*, Gray used archival research to locate the origins of Eliot's interest in Donne and highlighted Eliot's claim in 1961 that no one had been as influenced by the Metaphysicals as he had. Gray suggested that although Donne was Eliot's entry point, it is George Herbert who "is typical of his late mindset".¹⁴ His thesis was supervised by Professor Robert Crawford, author of the recent biography *The Young Eliot* which, in meticulous detail, traces the importance of Donne to the Harvard community Eliot found himself in

11 Eliot and Schuchard, 1993.

12 Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape : T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); Jewel Spears Brooker and University of London. Institute of United States Studies., *T.S. Eliot and Our Turning World*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001).

13 Fabio L. Vericat, 'From Physics to Metaphysics: Philosophy and Style in the Critical Writings of T.S. Eliot (1913-1935)', (University of Glasgow, 2002).

14 Will Gray, 'T.S. Eliot among the Metaphysicals', (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of St Andrews, 2011).

during 1904, attributing it to the enthusiasm of the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory, Professor LeBaron Russell Briggs. In this, Crawford is extending the work Lyndall Gordon has done in her earlier biography *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot*¹⁵ and drawing on Gail McDonald's research into Pound, Eliot and the American university system that educated them.¹⁶ In addition, in 2013, Khelsoril Wanbe and Paonam Sudeep Mangang published a journal article surveying Eliot's main thinking about Donne and relating this to Eliot's own poetic approach.¹⁷

My thesis draws extensively on the work cited above. However, as a practice-based PhD, its focus is on what it is possible for a contemporary writer to take from Eliot's reading of the Metaphysicals in developing her own aesthetic. The faceted nature of the structure – aligning modern/contemporary poets with their Metaphysical predecessors in a series of close readings – enables different thoughts to develop. In addition to the juxtaposition of Metaphysical and Modern/Contemporary poets, each of the chapters demonstrates a new approach to the poets concerned. The majority of writing on Isaac Rosenberg's poetry is in the context of the First World War and the other 'war poets', rather than positioning him as a Modernist or Metaphysical. Moreover, the tone of wonder in much previous Rosenberg studies, that an 'uneducated' poor East End boy, the child of refugees, could write as he did, has done him a dis-service. Although critics praise him as 'an original', in doing so they neglect the sheer volume of his recreational reading and his auto-didact nature. This dominant perspective was first challenged by Geoffrey Hill, whose Wharton lecture in 1998 drew on the views of Rosenberg's first editor, Denys Harding, to class him as a Metaphysical Poet¹⁸. Harold Bloom in 2002 also remarks on Rosenberg as a

15 Lyndall Gordon, *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot*, (London: Virago, 2012).; Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to the Wasteland*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015).

16 Gail McDonald, *Learning to Be Modern : Pound, Eliot, and the American University*, (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1993).

17 Khelsoril Wanbe and Paonam Sudeep Mangang, 'Donne and Eliot: A Study on Metaphysical Poetry', *European Academic Research*, 1 (November 2013).

18 Geoffrey Hill, 'Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918', *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1998 Lectures and Memoirs*, 101 (1998).

Metaphysical (although, by and large, Bloom ignores the Modernism of his work and is less radical in his stance than Hill)¹⁹. By following Hill's thinking and arguing that, just as Rosenberg used mimesis of the Grand Masters to learn to draw and paint, so he drew on his comprehensive reading of the English poets, particularly Donne, in writing his poems, Chapter One opens up a new way of reading him.

While a few scholars have acknowledged Yehuda Amichai as a Metaphysical Poet and drawn connections between him and Donne, as far as I can ascertain, I am the first to embark on a comparative reading of Amichai and Herbert, and Chapter Two addresses the restlessness of their faith as presented in their prayer poetry. Chapter Three pulls together John Burnside and Andrew Marvell, using close analysis of their biblical images to map their encoding of political messages in the bodies of land they describe. Again, this pairing seems to be a new one (even though Burnside himself made the comparison in a *Guardian* article following the announcement that he had won the 2012 T.S.Eliot prize²⁰) as is the explicitly political use of the Old Testament I attribute to Marvell. This thesis looks through a wide lens at what Modern Metaphysics might be, but what it doesn't attempt is to be comprehensive, either in its approach to each writer or in the selection of poets addressed. There are other Seventeenth Century poets, such as Vaughan, Cowley, Cleveland and Crashaw, whose work I don't explore as well as many contemporary poets who could be considered 'Metaphysical' and demonstrate a religious sensibility in their work.

In her recent book *Beyond the Lyric*, which classifies current British poets into various stylistic groups, Fiona Sampson has a chapter on 'The Expanded Lyric' where she describes poems that "track the consciousness that bounds from one thing to another", that "appear to refuse the poem's basic task of unity" but instead create a

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, *Poets of World War I: Wilfred Owen & Isaac Rosenberg*, (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002).

²⁰ John Burnside, 'How Poetry Can Change Lives', *The Guardian*, (17 Jan 2012).

“longitudinal unity”, poems I would describe as ‘modern metaphysical’.²¹ Her main examples of those who write in this way are John Burnside and Lavinia Greenlaw, although she also references the work of newer poets such as Maitreyabandhu, Janet Sutherland and David Briggs. To her list of British poets I might add Michael Symmons Roberts, Ruth Padel, David Constantine, Maura Dooley, Jemma Borg, Geoffrey Hill himself (whom Sampson includes in her chapter on ‘Modernism’) and many others, as well as Americans such as Jorie Graham, Louise Gluck, Marilyn Hacker, Michael Ryan and Cleopatra Mathis. Future work could extend to a critical appreciation of some of these writers, but for the purpose of this project I have chosen for my Seventeenth Century poets the major writers of their time and selected my modern and contemporary writers as a representative sample rather than an exclusive list. I have also chosen them for the resonance they have for my identity and praxis. Rosenberg and Amichai are Jewish poets, both according to their family identity and the cultural referents they select. With John Burnside, who draws extensively on Christian themes and images in his work, I share a conviction that “poetry is a form of alchemy”. As he writes: “it is our peculiar gift to live *as* spirits, by an imaginative (or magical, or alchemical) process: an *invention*, by which we create ourselves from moment to moment, just as the world around us creates us out of nothing.”²²

A Prismatic Approach: Structure and Methodology

In the modern age, we have come to understand our own selves as composites, often contradictory, even internally incompatible. We have understood that each of us is many different people. Our younger selves differ from our older selves; we can be bold in the company of our lovers and timorous before our employers, principled when we instruct our children and corrupt when offered some secret temptation; we are serious

21 Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric : A Map of Contemporary British Poetry*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012). 249

22 John Burnside “Strong Words” in W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, *Strong Words : Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000).

and frivolous, loud and quiet, aggressive and easily abashed. The 19th century concept of the integrated self has been replaced by this jostling crowd of "I"s. And yet, unless we are damaged, or deranged, we usually have a relatively clear sense of who we are. I agree with my many selves to call all of them "me."²³

A multi-dimensional approach seems particularly appropriate for the modern age, a period that political sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has termed an "Age of Uncertainty". In his book *Liquid Times*, he claims that, at least in the 'developed' world, we are living in a phase he describes as "liquid modernity" where forms "decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set".²⁴ This leads, he believes, to "a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite", and he claims "a life so fragmented stimulates 'lateral' rather than 'vertical' orientations".²⁵ While T.S. Eliot did not articulate a notion of 'liquid' modernity, he also saw the modern world as infinitely fragmented, stating in his essay on 'The Metaphysical Poets' that "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results."²⁶ In a similar way to Bauman, Eliot believes fragmentation stimulates lateral connections, suggesting "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning".²⁷ Eliot traces back this seemingly modern notion of fragmentation, of "disassociation of sensibilities" (a phrase he later qualifies²⁸) to the English Civil War and, behind his urge towards a response which

23 Salman Rushdie, 'The Five-O', in *Time*, (August 11, 1997).

24 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times : Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).1

25 Ibid: 3

26 Eliot, 1953. 119

27 Eliot, *ibid*.

28 In the Henriette Herz Lecture on 'Milton', delivered to the British Academy on 26th March 1947, published in Eliot, 1953; *ibid*. 139-140, Eliot more carefully explained his views on "dissociation of sensibility" which he referred to as "one of the two or three phrases of my coinage [...] which have had a success in the world astonishing to their author". While he emphasizes that his earlier writing "retains some validity", he gives the caveat: "If such a dissociation did take place, I suspect that the causes are too complex and too profound to justify our accounting for the changes in terms of literary criticism. All we can say is, that something like this did happen; that it had something to do with the Civil War, but that it is a consequence of the same causes which brought

dislocates language and meaning, it is possible to hear the Seventeenth Century mode of *Discordia Concors*, as Samuel Johnson termed it: “a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.”²⁹

Eliot’s choice of verbs – “to force”, “to dislocate” – implies a violence towards language, especially the language of poetry, that can be unsettling and which, centuries before, Samuel Johnson rejected, decrying that the Metaphysical Poets “broke every image into fragments”.³⁰ This violence is endemic to the notion of “Harmonious Discord” because the root of ‘Harmony’/ ‘Concord’ itself is a violent one. In Roman mythology known as Concordia, the Greek goddess Harmonia was the daughter of war (Ares) as well as love (Aphrodite). Known for her fatal necklace, which contained peace but caused wars, in the creative tensions she embodies, she is the very figure of opposition and discord. Eliot, who is immersed in classical learning, would have been well aware of the mythology surrounding the notion, and its centripetal forces. Ruth Padel writes that “Everything about *harmonia*, as concept, political metaphor or musical term, embodied in Orpheus or personified by Harmonia, speaks of tension between calm joining and tearing apart.”³¹ Here Padel is referring to Orpheus’s fate: “Losing *harmonia* means violence in the city, disease in the body, anguish in the soul. Orpheus therefore ends up torn apart, dismembered by maenads.” Eliot is writing between two world wars and referencing a period in which the country was riven by religion and between those loyal to Parliament or the Crown. In light of this it is interesting that he falls back on a military paradigm where language and meaning are in conflict and the poet wields a pen like a weapon. Yet George Steiner positions the writer and warrior as diametrically opposed: “Having a pen in your hand

about the Civil War; that we must seek the causes in Europe, not in England alone; and for what these causes were, we may dig and dig until we get to a depth at which words and concepts fail us.”

29 Johnson, 1968.; Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ *ibid*:115

30 Johnson, *ibid*.

31 Ruth Padel, *Silent Letters of the Alphabet*, (Tartet: Bloodaxe, 2010). 43

is Jewish, not being a tank officer.”³² Steiner’s words reverberate differently to Eliot’s. While comprehensiveness and allusiveness seem like positive qualities for a poet, I am hesitant about his push towards indirectness and dislocation of language and think it necessary to question the line between this and evasiveness. Bernard O’Donoghue’s insistence that “What poetry *mustn’t* do is talk to itself”³³ suggests that choosing poetry over real, practical, activism, has to be more than a way to avoid tackling difficulty head on, and insists that language should be our tool not our enemy. John Kinsella agrees, especially when the art of making comes from a feeling of love for a place and desire for activism:

There’s not much of a gap between love and activism and the creation of a poem. Apart from protesting against a destruction, the activist poem also attempts to provide moments of the beauty / ‘good’ one is attempting to preserve. That even out of loss, a future positive might be achieved.³⁴

That poetry should be engaged in the world, should involve ethics as well aesthetics is what, for me, makes it a permissible choice. While expecting poems to do too much is “a delusion and danger”³⁵, “it is a diminishment of them and a derogation to ignore what they can do.”³⁶ Seamus Heaney believes that it is “possible to have a poetry which consciously seeks to promote cultural and political change and yet can still manage to operate with the fullest artistic integrity”³⁷, a poetry where “the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our own experience.”³⁸ Creating a methodology that employs a midrashic³⁹ approach towards reading Anglo-American literature seems an appropriate way to articulate “the complex burden” of my own experience.

32 George Steiner, 'An Informal Conversation with George Steiner', in *Tel Aviv Review*, (Winter 1991), p. 38. 38

33 Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Poetry's Concern', in *Thumbscrew*, (Summer 2000), p. 2. 2

34 John Kinsella, 'Lyric and Razo: Activism and the Poet', in *Poetry Review*, (Spring 2007).79

35 Seamus Heaney, cited in Giles Fodden, 'When Authors Take Sides', *The Guardian*, (2002).

36 *Ibid*.

37 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry : Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1995). 6

38 *Ibid*: 10

39 'Midrash' originated as a Jewish method of interpreting Biblical stories that reads meanings into the gaps left in the Biblical narrative and is used to describe complex reading strategies. For a description of how the Talmudic Rabbis understood Midrashic reading see p155 of this thesis in the concluding section on 'The House as Temple'.

Pulling together six poets, writing as part of three different poetic periods – the Seventeenth Century Metaphysicals, the early Twentieth Century Modernists and Contemporary writers – is a complex undertaking in a relatively constrained space. Therefore, while the overall thesis makes a big argument about ‘Harmonious Discord’ and the poet’s task of yoking together seemingly disparate things, each of the chapters has a direct remit, addressing specific fragments that, viewed as a whole, aim to cohere into a unified thesis. Between an exploration of T.S. Eliot’s writing about Metaphysical Poetry and a conclusion that reflects on my personal praxis, are three chapters. Each is triangular in nature, making thematic and theoretical connections from a particular subject to one Modern or Contemporary and one Renaissance poet. Taken together they provide a multi-faceted prismatic approach to a Modern Metaphysics, and I use their “co-ordinates” as reference points to triangulate my own position. While the poets I have chosen write out of different places and periods, each takes their bearings from the Bible to a greater or lesser extent, and all are torn between religious, political and visceral realities.

The obvious theoretical underpinning for a project that takes Eliot’s essays as a starting point would be New Criticism, the American descendant of Practical Criticism. Both were schools of thought that emerged in response to Eliot’s critical prose, the first in England and the second in America. Prior to Eliot, Matthew Arnold’s 1869 book *Culture and Anarchy*⁴⁰ and his 1880 essay ‘The Study of Poetry’⁴¹ had proclaimed the importance of the poet’s role, the latter asserting: “More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what

40 Matthew Arnold and Jane Garnett, *Culture and Anarchy*, New ed. / edited with an introduction and notes by Jane Garnett. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

41 Matthew Arnold and H. G. Rawlinson, *Selected Essays of Matthew Arnold*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924).

now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry”. This set up a critical tradition of reifying the importance of poetry, a poetry that transcends subject, time and place and, as Bertens ironically comments, “A timeless culture must be the creation of timeless minds: that is, of minds that can at least temporarily disregard the world around them”.⁴² Arnold’s quasi-religious view of poetry was part of a liberal humanism for some parts of which Eliot had a clear affinity – high-minded and elitist. While we may have serious criticisms of the value-systems Arnold and Eliot ascribed to, questioning their definitions of culture, access, privilege and quality, their belief that poetry can be profound and offer a necessary complement to science, religion, philosophy and the modern world, still resonates. Eliot’s close attention to how and why poets write inspired Cambridge academics who read his essays and attended his lectures, such as I.A. Richards (author of *Practical Criticism*⁴³) and F.R. Leavis (author of *New Bearings in English Poetry*⁴⁴), to bring his methods into the University.

I.A. Richards, known for his pedagogical experiments during the 1920s when he gave his students poems to read without any contextual information, was William Empson’s tutor at Cambridge. Under this tutoring, Empson would write *Seven Types of Ambiguity* which, full of close readings, was named as a significant influence by Cleanth Brooks and the American New Critical School of the 1950s. In an essay Brooks contributed to the journal *Accent* in 1946 on ‘Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes’ and revised to provide the foundation to his seminal book of New Criticism, *The Well Wrought Urn*⁴⁵, he comments on Empson’s writing, suggesting it is significant because “his criticism is an attempt to deal with what the poem “means” in terms of its structure *as a poem*” [Brooks’s italics]. He contrasts this

42 Johannes Willem Bertens, *Literary Theory : The Basics*, 2nd ed. edn (London: Routledge, 2008). 9

43 I. A. Richards and John Constable, *Practical Criticism : A Study of Literary Judgement*, (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

44 F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry. A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932).

45 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn : Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, Revised ed. edn (London: Dobson, 1968).

with what past critics had tried to do, which he believes is find the “goodness of a poem” in terms of its “truth” or describe its “charm” due to its “decorative elements”. This focus on meaning, championed by Brooks, led to essays by W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley separating the poet from the poem and setting out theoretical injunctions that the poem should be read and analysed “in itself”.⁴⁶ As Goring, Hawthorn and Mitchell emphasise, “criticism that contained references to the author’s intention or the poem’s ‘affects’ in the reader was deemed illegitimate”.⁴⁷

The New Critics’ focus on close reading of the poem is admirable, but its rigours ignore the importance of situating a poem in its time and place and all that recent criticism has taught us about the importance of considering gender, class, race etc. There is a strong contemporary critical understanding of the amount identity and socio-economic circumstances impact on both writerly intentions and readerly reception. Although this thesis employs close-reading as a tool, it follows the more modern, flexible model of critics such as Helen Vendler and Ruth Padel. Vendler often situates her readings, as I do, historically and contextually. Perhaps what marks her approach most radically as divergent from the New Critics is the extent that, for Vendler, the poet’s intention is an important consideration. When, in a 1996 *Paris Review* interview, she is asked about her ideal reader, Vendler responds:

Well, I think of my audience in part as being the poet. What I would hope would be that if Keats read what I had written about the ode “To Autumn,” he would say, Yes, that is the way I wanted it to be thought of. And, Yes, you have unfolded what I had implied, or something like that. It would not strike the poet, I hope, that there was a discrepancy between my description of the work and the poet’s own conception of the work. I wouldn’t be very happy if a poet read what I had written and said, What a peculiar thing to say about this work of mine.⁴⁸

46 William Kurtz Wimsatt and Monroe Curtis Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon. Studies in the Meaning of Poetry. By W. K. Wimsatt ... And Two Preliminary Essays Written in Collaboration with Monroe C. Beardsley*, ([Lexington, Ky.]: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

47 Paul Goring, Jeremy Hawthorn, and Domhnall Mitchell, *Studying Literature : The Essential Companion*, 2nd ed. edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010).

48 Helen Vendler, ‘The Art of Criticism No. 3’, ed. by Henri Cole (*The Paris Review*, Winter 1996).

Vendler wants to “unfold” what the poet implies, suggesting that she sees the critic’s role as a partnership with the poet in order to reveal to the reader the full dimensions of the poet’s thoughts. Padel, on the other hand, whose *Independent on Sunday* columns, later collected in two books, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*⁴⁹ and *The Poem and The Journey*⁵⁰, encourage the reading and discussion of contemporary poetry, explicitly states that “The point was reading: the poem not the poet”.⁵¹ In saying this she comes closer to the New Critics than Vendler, but her view of the poem’s “affects” in the reader is opposite to theirs. Although Cleanth Brooks sniggered that “The New Critic, like the Snark, is a very elusive beast”⁵², suggesting they are not so much a school as a random collection, what Brooks, Empson, Wimsatt and Beardsley, John Crow Ransome et al. all have in common is that they are writing from within the academy, and there is something very Ivory Tower about their discounting of the reader’s emotional and personal response to poetry as an “affective fallacy”.⁵³ For Padel, on the other hand, enabling and encouraging the reader to have a personal encounter with the poem is all, and the original format of her readings, in a newspaper column, was expressly intended to draw readers into a conversation about the poem. As she declares in the introduction to a collection of these pieces, “I was thrilled when that happened, for the point was not convincing anyone that my way of reading a poem was right, but giving people tools to help them to read the poem for themselves”. In a radically different approach to the New Critics, Padel encourages her readers to invest emotionally: “some had simply fallen in love with a poem [...] These poems were now part of their lives”.⁵⁴

49 Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem, or, How Reading Modern Poetry Can Change Your Life*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002).

50 Ruth Padel, *The Poem and the Journey : And Sixty Poems to Read Along the Way*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007).

51 Padel, 2002. 2

52 Cleanth Brooks, 'The New Criticism', *The Sewanee Review*, 87:4 (1979). 592.

53 W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Affective Fallacy', *The Sewanee Review*, 57 (1949).

54 Padel 2002: Ibid.

Robert Hampson agrees with Padel about the importance of a personal response while sounding a note of caution:

I. A. Richards long ago, at the very start of practical criticism, drew attention to the danger of ‘stock responses’ as the ‘personal responses’ of the uninformed reader. As a teacher, I want my students to have informed responses – and that ‘informed response’ might require historical knowledge, biographical knowledge, knowledge of related literature, knowledge of other works by the same writer, knowledge of the critical tradition, knowledge of contemporary theoretical approaches. I don’t lose sight of the text, and close reading of the text, and of the importance of the personal response to the text, but the personal response also has to be an informed response.⁵⁵

Both Padel and Vendler are close readers whose personal responses are ‘informed’ responses, reaching to historical, biographical, literary and theoretical knowledge as necessary while never losing sight of the text. Moreover, they see reading the text as pleasure, *jouissance*, and perhaps could be best described by Roland Barthes’s phrase “explorers of the bliss of writing”.⁵⁶ Vendler, who states, “I have never liked the term ‘close-reading’”, describes this as “reading from the point of view of the writer”. Since the poems in this thesis are meditations on homes and homelands, it is fitting that the reading methodology of an informed, personal, pleasurable and writerly response I learn from the three critics above, and employ in this thesis, is described by Vendler through the metaphor of a room:

I think of close readers as people who want to read from the point of view of someone who composes with words. It’s a view from the inside, not from the outside. The phrase “close reading” sounds as if you’re looking at the text with a microscope from outside, but I would rather think of a close reader as someone who goes inside a room and describes the architecture. You speak from inside the poem as someone looking to see how the roof articulates with the walls and how the wall articulates with the floor. And where are the crossbeams that hold it up, and where are the windows that let light through?⁵⁷

55 Robert Hampson, ‘Robert Hampson Interview’, ed. by Lidia Vianu (*The Argoist Online*).

56 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1st American ed. edn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975).

57 Vendler. 1996: Ibid.

T.S. Eliot and Characteristics of a Modern Metaphysics

In 1919 T.S. Eliot wrote one of the seminal essays on poetry in the twentieth century: 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', included in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*⁵⁸. Most famous for its arguments regarding the "impersonality" of the writer, it is also noted for its attitude towards "the historical sense", an appreciation of a poet's sense of both "the pastness of the past" and the past's relationship to the present, as he claimed that, "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." While Eliot's width of reading and historical knowledge extends to English and European literature over a span of several centuries, over and over again during his lifetime he relates his own poetry and, by extension, all Modernist poetry, to two major influences: Dante and the Metaphysical Poets. From his early essays on 'The Metaphysical Poets' and 'Andrew Marvell' to the Clark Lectures he delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1926 'On the Metaphysical Poetry of the Seventeenth Century', to his three Turnbull Lectures at John Hopkins University in 1933 on 'The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry', to his commentary on George Herbert in 1962⁵⁹, Eliot's engagement with the Metaphysicals was long lasting and comprehensive. Wanbe and Mangang⁶⁰ see a "kinship" between Eliot and the Metaphysical Poets, and Ronald Schuchard, editor of Eliot's complete prose, uses Eliot's lectures to declare him a Metaphysical Poet: "Eliot had begun to outline a theory based on three metaphysical moments – Dante in Florence in the thirteenth century; Donne in London in the seventeenth century; Laforgue in Paris in the

58 Eliot, 1920.

59 T. S. Eliot, *George Herbert*, (Published for the British Council and the National Book League by Longmans, 1962).

60 Wanbe and Mangang.

nineteenth century. Implicitly, there was a fourth moment at hand- Eliot in London in the twentieth century.”⁶¹

But what does it mean to call someone a ‘Metaphysical Poet’? Since Eliot considered the term so inaccurate that it was “libellous of metaphysics”⁶², out of necessity he argued, “what we have to do, in the end, is to *impose* a meaning, rather than to *discover* it”⁶³ [Eliot’s italics]. In order to ‘impose’ a definition of a modern metaphysical aesthetic, it is necessary to first separate out the poem from the poet. Rather than talking about *Metaphysical Poets*, using the term *Metaphysical Poems* might allow us to identify common characteristics between Eliot’s and the Seventeenth Century Metaphysicals’ writing that may, in turn, be applied to contemporary poetics. These might be listed as follows:

i) A Philosophical Passion

Eliot observed in regard to Dante “we do find a philosophical passion – not a passion for philosophy but an alteration of human passion by philosophy”; and stated that in Crashaw’s verse “contemplation is probably the most ecstatic emotional state possible”⁶⁴ Poems that are about the process of teasing out a thought or articulating a philosophical reflection could be termed ‘metaphysical’.

ii) A Colloquial Vocabulary and Conversational Tone

As far as Samuel Johnson and Dryden were concerned, Donne spoke in a “common language”, something Mathiessen identifies as a commonality between Donne and Eliot: “Similarities between Eliot’s technical devices and those of Donne have been often observed: the conversational tone, the vocabulary at once colloquial and

61 Eliot and Schuchard, 1993.

62 See the following section of this thesis, ‘Metaphysics as Poetic and Philosophical Strategies’, for a fuller discussion of Eliot’s response to the term.

63 Eliot and Schuchard, 1993. 249

64 Ibid: 254

surprisingly strange – both of these a product of Eliot’s belief in the relation of poetry to actual speech, and paralleling his use of ‘non-poetic’ material”.⁶⁵ For Sen too, Eliot “refreshes the language of poetry by bringing it closer to common speech”.⁶⁶ Therefore Metaphysical poems, while reflecting on complicated thoughts, should do so with clarity and in the language of common speech rather than with technical, recondite or highbrow expressions.

iii) Syntax / Rapid Association of Ideas

If the complexity of Metaphysical Poetry isn’t because of the language itself, it is perhaps due to the way complex thoughts are expressed resulting in syntactical ingenuity to convey the evolution of the thought on the page. Mathiessen described this in Eliot’s poetry as “the rapid association of ideas which demands alert agility from the reader; the irregular verse and difficult sentence structure as a part of fidelity to thought and feeling; and, especially, the flashes of wit which result from the shock of such unexpected contrasts.”⁶⁷

iv) Difficulty: Allusiveness and Elusiveness

Eighteenth century critics found the thinking of the Metaphysical Poets “abstruse”, and Samuel Johnson’s opinion that ‘To show their learning was their whole endeavour’ was often repeated.⁶⁸ The same criticism of over-cleverness and obfuscation has been made of Eliot: “Confronted by Eliot’s poems, many early reviewers had commented on their difficulty and their ‘cleverness’, evidenced in the literary allusiveness that practically became his hallmark; and to some degree a sense of Eliot’s ‘difficulty’ continues.”⁶⁹ This difficulty is attributed to their allusiveness –

65 F.O. Mathiessen, *The Achievements of T.S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

66 S. K. Sen, *Metaphysical Tradition and T.S. Eliot*, (Calcutta: Mukhopadaya, 1967).

67 Ibid.

68 Johnson, 1968. Frank L. Huntley, 'Dr. Johnson and Metaphysical Wit; or, "Discordia Concors" Yoked and Balanced', *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 2 (1969).

69 Tony Sharpe, *T. S. Eliot : A Literary Life*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

frequent citation or gesturing towards other poems / pieces of knowledge – but the result is that meaning can be elusive, subtle rather than obvious and requiring a degree of work by the reader. So while, being written in as clear, colloquial language as possible, the Metaphysical poem's meaning may be not immediately apparent at first and require the thoughtful attention of its reader.

iv) 'Visual Wit' / The Use of Conceits

According to Sen, "The 'difficulty' of Donne's poetry was due partly to the new manner – the packed style and the disconcerting turns of logic – and partly to the use of obscure allusions and learned conceits."⁷⁰ These conceits, something Eliot terms "visual wit" when writing about Seventeenth Century poetry, involve bringing together very different concepts in a single image in order to articulate meaning precisely through the comparison. As George Williamson comments: "His acute perception of similarity and difference between the same things, his mixed use of the intellectual wits that Hobbes called fancy and judgment, is common in Metaphysical Poetry or the poetic wit of the seventeenth century."⁷¹ I would argue that the use of conceits is equally a hallmark of the modern metaphysical poem.

v) Paradox and Puns

For George Williamson, Eliot's conceits, like those of the Metaphysicals, frequently result in paradox: "In the new and the old he finds both antithesis and similitude, often mingled in the paradox of the one and the many, or of time and the timeless."⁷²

Wanbe and Mangang connect this to Ronald Tamplin's observation: "The pun is of course the greatest degree of heterogeneous unity, in that two meanings are located exactly in the same sound. One word has two distinct meanings. In this sense Jesus

70 Sen, 1967.

71 George Professor at the University of Chicago Williamson and John Donne, [*Six Metaphysical Poets: A Reader's Guide.*] *a Reader's Guide to the Metaphysical Poets: John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968).

72 Ibid.

was the last word in puns, man and God, spirit and flesh [...] And just as the Metaphysicals could extend out from the example of Christ into ever-widening rings in imagery because paradox is the key to the meaning of experience, so for Eliot paradoxical unities constantly help to give form to his thought.”⁷³ A contemporary metaphysical poem may employ either and/or both paradoxes and puns, and wordplay is a clear signifier of a modern metaphysical poem.

Metaphysics as Poetic and Philosophical Strategies

Before considering the strategies involved in Metaphysical writing, it is important to clarify the reasons for employing this choice of terminology. While it is a difficult term to pin down, and therefore to use, there are two major reasons to do so. Firstly, because it immediately calls to mind the tradition of writing discussed below and, perhaps more importantly for me as I explore what writing this kind of poetry means, no other word quite fits. ‘Sacred’ seems to reify the poem as something that has an element of holiness or the divine, consecrating meaning, while the whole intention should be to question it. ‘Religious’ poetry has similar issues and, even more so, designates a label to the poet for religious poetry must be written by a religious writer. Yet as a Jew, who perceives my identity as both religious and racial, as likely to be connected to cultural inheritance as any kind of belief, and who is writing about poets who may or might not subscribe to any religious practice, this term seems not only inadequate but restricting. ‘Poetry of Belief’ seems inappropriate for poems that frequently question faith and articulate doubt and ‘Spiritual’ poetry has both new-age connotations and a wishy washiness I find troubling. And while ‘Numinous’ might be more mystical, it is at some level as problematic as ‘spiritual’ for I see this kind of writing as being as concerned with the ‘physical’ as with the ‘meta’ / beyondness that these terms imply. Metaphysical may not be the ideal term, but it seems to me, writing

⁷³ Ronald Tamplin, *A Preface to T.S. Eliot*, (London: Longman, 1988, 1987).

in English, as the only one available, and its use has very precise connotations. For when employing the term “Metaphysical Poetry”, it is customary to understand it as a shorthand for poetry written in the Stuart era: a Seventeenth Century bridging movement between Elizabethan /Jacobean Renaissance verse and a new poetic moment ushered in by Milton’s political and poetic epic *Paradise Lost*. This is the primary sense in which I use the term.

It is usually attributed to Samuel Johnson⁷⁴, but the appellation of “metaphysics” to poetry is actually first given by John Dryden in ‘A Discourse Affecting Satire’, a 1693 essay in which he extends and revises his thinking about John Donne from his earlier ‘Essay on Dramatic Poesy’ (1668).⁷⁵ In the original piece he objects to writers such as John Cleveland “wresting and torturing a word into another meaning”, comparing Cleveland unfavourably to Donne: “the one gives us deep thoughts in common language, though rough cadence; the other gives us common thoughts in abstruse words” George Williamson characterises this comment as “In Donne the thought is abstruse, in Cleveland the language”⁷⁶ but this is unfairly dismissive – it seems to me that Dryden is complementing Donne on his ability to express intellectual depth clearly in easily understood words, although he has reservations about the formal qualities of his verse. However, by 1693 Dryden’s admiration for Donne’s “deep thoughts”, if indeed it existed initially, has disappeared completely. In the passage Johnson picks up on in his *Lives of The Poets*, Dryden suggests that Donne

affects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their heats, and entertain them with the softness of love. In this (if I may be pardoned for so bold a truth) Mr. Cowley has copied him to a fault.⁷⁷

74 Johnson, 1968.

75 John Dryden, *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays Vols 1-2*, ([S.l.]: Dent, 1962).

76 Williamson and Donne, 1968. 4

77 Dryden: *Ibid*.

It is probable that what lies behind Dryden's change of heart is William Walsh's objection, in his Preface to *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant* published the year previously, that "The Moderns [...] fill their Verses with Thoughts that are surprising and glittering, but not tender, passionate, or natural to a Man in Love".⁷⁸ Dryden's assumption that, for the sake of us women whose tender minds might be unnecessarily perplexed, men should not combine intellect and romance is hardly original, but his coinage of the word "metaphysics" to describe Donne's craft most certainly is. While other writers challenged the sentiment about combining philosophy and love (eg. Charles Giddon wrote to Walsh that "A Man that is used to a good Habit of thinking, cannot be without extraordinary Thoughts on what concerns him so near as the Heart of his Mistress"⁷⁹), the description of Donne as philosophical and employing "metaphysics" stuck. Alexander Pope agreed with Dryden about the debt Cowley owed to Donne, although he was far more complementary about both of them. In his undated 'Sketch for a History of the Rise and Progress of English Poetry'⁸⁰, included after his death by Owen Ruffhead in 1740 in a published collection of his work, Pope incorporates a section on the "School of Donne" in which he opines "Donne had no imagination, but as much wit, I think, as any writer can possibly have."⁸¹ For Pope, wit is something to be praised, and he says of Cowley: "Cowley is a fine poet, in spite of all his faults. He, as well as Davenant, borrowed his metaphysical style from Donne".⁸²

78 William Poet Walsh, *Letters and Poems, Amorous and Gallant*. [by William Walsh.], (London: Jacob Tonson, 1692).

79 Charles Gildon, *The Second Volume of the Post-Boy Robb'd of His Mail: Or, the Pacquet Broke-Open. To Which Are Added Several Ingenious Letters Lately Sent to the Gentlemen Concern'd in This Frolick: as Also Copies of Those Private Letters Which Lately Past between - with Observations Upon Each Letter*, (London: printed by J. Wilde, for John Dunton, at the Raven in the Poultry, 1693).

80 Alexander Pope, *A Collection of Essays, Epistles and Odes. ... By Alexander Pope, Esq.*, (London: sold by J. and R. Tonson).

81 Owen Ruffhead, *The Life of Alexander Pope*, (Reprographischer Nachdruck der Ausg. London, Bathurst usw., 1769.) edn (Hildesheim).

82 Ibid.

Samuel Johnson's famous naming of "The Metaphysical Poets" is very clearly responding to Alexander Pope's thought expressed in this passage. He opens his 'Life of Cowley' with the sentence "The Metaphysical Poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour". Johnson's group of poets of the "metaphysick style" includes Donne, Cleveland and Cowley; he quotes from all three poets (although also mentions a few others as successors); and his line of thinking can be traced back to Walsh and Dryden - the debt he owes them is evident. Nor is Johnson's now iconic definition of their "wit" as "a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" entirely original. Pope had previously used the principle *concordia discors* when discussing wit in poetry. Frank L. Huntley traces the "English Augustan version of this classical idea" to a translation of Book One of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* published by Jacob Tonson in London in 1716/7.⁸³ Tonson's title: *Ovid's Metamorphoses in Fifteen Books, Translated by the Most Eminent Hands*⁸⁴ suggest the involvement of a host of important poets in the project. Dryden was included in their number, and the translation of the key verse is his:

For heat and moisture, when in Bodies joyn'd,
 The temper that results from either Kind
 Conception makes; and fighting till they mix,
 Their mingled atoms in each other fix.
 Thus Nature's hand the Genial Bed prepares
 With *friendly discord*, and with fruitful Wars.

[p19, my italics]

According to Leo Spitzer, Ovid is playing with Empedocles's notion of the four elements (air, water, fire and earth), four qualities (dry, wet, hot, cold) and four temperaments (sanguine, melancholy, choleric and phlegmatic) that are seen as

⁸³ Huntley. (1969): Ibid.

⁸⁴ B. C. A. D. or A. D. Ovid and others, *Ovid's Art of Love ... Together with His Remedy of Love. Translated [Sic] into English Verse by Several Eminent Hands [I.E. John Dryden, William Congreve and Nahum Tate]. To Which Are Added, the Court of Love, a Tale from Chaucer [Paraphrased by Arthur Maynwaring]. And the History of Love (by Mr. Charles Hopkins). The Second Edition.* (London: J. T., 1716).

combining to make the whole of nature.⁸⁵ But Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s “friendly discord (*concordia discors*)” is not the only source of this idea during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. As Huntley points out, two English translations of Manilius’s *Astronomicon* are in circulation, the first by Edward Sherburne published in 1675 and, perhaps more notably, the second, translated by Thomas Creech in 1697 and, like *Metamorphoses*, published by Jacob Tonson.⁸⁶ Rather strangely, after a perfect description of it, Creech translates Manilius’s ‘*discordia concors*’ as ‘Variety of Things’ but it is clear that the passage describes exactly the same philosophical idea:

Or whether Water, Air, and Flame and Earth
 Knew no beginning, nor first seeds of Birth;
 But first in Being from themselves arose,
 And as four Members the vast God compose;
 In which Thin, Thick, Hot, Cold, Moist, and Dry,
 For mutual Actions mutual parts supply,
From whose agreeing disagreement springs,
 The numerous odd *Variety of Things*.
 These qualities to act provoke the Seed,
 Make Vital Elements and Bodies breed.

[p8, my italics]

For Samuel Johnson, it seems that those he terms Metaphysical Poets are struggling to reach the ideal that Greek and Roman poets and philosophers believe is achieved when all these “mutual parts” are in balance and working in harmony. This classical science sits uneasily against Christian notions of body and soul and, according to Johnson, in the writing of the Metaphysicals they are “yoked by violence together”. Dismissively he states: “Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were

85 Leo Spitzer and Anna Granville Hatcher, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony. Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word* edited by Anna Granville Hatcher, Etc., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).409-64

86 Marcus Manilius and Thomas Creech, *The Five Books of M. Manilius, Containing a System of the Ancient Astronomy and Astrology; Together with the Philosophy of the Stoicks. Done into English Verse. With Notes [by T. C., I.E. T. Creech]*, (London, 1697).

ever found.”⁸⁷ Johnson agrees that Donne is intelligent, calling him “a man of very extensive and various knowledge”, and acknowledges that he has Wit. But where as Classical Wit is “at once natural and new [...] not obvious [...] acknowledged to be just”, Johnson condemns Donne’s Wit as one in which “nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.” It is this kind of Wit that Johnson suggests “may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*”, but T.S. Eliot alleges that there is nothing rigorous or philosophical in Johnson’s consideration or, indeed, in his and Dryden’s naming of it as “Metaphysical”.

In 1926, introducing his Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, T.S. Eliot begins by looking at how the description “Metaphysical” was applied to these poets:

This term “metaphysical”, used by Dryden, adopted by Johnson, was first used as a convenient term, and as much defined by the material in hand, as defining it. It was used by persons who were not themselves metaphysicians, or of a philosophical cast of mind.⁸⁸

Although, for Eliot, “the designation may be a complete misnomer”⁸⁹, it is one that has been “consecrated by use”. In their study of Donne and Eliot, Wanbe and Mangang argue “Eliot obviously means that the term ‘metaphysical’ has been so often employed that it has become widely and readily accepted and no question of the rightness or appropriateness of the term arises anymore”. While this is accurate, I would suggest that the religious connotations of “consecrated” are not accidental, for these are poets who engage with the sacred. Eliot thinks this important and, rather than seeing their

⁸⁷ Johnson, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Eliot and Schuchard, 1993.

⁸⁹ Eliot, *ibid.*

engagement with religion and nature as at odds, he views it as one of their strengths, observing “If so shrewd and sensitive (though so limited) a critic as Johnson failed to define Metaphysical Poetry by its faults, it is worthwhile to inquire whether we may not have more success by adopting the opposite method”.

To Eliot, the Harvard trained philosopher, it was clear that the term “Metaphysical” had been misapplied and there would be no point in exploring it from a philosophical perspective. However, just as Eliot opposed Johnson, perhaps we need to challenge Eliot. Surely any consideration of a “Modern Metaphysical Poetry” must take into account “Metaphysics” which, although it has a long history, developed into a detailed philosophical discourse during the Twentieth century. Van Inwagen has argued that the distinction between an Aristotelian “Physics” questioning the nature of being, and the modern understanding of “Metaphysics” in its sense of questioning what is beyond the physical, originated at exactly the same time our civil-war poets were writing, the moment Eliot believes there was a “dissociation of sensibilities”⁹⁰. Van Inwagen’s essay on “Metaphysics” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy begins as follows:

Can we say that the word ‘metaphysics’ is a name for that “science” (that *episteme*, that *scientia*, that study, that discipline) whose subject-matter is the subject-matter of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*? If we do say this, we shall be committed to some thesis in the neighborhood of the following theses: “The subject-matter of metaphysics is ‘being as such’”; “The subject-matter of metaphysics is the first causes of things”; “The subject-matter of metaphysics is that which does not change.” Any of these three theses might have been regarded as a defensible statement of the subject-matter of what was currently called “metaphysics” till the seventeenth century, when, rather suddenly, many topics and problems that Aristotle and the Medievals would have classified as belonging to physics (the relation of mind and body, for example, or the freedom of the will, or personal identity across time) began to be “reassigned” to metaphysics.⁹¹

90 Eliot, *ibid*: 21.

91 Peter Van Inwagen, 'Metaphysics', in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (California, 2012). <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/metaphysics/>

Key to a modern understanding of “Metaphysics” is the relation of mind and body or, in a religious context, the relation of soul and body. Andrew Marvell’s ‘A Dialogue between Body and Soul’ discussed in Chapter Three, is one of the first major examples of this poetically, and I locate a modern example of this type of metaphysical thinking in John Burnside’s constant reaching for the intangible, searching for the numinous in lack and absences: “the gap between darkness and light has already vanished/ [...] all that remains [...] / is the scent on his skin, a scent he mistakes for the spirit.”⁹² Martin Heidegger gave a series of lectures on Metaphysics in 1935 at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau. In 1953 he turned these lectures into a book-length publication titled *Introduction to Metaphysics* in which he identified the “fundamental question of metaphysics” as “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?”⁹³ He expands this question in multiple ways, including a analysis of art: “art is the opening up of the Being of beings”.⁹⁴ After considering the work of Parmenides and Sophocles, Heidegger asserts “But we must recall the originary essential connection between poetic and thoughtful saying, especially when, as here, it is a matter of the inceptive poetizing-thinking, grounding and founding of the historical Dasein [Being-here] of a people.”⁹⁵ While I have many reservations about Heidegger’s work, not least because at times he used his philosophy as a political and social justification of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, I believe this particular insight is incisive. Heidegger’s notion of the ‘Being-Here’ of a People concerns Andrew Marvell, Isaac Rosenberg and Yehudah Amichai, all writing at times of war when they are pulled between peoples with competing claims to land. However, they do not write polemics, but rather nuanced and thoughtful appreciations of complex situations on a variety of scales, shifting between micro and macrocosms, examining small things in close detail as a way to tease out larger implications.

92 ‘Ny Hellesund’ in John Burnside, *Gift Songs*, (London: Cape Poetry, 2007).79

93 Martin Heidegger, Gregory Fried, and Richard F. H. Polt, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2000).1

94 Ibid: 140

95 Ibid: 176

The connections between poetry and thought, thought and utterance are made explicit in much Metaphysical Poetry. Metaphysical Poems are often full of conceits and sustained metaphors, exploring the relationship between God, people and the natural world. Like their predecessors Donne, Herbert and Marvell meditations on the relationships between these entities are the concern of Rosenberg, Amichai and Burnside. Like the historical Metaphysicals, all three are technical innovators, experimenting with form and the shape of poem and thought. In 1903 Henri Bergson, T.S. Eliot's philosophy teacher during his time in Paris, wrote *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, in which he defined it as the relationship between "intellect" and "intuition".⁹⁶ For Bergson, the intellect is spatial, apprehending the world as a collection of fixed, discrete units that are static and measurable. By "intuition", on the other hand, "is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible."⁹⁷ Poetically I would translate this into another key feature of modern Metaphysical Poetry: a sensuously intellectual mode of writing where the poem conveys a sense of the mind in action within the poem. According to Thomas A. Goudge, Bergson's most original conclusion is about duration, which T.E. Hulme defines as "a heterogeneous flux or becoming" or, to express it in Goudge's words, "Absolute reality as revealed by metaphysical intuition is the ever-rolling stream of time."⁹⁸ As opposed to the hewn-stone quality of much Elizabethan verse, Metaphysical Poetry was characterised by a mercurial liquidity, a quality shared by all three recent poets and explored particularly when Burnside's handling of 'place' in his work is considered later in the thesis.

⁹⁶ Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1999).

⁹⁷ Ibid. 23-24

⁹⁸ Ibid. 12. See Thomas A. Goudge's Introduction

Hannah Arendt, a protégé of Heidegger and an influence on Burnside, argues for an understanding of Greek Philosophy dependent on the affinity between “contemplation and fabrication (theoria and poiesis)”, as she explains it: “the beholding of something was considered to be an inherent element in fabrication as well, inasmuch as the work of the craftsman was guided by the ‘idea’”.⁹⁹ In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Iris Murdoch picks up this theme and develops it further to understand how the fabrication isn’t just guided by the idea, but in its very process can create a fresh apprehension: “Something is apprehended as *there* which is not yet *known*. Then something comes, as we sometimes say, from the unconscious. It comes to us out of the dark of non-being, as a reward for loving attention.”¹⁰⁰ This concept, inspired by both Keats’s ‘negative capability’ and Simone Weil’s ‘patient attention’ is equally a metaphysical and a religious one for Murdoch:

Good is not an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary will place objects of its choice. It is something which we all experience as a creative force. This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word ‘deep’, or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal. In this respect metaphysical and religious pictures resemble each other.¹⁰¹

This link between the metaphysical and religious is perhaps the most important of the features of what I am terming ‘Modern Metaphysical Poetry’. Almost all the poems I refer to contain biblical and religious imagery or are aware of being religious statements in a secular world. Often they take forms influenced by hymns or prayers, or have religious or spiritual iconography underlying their imagery. The historical Metaphysical Poets were aware of the relationship between institution and belief, public and private, as they were often working for Patrons, and sometimes for the

⁹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). 301

¹⁰⁰ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, (London: Vintage, 2003). 505

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

church itself. In the modern world this carries over into an awareness of audience, both divine and human, and a sense of writing in and against tradition.

Chapter One
‘Visions and Revisions’¹⁰²

On the Allusive, Elusive Isaac Rosenberg
and His Reading of John Donne

The ‘Remarkable’ Isaac Rosenberg

Geoffrey Hill, whose Wharton Lecture in 1998 set out to redefine Isaac Rosenberg as a Metaphysical Poet, asserts

One cannot come to an equitable valuation of Rosenberg’s work without acknowledging his own recognition of the psychology of circumstance, of the interrelatedness of experience and language, or without perceiving the cogency with which he engages his own inwardness and ‘outer semblance’.¹⁰³

In using the phrase ‘outer semblance’, Hill is referring to a pencil sketch that Rosenberg drew in the trenches in 1918 shortly before he died and enclosed in a letter to Gordon Bottomley. Rosenberg titled the sketch: ‘Isaac Rosenberg: His Outer Semblance?’¹⁰⁴ The question mark is all-important here. Art historians such as Irene Wise have discussed the extent to which his earlier, painted, self-portraits were done using a mirror, and speculated whether a mirror or another way to view his reflection was available to him in the trenches.¹⁰⁵ For a literary critic who wishes to interrogate Rosenberg’s poetic dialogue between “experience and language” and negotiate the locations and dislocations of his poetic identity, highlighting the tensions between his inner and outer semblance, understanding Rosenberg’s background as an artist and expertise in self-portraiture is essential. As this chapter will go on to explore, Rosenberg was a dedicated reader of John Donne’s poems. T.S. Eliot appreciates

102 ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in Eliot, 1969. 14

103 Hill. 2

104 See appendix 1 on p166 of this thesis.

105 Irene Wise, ‘Isaac Rosenberg: Poet, Painter, Soldier’, in JRC Annual Lecture, (University of Roehampton, 25th November 2014).

Donne for his ability to select the “image of absolute necessity”.¹⁰⁶ Isaac Rosenberg, a Slade-trained artist, shares this visual acuity, and the tension between inner understanding and outer appearance gives his work power. Following Hill, to come to an “equitable understanding” of Rosenberg, it is essential to begin with an appreciation of his biographical circumstances and how his contemporaries viewed him.

In July 1935, T.S. Eliot commented in *The Criterion*¹⁰⁷ that Isaac Rosenberg was the “most remarkable of the British Poets writing during the First World War”. While Eliot’s phrasing isn’t original – in *New Bearings in English Poetry*¹⁰⁸ published in 1932, F R Leavis had already championed Rosenberg, suggesting he was “equally remarkable” to Wilfred Owen and “even more technically interesting” – it marked a turning point in Rosenberg criticism. Eliot’s friend Siegfried Sassoon agreed to write the foreword to a new *Collected Works*¹⁰⁹, edited by Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding (published in 1937), and Rosenberg’s poetry was taken up by writers such as Robert Graves and Keith Douglas. The latter would cite Rosenberg in his Second World War poem, *Desert Flowers*: ‘Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying’.¹¹⁰ For Graves and Douglas, Rosenberg is a touchstone for the cultural conflicts embedded in war; as I will explore below, Eliot and Sassoon thought him unusual because of the religious / racial content of his work; while for Leavis he is a supreme technician. Edward Marsh anthologized him as a “Georgian poet” which then, as now, had connotations of conservatism (although several other of Marsh’s “Georgians” viewed themselves as progressive and modern), while to Ezra Pound, who praised him and sent his poems to Harriet Monroe in America for publication in

106 ‘Clark Lecture IV’ in Eliot and Schuchard, 1993. 119

107 T.S. Eliot, ‘A Commentary’, *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review*, XIV-LVII (July 1935).

108 Leavis, 1932.

109 Isaac Rosenberg, Gordon Bottomley, and Denys Clement Wyatt Harding, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg. Poetry, Prose, Letters and Some Drawings [Including Portraits]*. Edited by Gordon Bottomley & Denys Harding, Etc. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937).

110 Keith Douglas and Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1964).

Poetry magazine, he was “rough”, a “burglar”.¹¹¹ As Rosenberg’s biographer, Jean Lidiard, has pointed out,

Every critic sees him in terms of dichotomies, but each sees a different dichotomy. He is English but Jewish; he is from London’s East End yet also from the Slade School and the Café Royal; his work reveals Hebrew elements as well as his relationship to the English Romantic tradition; he is orthodox and unorthodox in his religious vision; from a pacifist background, he is nonetheless obsessed with the creative and destructive energy of power.¹¹²

To Lidiard’s list I would add another dichotomy, for Rosenberg’s literary work both reaches back to and responds to the poems of the Metaphysicals yet he is determinedly Modern in his contemporary influences and views on art. This chapter argues that his poetry is at his best when this modern language and world view filters into his poems.

The argument that Rosenberg is an embryonic modern metaphysical is based around a handful of Rosenberg’s later, predominately war, poems. Much of his early work is influenced by Shelley and Keats and, as Francine Gould comments, demonstrates “the moral earnestness and predilection for sonorous language that give R[osenberg]’s work its richness yet, when in excess, detract from its effectiveness.”¹¹³ David Daiches believes this bleeds into the war poems and, for Daiches, foreshadows what could have been a new kind of writing:

Had Rosenberg lived to develop further along the lines on which he had already moved, he might have changed the course of modern English poetry, producing side by side with the poetry of Eliot and his school a richer and more monumental kind of verse, opposing a new romantic poetry to the new metaphysical brand.¹¹⁴

While I agree with Daiches that, had Rosenberg lived, he may have “changed the course of modern English poetry”, I disagree that his verse would have been

111 Ezra Pound, 1916 letter to Harriet Monroe, cited in Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg : The Making of a Great War Poet : A New Life*, (London: Phoenix, 2009).

112 Jean Liddiard, *Isaac Rosenberg : The Half Used Life*, (London: Gollancz, 1975). 38

113 Francine Gould, ‘Isaac Rosenberg’ in Steven Serafin, *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, 3rd edn (Detroit: St. James Press, 1999). 707-08

114 David Daiches, ‘Isaac Rosenberg’, *Commentary*, (1950). 91-3

“romantic” or in opposition to “the poetry of Eliot”. Although Rosenberg did not set out deliberately to encapsulate *Discordia Concors* as part of a Modern Metaphysical aesthetic, circumstance lent elements of the “new metaphysical brand” to his work. Poverty, lack of access to paper and the time constraints of serving at the front affected his ability to compose in long bursts so he pieced together fragments into meditative poems, as Eliot would later do deliberately for effect; he frequently tried on different styles – as a poet he was self-taught and learned by imitating others’ voices since his art studies had taught him to work by mimesis; wide reading and instinct led him away from traditional metrical forms to experimenting with freer rhythms; his eye for the visual led him to an understanding of the aesthetic clarity of the line as well as lending itself to incorporating images into extended metaphors. Several years before Eliot would articulate the importance of the Metaphysicals for Modernist poets, Rosenberg was already reading them, keeping his copy of Donne in his pocket when in hospital or at the Front, borrowing Donne’s images and his notion of the poetic conceit.¹¹⁵

If both Leavis and Eliot see Rosenberg as “remarkable”, their justification for using that term is based on different reasoning. Leavis’s appreciation of Rosenberg is focused on the innovative nature of his poetic craft. He sees Rosenberg as a conscious pioneer of Modernism, viewing his financial disadvantages as his advantages: what saves Rosenberg for Leavis is that he didn’t have a traditional education and therefore his writing isn’t conventional. It should be noted that Rosenberg’s friend, Joseph Leftwich, while agreeing with Leavis about the lack of a formal literary education leading Rosenberg towards a modernist aesthetic, disagreed that he was consciously pioneering a new Modernism aesthetic¹¹⁶. Eliot, on the other hand, makes a racial argument, suggesting that Rosenberg’s verse “does not only owe its distinction to its

115 Isaac Rosenberg letter to Edward Marsh 2nd November 1915, cited in Wilson, 2009.

116 Joseph Leftwich letter to Denys Harding, 18th June 1937, cited in Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Isaac Rosenberg, Poet & Painter : A Biography*, (London (Kingly Court, 10 Kingly St., W1A 4ES): Cecil Woolf, 1975). 36

being Hebraic: but because it is Hebraic it is a contribution to English Literature. For a Jewish poet to be able to write like a Jew in Western Europe and in a western European language, is almost a miracle.”¹¹⁷

It is difficult to know exactly how much Eliot was aware of Rosenberg’s educational background. Brought up by immigrant parents who had fled from the Russian occupation of Dvinsk (now in Latvia, then part of the Pale of Settlement) and spoke Yiddish, Russian and Hebrew, Rosenberg did not receive an English education until the age of seven when his family moved from Bristol to Stepney expressly for the purpose of enrolling him in a Jewish school. His official schooling ended when, aged fourteen, he was apprenticed to the engraver Carl Hentschel but, an auto-didact, Rosenberg continued to educate himself with the help of family friends such as the retired school-teacher Winifreda Seaton as well as through regular visits to Whitechapel Library. An entry in Joseph Leftwich’s diary from 1911 says of Rosenberg,

he goes on in his own way, running away to the libraries whenever he can, to read poetry and the lives of the poets, their letters, their essays on how to write poetry, their theories of what poetry should be and do. [...] It is only in poetry that he fills himself with something.¹¹⁸

In this light, the way Rosenberg integrated his Jewish culture into English poetry with fluency and considerable literary skill in what was not his first language does, indeed, seem miraculous. Yet, tonally Eliot’s statement is a difficult one to gauge. Initially Antony Julius cites his description of Rosenberg as evidence of Eliot’s anti-semitism, condemning it for its patronizing tone, “Eliot’s eccentric praise of the Jewish poet is

117 Eliot. (1935) Ibid.

118 Joseph Cohen and Isaac Rosenberg, *Journey to the Trenches: The Life of Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918*, (London: Robson Books, 1975).

consistent with his larger deprecations. ‘That a Jew can do this!’ registers the surprise of the anti-semite”.¹¹⁹ However, Julius later retracts this view.

On publication in 1995, Anthony Julius’s book on *T.S. Eliot, Antisemitism and Literary Form* was widely criticized by many Eliot scholars. Julius would complain in the *Guardian*, that his book was read by some hostile readers merely as an attack on Eliot, and an attempt to denigrate him, rather than the resistant but respectful reading Julius claimed he wished to perform.¹²⁰ In true barrister’s style, on publication of the 2nd Edition in 2003, Julius added a long rebuttal of criticism by ‘hostile readers’ such as Christopher Ricks, Jewel Spears Brooker and Christopher Hitchens, taking their arguments one by one and breaking them down.¹²¹ However, on two issues Julius admitted that his critics might have a point and took back some of what he initially said: the first was a grudging acceptance that Eliot’s seemingly dismissive comments on Marx might have been in jest (“I accept that [Craig] Raine’s alternative reading [...] is just about plausible”)¹²² and the second was in reference to the statement quoted above about Rosenberg. After Julius’s view of Eliot’s intentions have been queried by James Wood, Julius acknowledges:

I may also have misread Eliot on Isaac Rosenberg. Eliot praises Rosenberg’s poetry for his Hebraism; by implication, Rosenberg is a Jew true to his tradition. My sense that Eliot wished to bound Jews within their own, assigned idiom, and that he was unwilling to admit of a Jewish contribution that was *not* Hebraic, was perhaps mistaken, and definitely lacked charity. At any rate, I do not now think that this formulation of Eliot’s was anti-Semitic.¹²³

119 Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

120 Anthony Julius, ‘The Poetry of Prejudice’, *The Guardian*, (7th June 2003).

121 Anthony Julius, ‘Fourteen Propositions Responding to Critics’ in Anthony Julius, *T.S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*, Rev. ed. edn (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003). 302-335

122 Ibid. 332 This is in reference to Eliot calling Marx “A Jewish economist who inverted Hegel”.

123 Ibid. 332

Crowns of Thorns

Eliot isn't alone in viewing the fusion of Rosenberg's English and Jewish literary heritages as what makes him "remarkable". In 1937, when Siegfried Sassoon is invited by Bottomley and Harding to write the Foreword to Rosenberg's *Collected Works*, he dwells on the "racial quality" of Rosenberg's verse:

In reading and re-reading these poems I have been strongly impressed by their depth and integrity. I have found a sensitive and vigorous mind energetically interested in experimenting with language, and I have recognised in Rosenberg a fruitful fusion between English and Hebrew culture. Behind all his poetry there is a racial quality – biblical and prophetic.¹²⁴

Whether or not Eliot's description of Rosenberg's 'Hebraic-ness' or Sassoon's for that matter, is anti-Semitic, it is certainly limiting, coloured by the "partiality and subjectivity"¹²⁵ of the writers and isn't a fully correct assessment of Rosenberg as a poet. While Rosenberg does often use images from the Hebrew Bible and write poems and plays about religious figures, most prominently Moses, his Biblical references are not always drawn from his Jewish heritage, but from New Testament imagery employed by the poets he loved. For example, 'Dead Man's Dump' opens with a simile comparing the "limbers" (two-wheeled carts supporting artillery pieces) with "crowns of thorns" and "scepters old":

The plunging limbers over the shattered track
Racketed with their rusty freight,
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
To stay the flood of brutish men
Upon our brothers dear.¹²⁶

124 Siegfried Sassoon, foreword to Rosenberg, Bottomley, and Harding, 1937. Ibid: 2

125 Nayef Al-Joulani, 'Essenced to Language': *The Margins of Isaac Rosenberg*, (Oxford ; New York: Peter Lang, 2007). 21

126 Isaac Rosenberg, Gordon Bottomley, and Denys Clement Wyatt Harding, *The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg. Edited by Gordon Bottomley & Denys Harding, Etc.*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949).

The crown of thorns is not a Jewish image, but rather an instrument of The Passion. Originally it comes from the Gospels: three of the four describe the Roman soldiers twisting together a crown of thorns and placing it upon Jesus's head as a way to torture him further – both by causing him pain and as a mocking symbol of his claim of authority. Whether or not Rosenberg had read the Gospels, he had certainly read the Metaphysical Poets, mentioning the poetry of George Herbert and Andrew Marvell in his letters, both of whom employ the crown of thorns as a poetic conceit.^{127/128} All poets are influenced by their reading matter and fragments sometimes filter through unexpectedly, so any of Herbert's or Marvell's poems could have leaked their images into Rosenberg's unconscious. It is safest though to assume that, if Rosenberg's thorny crown is a direct, deliberate reference to his recent reading, it would have been taken from the poems of John Donne.¹²⁹ Between 1912 and 1915 Rosenberg's correspondence with Winifreda Seaton is filled with references to Donne. Seaton is the person who first recommended Donne's poems to Rosenberg and reflections on reading them form a substantial part of Seaton's and Rosenberg's correspondence.¹³⁰

On the 2nd November 1915, Rosenberg writes to Edward Marsh from a hospital bereft of reading and writing material (“there is not a book or paper here”) that “I have only taken Donne with me” – suggesting that in the period prior to Rosenberg's writing ‘Dead Man's Dump’, Donne's poems are his sole reading material.¹³¹ In a letter to his patron Sydney Schiff, dated only November 1915 but thought to be written

127 Herbert is mentioned frequently in correspondence with Miss Seaton in the Spring of 1911 in Mss held in British Library and Jewish Museum Archives; Marvell is discussed in correspondence with Edward Marsh eg see Rosenberg's letter postmarked 27th May 1917 in which he reviews ‘To a Coy Mistress’ and concludes: “Now I think if Andrew Marvell had broken up his rhythms more he would have been considered a terrific poet”. Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003. 165

128 George Herbert, ‘The Agonie’ in George Herbert, Izaak Walton, and Barnabas Oley, *The Works of George Herbert in Prose and Verse*, (London: Bell and Daldy, 1859). Andrew Marvell, ‘The Coronet’ in Andrew Marvell and Nigel Smith, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, Rev. ed. edn (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2007).

129 Since Rosenberg was a visual artist who spent many years visiting the National Gallery and copying paintings by Old Masters in order to acquire skills, this image may have had a visual arts, as well as literary source.

130 Vivien Noakes, *Catalogue of Isaac Rosenberg Material in the Imperial War Museum*, ([Great Britain: V. Noakes], 1998).

131 Isaac Rosenberg and Jean Liddiard, *Poetry out of My Head and Heart : Unpublished Letters & Poem Versions*, (London: Enitharmon in association with The European Jewish Publications Society ; Chester Springs, PA : Distributed in the USA by Dufour Editions, 2007).

towards the end of the month, he claims “I have with me Donne’s poems and Brown[e]’s ‘Religion De Medici [*sic*] and must carry both in my pocket.”¹³² By this point Rosenberg seems to have acquired another Seventeenth Century book, but his access to reading material is still limited. Therefore throughout this month Donne provides the majority, if not only, content of Rosenberg’s literary reading. It seems obvious therefore to hear the “thorny crown” of ‘La Corona’ and Donne’s extended metaphysical play on this image behind the Rosenberg reference.¹³³ It may not be too much of a stretch to see Donne also in the comparison of “rusty stakes” to “sceptres”. Although the word does not appear in Donne’s poems, it features frequently in his prose, especially when preaching about the “rod of Moses”, for example in his St Dunstan’s sermon.¹³⁴ Rosenberg’s obsession with Moses, identifying with him in an eponymous dramatic fragment as well as poems such as ‘The Jew’, is well documented, and it is very possible he had read Donne’s writing about his favourite biblical figure.¹³⁵ Or perhaps, if not drawn from Donne, “sceptres” is a word that comes from Rosenberg’s reading of Shakespeare, in whose *Richard III* England is famously described as “this sceptre’d isle”.¹³⁶ Whatever literary allusion lies behind Rosenberg’s word choice, it isn’t the Hebrew Bible.

Great Sceptred Dooms

These echoes play out through another poem, *In War*, which Rosenberg wrote on the Western Front, which concludes with the final stanza:

What are the great sceptred dooms
To us, caught
in the wild wave?
We break ourselves on them,
My brother, our hearts and years.¹³⁷

¹³² Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003. 142

¹³³ John Donne and Ilona Bell, *John Donne : Collected Poetry*, (London: Penguin, 2012).

¹³⁴ John Donne, *Sermons : Selected Passages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

¹³⁵ Isaac Rosenberg, *Moses. A Play. Few Ms. Corrections*, (London: Paragon Printing Works, 1916).

¹³⁶ William Shakespeare and E. A. J. Honigmann, *Richard Iii*, [New] ed. / edited with a commentary by E.A.J. Honigmann / introduced by Michael Taylor / the play in performance by Gillian Day. edn (London: Penguin, 2005).

¹³⁷ Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003. 97

Rosenberg's critics have had all kinds of trouble with this. Jean Moorcroft Wilson, for example, observes: "How 'great sceptred dooms' relates to 'the wild waves' [*sic*] is not clear. But both images have become symbolic of the violent and merciless yet majestic nature of war".¹³⁸ She goes on to excuse what she sees as Rosenberg's imprecision by arguing it is part of an artistic technique that makes him great, "almost as though language were paint".¹³⁹ David Perkins too, cites this phrase as an example of Rosenberg's "cloudily splendid 'rhetoric', one that most Georgian and Modernist poets no longer dared to use" and suggests, "The phrase 'great sceptred dooms,' though completely Rosenberg's own, is of the type found in Thompson's 'The Hound of Heaven'; the passage belongs in the Romantic tradition of powerfully direct statement."¹⁴⁰ Moorcroft Wilson doesn't understand the metaphorical relationship embedded in the poem, but thinks that this is because Rosenberg's poetry is stylistically impressionistic, while Perkins seems to constantly contradict himself, believing these words of Rosenberg to be simultaneously "cloudily splendid" and "emotionally direct"; both original, "completely Rosenberg's own" and yet of the Romantic tradition. E.O.G Davies has complained that "Isaac Rosenberg was a revolutionary in verse, and it is this that upset the critics; they did not know where to place him, and they took the easy way out, that of dismissing him."¹⁴¹ While I don't think either Moorcroft Wilson or Perkins are dismissive of Rosenberg, in their analysis of this particular poem neither of them seem to "know where to place him". To fully understand the final stanza, one needs to look both at the poem as a whole, and also to acknowledge the Renaissance roots of Rosenberg's writing in this period and his many Christian literary allusions as a result. The tone of the poem is introduced in the first stanza, by the biblical sounding lines "the motion of your spirit / ever moves with

138 Wilson, 2009. 10

139 *Ibid.*

140 David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1976). 287

141 E.O.G. Davies, Isaac Rosenberg, Unpublished Masters Thesis, Nottingham (1957) 12 cited in Al-Joulani, 2007. 206

these”. While the chiasmic structure of this phrase is straight out of the Hebrew Bible, the content is more New Testament than Old. A surface reading would ascribe it purely to the individual addressed by the poet, a brother whose voice “that once could mirror / Remote depths / of moving being” has been “suddenly stilled forever”. Yet the “spirit” hints at a Holy Spirit whom Rosenberg implies either does not exist or has abandoned them. “No ghost darkens the places / Dark to One”. A few years later in 1922, Eliot will riff off Luke 24 in a journey along the Road to Emmaus in *The Wasteland* and summon his own spiritual companion:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
-But who is that on the other side of you?¹⁴²

In contrast to Eliot’s world, Rosenberg’s is filled with a sense of absence and loss rather than presence, “my heart is heavy to think / how it was heavy once”. It is no spiritual figure but rather the dead soldiers who are “hooded”, and loss is an all too “human art”. Flickers of reference to a trinitarian theology Rosenberg does not believe in abound: we are told that the narrator’s brother died “three dread noons since”, “he / Was killed three days ago” and Rosenberg sets his fate as opposed to that of the living, “we who chance kept whole”. That wholeness is qualified, not by a sense of three-in-one unification, but by a worldly exhaustion: “whole - /But haggard, spent”. The message of the narrator’s brother’s death is delivered by a priest to whom he only half listens: “The good priest came to pray; / Our ears half heard, And half we thought / Of alien things, irrelevant”. The “alien” things Rosenberg is thinking of may be of the body, of worldly survival, but some have argued he may also be, at least to some

142 Eliot, 1969.

degree, alienated from the priest because of his Jewish identity.¹⁴³ In other poems Rosenberg separates himself out from his aryanised English, Christian, comrades, whom he describes as “haughty athletes”¹⁴⁴, “blond, bronzed and ruddy”¹⁴⁵ in contrast to his own bantam-sized, dark complexioned foreignness, yet here he identifies them as brothers and speaks of himself and the soldiers collectively in the first person plural: “We were vexed / With the sun’s heat”. And then, at the end of a poem about hearing bad news, about the realities of war, about loss of those close to you and who could be you, he cries out, “What are the great sceptred dooms / To us, caught / In the wild wave?”

Moorcroft Wilson is unclear about what this statement means in the context of the poem, but perhaps that is because she buys into the Eliot and Sassoon notion of Rosenberg as “remarkable” due to his rootedness in Hebrew culture. In her introduction to Rosenberg’s *Selected Poems*, where she quotes Sassoon’s now infamous statement about the “racial quality” of Rosenberg’s verse, she writes “While Rosenberg’s contemporaries, including the half-Jewish Siegfried Sassoon, draw largely on the Christian and classical mythology they had absorbed through their traditional English education, Rosenberg was influenced by a different cultural heritage.”¹⁴⁶ Yet, although Rosenberg might not have been Oxbridge educated, he is clearly well-read in the English and Christian classics. In a poem, ‘The Blind God’, that owes a clear debt to both Donne’s ‘The Sun Rising’ [“But that I would not lose her sight so long, if her eyes had not blinded thine”] and ‘The Good Morrow’, Rosenberg asks “Will you bear to meet your God / You have streaked with

143 Peter Jonathan Lawson, 'Otherness and Affiliation : Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein', (Southampton: University of Southampton, 2002); Peter Lawson, *Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein*, (London ; Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006).

144 ‘Dead Man’s Dump’ in Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003.

145 ‘The Jew’ in Vivien Noakes, 'The Complete Poems and Fragments of Isaac Rosenberg with a Catalogue of the Isaac Rosenberg Material in the Imperial War Museum. [Electronic Resource]', (University of Oxford, 1998).

146 Isaac Rosenberg and Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *The Selected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, (London: Cecil Woolf, 2003).

Blasphemy?”¹⁴⁷ Although it is a poem that seems to contrast “the wise man and the fool”, Rosenberg’s implication is that every human is both, and he lays claim to it all, belief and blasphemy, being the ill-educated Jew and the wise man simultaneously. If we can acknowledge Rosenberg as having the resources to experiment with English and Christian allusions as well as Jewish tradition, then it becomes possible to make sense of that final, troubling, stanza of ‘In War’.

For, in true metaphysical fashion, here Rosenberg is playing with a literary conceit. His jumping off point is John of Gaunt’s speech in *Richard III* where “this scepter’d isle” is surrounded by a “silver sea” which serves as a “moat defensive to a house”.¹⁴⁸ But Shakespeare’s Gaunt bemoans how “England, bound in with the triumphant sea / whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege... That England, that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.” Perhaps Rosenberg’s “great sceptered dooms” are the various grandchildren of Queen Victoria – the Kaiser, the Czar, the King – who are in conflict, or perhaps they are the rocks of England. What does fighting for an idea, a land that does not altogether accept him, “great” and “sceptered” though it is, mean to the soldier Rosenberg, “to us, caught in the wild wave”? Rosenberg cries out with the voice of those who are fighting, who are losing their lives, who find that “we break ourselves on” the metaphorical rocks. His question echoes that of Donne’s ‘The Storm’:

Pumping hath tired our men, and what’s the gain?
Seas into seas thrown, we suck in again;
Hearing hath deaf’d our sailors, and if they
Knew how to hear, there’s none knows what to say.¹⁴⁹

The working class, East-end Jew, Private Rosenberg 22311, with ill-fitting boots and not enough food, serving in the Eleventh Battalion of the Kings Own Royal Lancaster

147 Noakes.

148 Shakespeare and Honigmann, 2005.

149 Donne and Bell, 2012.

Regiment, a “Bantam Division” for those under 5 foot 3 inches tall, who spent twenty one months on the front line carrying bodies with the stretcher bearers, is a poet of whom Geoffrey Hill declares: “Far more than [Wilfred] Owen, Rosenberg was a poet made and re-made by exposure”.^{150/151} Desperate as Donne’s drowning sailors, by the time of his death in 1918, Rosenberg is exhausted and disillusioned, writing on the 14th February: “Sometimes I give way and am appalled at the devastation this life seems to have made in my nature [...] I seem to be powerless to compel my will to any direction and all I do is without energy and interest”.¹⁵² His phrasing seems to echo the penultimate line of ‘The Calm’ that follows Donne’s ‘Storm’, “We have no power, no will, no sense”, but Donne’s conclusion retracts his previous statement: “I lie, / I should not then thus feel this misery.”¹⁵³ In his Clark Lectures, T.S. Eliot uses these two poems to illustrate Donne’s “trick [...] of first stating a simple and startling idea of direct and easily apprehensible emotional value, and then proceeding to all the variations and changes”.¹⁵⁴ Rosenberg’s letters are similarly full of these kind of reversals. Eighteen months earlier, in a letter to Laurence Binyon that has not been precisely dated, but is thought to be from Autumn 1916, Rosenberg writes:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting [...] I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.¹⁵⁵

It is possible to read the difference between Rosenberg’s two statements as simply one of the progression of time and experience, the hopeful naivety of his first approach giving way to the lethargy and despair that comes from experience. Yet, perhaps both

¹⁵⁰ William Carter, *Bantams at War : The Story of the 11th (Service) Battalion, the King's Own Royal (Lancaster) Regiment*, (Lancaster: King's Own Royal Regiment Museum, 2002).

¹⁵¹ Hill.

¹⁵² Isaac Rosenberg, ‘Letter to Miss Seaton’ in Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003. 173

¹⁵³ Donne and Bell, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Eliot and Schuchard, 1993. 148

¹⁵⁵ Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003.

his determination and exhaustion existed simultaneously: Rosenberg's ability to feel and describe what is happening to him shows that his consciousness is fully alert, even when battered by "the wild wave". Like Donne, Rosenberg's description of the misery gives lie to the fact that he is so depressed he is unable to rouse the energy to feel it.

Lice, Fleas and Vermin

One of Rosenberg's most interesting capacities is his ability to bridge seemingly oppositional ideas and tones. His poem, 'Louse Hunting', has been described by Jean Moorcroft Wilson as one of his greatest accomplishments. She states: "Rosenberg's verse is at its best when, as here, his artistic vision is subsumed into his poetic one".¹⁵⁶ It is true that the poem draws on Rosenberg's painterly vision, beginning "Nudes – stark aglisten / Yelling in Lurid Glee" but perhaps it's greatest strength is not its visual qualities but its wicked humor, describing:

[...] a shirt verminously busy
Yon soldier tore from his throat
With oaths
Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice.¹⁵⁷

Drawn from real experience, it articulates a scene Rosenberg first recounted in a letter to Bottomley: "Last night we had a funny hunt for fleas. All stripped by candlelight some Scots dancing over the candle & burning the fleas, & the funniest, drollest and dirtiest scenes of conversation ever imagined."¹⁵⁸ It is also clearly indebted to Donne's 'The Flea', a poem that "maidenhead", if not "Godhead", might "shrink at", Donne's poem influencing both insect as subject matter and the ironic tone.¹⁵⁹ There is an obvious connection between these two poems, yet Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the

156 Wilson, 2009. 36

157 Rosenberg and Wilson, 2003.

158 Rosenberg and Liddiard, 2003. 51

159 Donne and Bell, 2012.

Trenches’, a poem Paul Fussell identifies as “the greatest poem of the First World War”¹⁶⁰, owes even more to ‘The Flea’. Donne’s creature is a conduit between male and female, “in this flea our two bloods mingled be”, and the locus of the combination of opposites – guilt and innocence (“in blood of innocence? / Wherein could this flea guilty be”), falsity and honor (“then learn how false, fears be: / Just so much honor, when thou yield’st to me” and death and life (“this flea’s death took life from thee”). Harold Bloom, whose thematic analysis of Isaac Rosenberg’s poems in his book on *Poets of World War One*¹⁶¹ acknowledged that “Rosenberg, like many of the First World War poets was heavily influenced by Metaphysical poets” was the first to suggest that the rat in ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’, “calls to mind the imagery used by John Donne in his poem ‘The Flea’”. Rosenberg’s rat, with its “cosmopolitan sympathies” crosses between the German and Allied soldiers:

Now you have touched this English hand
 You will do the same to a German
 Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
 To cross the sleeping green between.

Like Donne’s flea, the rat is a locus for the heretical and ephemeral; apostrophising the creature, Rosenberg exclaims, “they would shoot you if they knew”. Donne’s flea is external to, and other than, the man and woman it bites; Rosenberg’s rat is a “live thing” running between the two opposing and entrenched sides of the conflict. Yet for both writers, to an extent, their creature is also a placeholder for the narrator of the poem. Donne’s suitor lasciviously implies that he too wishes to be a creature that “sucks” on his mistress’s skin, who intermingles fluids with her: “this, alas, is more than we would do”. So too, the “droll rat”, the “queer, sardonic rat” can be read as a figure for Rosenberg, or at least the soldier who speaks the poem in the first person.

¹⁶⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 25th anniversary ed. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
¹⁶¹ Bloom, 2002. 74

Annie Rosenberg, Isaac's sister, one of his main correspondents, who typed up each of his poem drafts for him and posted them back to France for Rosenberg to edit, claims that Isaac's identification with rats goes all the way back to their childhood. When Rosenberg was eight, the family moved from Bristol to Whitechapel in order to try and enrol him in a Jewish school. Although this educational aim failed since the Jewish Free School was oversubscribed, they settled in the East End and, until they raised the money to move further into Stepney, lived dockside on Cable Street, one of the poorest streets in fin de siècle London. According to Jean Moorcroft Wilson, when she interviewed Annie in 1973, Annie maintained that the Rosenberg children were fearful of the "huge rats from the docks and river", and the rat dominated Isaac's imagination from that early experience of living in squalor onwards.¹⁶² By the time of writing 'Break of Day in the Trenches' the rat was no longer menacing but a figure of the naïve, displaced, the rootless cosmopolitan, with questionable allegiance. Rosenberg, who had decided to enlist not for patriotic reasons but in order to be able to send money home to his mother, did not have strong beliefs in the reasons for war. His father, who had fled from conscription into the Russian army, was deeply suspicious of the English alliance with Russia against the Germans. It took until he was 23 for Rosenberg to have his British citizenship affirmed: in 1913 on entering a art competition that was limited to British subjects, he wrote to Ernest Lesser, the Honorary Secretary of the Jewish Education Aid Society, to ask him to confirm his nationality.¹⁶³ An early draft of the poem, inserted into a letter to Gordon Bottomley dated 12th July 1916¹⁶⁴, describes the rat as "subterranean" and contains an extra line in parenthesis that Rosenberg later removed:

162 Wilson, 2009. 33

163 "Thanks for the information about my being a British subject." Rosenberg to Lesser, letter cited in Isaac Rosenberg and Ian Parsons, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg : Poetry, Prose, Letters, Paintings and Drawings*, [Revised ed.] / edited with an introduction and notes by Ian Parsons. edn (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979). 197.

164 Unpublished manuscript: British Library Add. 73497

They would shoot you if they knew
Your cosmopolitan sympathies
(*And Lord knows what antipathies*).

[my italics]

Removing this phrase is a smart editorial decision, for retaining such a strong authorial interjection would alter the tonality of the poem and reduce its subtlety. Without the extra line, and the focus on a life underground, the figure of the rat becomes more complex and is able to stand as a metonym for the “droll”, “sardonic” speaker of the poem. Rosenberg’s editorial process during this period seems to focus on simplifying his language, and intensifying his meaning. While he never writes an *ars poetica*, in 1914 during a trip to South Africa he creates an artistic manifesto, published as *Art II*.¹⁶⁵ At the Slade, Rosenberg had been a student of Henry Tonks, anatomist turned drawing master, who insisted his students focus on the clarity of their lines. Rosenberg asks of himself as he draws:

Can I read it? Is it clear, concise, definite? It cannot be too harsh for me. The lines cut into my consciousness; the waves of life must be disturbed, sharp and unhesitating. It is nature’s consent, her agreement that what we can wrest from her, we keep. Truth, structural veracity, clearness of thought and utterance, the intelligent understanding of what is essential.

Perhaps this is in his mind when he is editing, for another major change that takes place between the writing of this early draft of ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’ and the version that Ezra Pound will send to Harriet Monroe, is in the final line. On the 12th April, Rosenberg concludes the poem “Only white with powdered chalk”, but by its publication in *Poetry* in December of that year, the ending reads:

Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins
Drop, and are ever dropping;
But mine in my ear is safe –
Just a little white with the dust.

165 Collected in Rosenberg, Bottomley, and Harding, 1937. 133

The sinking of the roots into veins nods to Donne's blood-sucking Flea and, with the act of tucking a poppy behind his ear, Rosenberg assumes a similarly jaunty demeanour to Donne's suitor. It is a life-affirming gesture, reminiscent of the pre-war Rosenberg painting himself over and over again wearing a very bohemian pink cravat.¹⁶⁶ Just as the final line of 'The Flea' reminds us of the cost of living, "this flea's death took life from thee", so the transformation of "powdered chalk" into "dust" brings a new seriousness to Rosenberg's poem, and a "clarity of thought and utterance". As Bloom points out, it is a word that alludes to "the dust that covers the dead and to which all human beings must ultimately turn."¹⁶⁷ The word "chalk" can be pregnant with creative meaning for an artist, but "dust" has a Metaphysical reach.

166 Wise. 2014
167 Bloom: *ibid*, 75.

Chapter Two
‘The Praying Mind’¹⁶⁸

On Faith and Intellect in the Poetry of
George Herbert and Yehuda Amichai

The Double Helix of Feeling and Thought

To bring together the work of George Herbert, seventeenth century Anglican priest, and Yehuda Amichai, twentieth century Israeli poet soldier, may seem a peculiarly metaphysical endeavour, if one defines Metaphysical Poetry as Samuel Johnson did: “The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”¹⁶⁹. However, I’m not the first writer to sense a resonance between these two poets: one of Amichai’s most prominent translators, Chana Bloch, studied George Herbert for her graduate thesis, writing a book about the layers of biblical imagery permeating his work¹⁷⁰ and, in 2007, David Fishelov published an article titled “Yehuda Amichai: A Modern Metaphysical Poet”¹⁷¹ in which he made a comparative study of Amichai and a different seventeenth century Metaphysical Poet, John Donne. After identifying five levels of the poetic text that he believes Amichai and Donne share, Fishelov argues:

These close affinities between Amichai and the Metaphysical Poets should not, however, cloud the significant differences between them. Instead, these shared poetic characteristics ultimately highlight the modernist nature of Amichai's poetry - with its tendency for fragmentation, exploring man's internal world, and expressing an existential point of view.

While I agree with Fishelov that it is important to highlight differences between the contemporary and original Metaphysical Poets, as well as identify similarities, I would argue that some of the characteristics he uses to categorise Amichai as

168 ‘Little Gidding’ in Eliot, 1969. 191-8

169 Johnson, 1968.

170 Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word : George Herbert and the Bible*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

171 David Fishelov, ‘Yehuda Amichai: A Modern Metaphysical Poet*’, *Orbis Litterarum*, 47 (1992).178-191

“modernist” rather than “metaphysical”, and therefore distinct from Donne, feature heavily in George Herbert’s work, especially the exploration of internal worlds and existential points of view. T.S. Eliot was careful to differentiate Donne and Herbert as follows: “Both men were highly intellectual, both men had very keen sensibility: but in Donne thought seems in control of feeling, and in Herbert feeling seems in control of thought.”¹⁷² This notion of feeling being in control of thought seems important, for both Herbert’s and Amichai’s writing is largely occasioned by wrestling with notions of faith and doubt, perhaps as a self-conscious performance of revolt and surrender. In this chapter I suggest that, as for Amichai, it is Herbert’s interrogation of belief, stemming from the tension between faithful truth and artistic truth, which produces the movement of thought and emotion in his writing and is key to the fundamental Metaphysical nature of his poetry. I perform close readings of several poems to analyse the ways in which the language of both poets comes alive in prayer-poetry that challenges what it means to pray; examine how each questions the nature of a complex God they believe created a flawed humanity and, in doing so, will compare and contrast how they draw upon biblical narratives. Erich Auerbach claims that “from the very first, in the Old Testament stories, the sublime, tragic and problematic take shape precisely in the domestic and commonplace.”¹⁷³ In an interesting reflection of this, both Herbert and Amichai use the “sublime, tragic and problematic” components of the Biblical text to elucidate the “domestic and commonplace” of their everyday lives.

A reversal such as this is typical of Herbert’s thought-pattern, since a double helix structure seems prevalent throughout his work. In the first of his Oxford Poetry Lectures, published as *The Redress of Poetry*¹⁷⁴, Seamus Heaney writes:

172 Eliot, 1962.36

173 Erich Auerbach and Willard Ropes Trask, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).22

174 Heaney, 1995.14

What might be called the DNA pattern of Herbert's imagination is fundamentally a matter of up-down, criss-cross motion, reversals effected with such symmetry that they are experienced as culminations, tensions so thoroughly exercised and traced home that they return the system to relaxation, dialogues so sinuous that they end with speakers ready to start again, sometimes from diametrically opposed premises.

For Heaney, the key characteristic of Herbert's poetry is his use of antitheses: "creator / creature, heaven / earth, soul / body, eternity / time, life / death, Christ / man, grace / guilt, virtue / sin, divine love / courtly love". These are all common themes within Renaissance poetry and central to the theology of the seventeenth century Church of England in which Herbert was an ordained minister. However, significantly for Heaney, "such antithetical pairings are experienced more immediately as emotional dilemmas than as doctrinal cruxes: they are functions of the poet's mind as it moves across the frontier of writing, out of homiletics and apologetics into poetry, upon the impulses and reflexes of awakened language."¹⁷⁵

The Praying Mind

The homiletics and apologetics Heaney refers to are important modes for a priest, and modes Herbert also worked in, especially with his sermons defending Anglican theology and asserting belief in Christian truth.¹⁷⁶ Yet, in *Proofs and Theories*¹⁷⁷ Louise Glück argues 'Against Sincerity', claiming "The artist's task [...] involves the transformation of the actual to the true." This postulates a gap between truth and actuality, suggesting that repeating actual truth in a poem is a reductive gesture – the poet's role should become that of alchemist, transforming or refining truth, using insight and aesthetics. This is not a simple act for a religious person, a person of faith

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Stanford Lehmborg, 'Writings of English Cathedral Clegys 1600-1700: Devotional Literature and Sermons', *Anglican Theological Review*, 75 (1993).

¹⁷⁷ Louise Glück, *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999, 1994). 21

for, as Glück explains, “when the compulsion of speech is to find and say the truth, which is single because inclusive, all utterance must be tormented by doubt. The capacity of such a mind for suffering has to be enormous.”¹⁷⁸ I believe that this understanding of suffering is what allows Herbert to achieve a fully realized poetry, which is, as Heaney claims, “a poetry where the co-ordinates of the imagined thing correspond to and allow us to contemplate the complex burden of our own experience.”

While Heaney’s model is the poet-priest, for Ted Hughes it is the poet-soldier Yehudah Amichai who enables him to contemplate his own burdens. He describes Amichai as the poet “I most often return to when the whole business of writing anything natural, real and satisfying, seems impossible”:

The effect his poetry has on me is to give me my own life – to open it up somehow, to make it all available to me afresh, to uncover all kind of riches in every moment of it, and to free me from my mental prisons.¹⁷⁹

Although, like Heaney, George Herbert is the poet I read to think about poetry and faith, like Ted Hughes, Amichai is the poet to whom I return time and time again when burdened by the realities of daily existence. But I want from him something more than what he does for Hughes: to give me back not just my own life, but the life of my people and their rich and painful history. For I have no authority to speak about the political situation in the Middle East myself – I am neither an Israeli or a Palestinian, but a Diaspora Jew with a deep love for, yet very complicated relationship with, the land. Peter Cole maintains that Amichai “assumes the burdens and dilemmas of both [Israelis and Diaspora Jews]”¹⁸⁰. In this chapter, I examine how Amichai carries these

178 Ibid: 21

179 Ted Hughes ‘Introduction’ to Yehuda Amichai, Ted Hughes, and Daniel Weissbort, *Yehuda Amichai : Selected Poems*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2000).xiii

180 Peter Cole, ‘Letter from Jerusalem’, *Times Literary Supplement*, (21st September 2000).

burdens and compare his attempts to address both politics and poetry in his work with those of Herbert, who is writing in a country on the brink of civil war.

The poem from which Heaney derives his sense of the counterweighted nature of Herbert's Metaphysical aesthetic is 'The Pulley', a poem key to understanding all three elements this chapter explores in relation to Amichai's work – language, the nature of God and the use of biblical narrative.¹⁸¹ Part of a collection of poems, *The Temple*, completed in 1633 shortly before he died, which are thematically connected by their exploration of the architecture of churches, *The Pulley's* conceit is based on the metaphor of a builder's tool: the weight-bearing ropes that enable items to be lifted or lowered. This central metaphor allows the poem to calculate the dimensions of the relationship between God and man, yet it is interwoven with other images, both secular and sacred, that increase our awareness of the complicated push me–pull you affair he's describing.

The poem begins by temporally positioning itself "When God at first made man". The specificity of "at first" is interesting, not only because Genesis contains two different creation stories, but because of the implication that God's creation and re-creation of humanity is continuous. The biblical context of the "first" creation story (Genesis chapter one) is the sixth day, after the creation of plants and animals (ie Nature) but before the Sabbath, the seventh day of rest, and throughout the poem there are countervailing pressures between God and Nature, Man and Rest. However rather than only making use of the biblical verses, I would suggest that Herbert immediately pulls two other metaphors into play with his "glass of blessings", the Eucharistic wine and Pandora's Box.

181 George Herbert and Helen Wilcox, *The English Poems of George Herbert*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

A glass is a frequent image for Herbert and it isn't a great stretch to claim that the blessings here transmute into other substances. In 'Praise (iii)', the poem Herbert placed just two before 'The Pulley' when ordering his collection¹⁸², "the glasse was full and more", yet rather than being full of blessings seems full of tears ("when my eyes did weep to heaven") and blood, ("since my heart, Though press'd, runnes thin"). In another poem, 'The Bunch of Grapes', the pressing of "God Himself" is said to produce "sweet wine" from "the Laws sowre juice", and in *The Agonie* "Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain/ To hunt his cruel food through ev'ry vein" but "Love is that liquor sweet and most divine, Which my God feels as bloud, but I, as wine".¹⁸³ Kathryn Walls has connected these many images of wine to the sermon Lancelot Andrewes preached before James I on Easter Day 1623.¹⁸⁴ Andrewes was a friend of the Herbert family, and was thought to have sponsored George Herbert's entry to Westminster school and to have been his teacher there. Walls elucidates how Andrewes took as his text Isaiah 63:1-3 and expounded the relationship between the blood of Christ, wine and learning, citing Andrewes's homily: "For when we read, what do we but gather grapes here and there; and when we study what we have gathered, then are we even in torculari [in the wine-press], and press them we do, and press out of them that which daily you taste of."¹⁸⁵ Robert Hilliard Whalen, whose thesis on notions of the Sacrament in Donne and Herbert¹⁸⁶ points out sacramental echoes throughout the Herbert canon suggests that Herbert's metaphorical use of the eucharist, while often seriously exploring theological differences between Catholicism and the Anglican church he served, can also be occasionally parodic, citing 'Miserie': "Man is but grasse, / He knows it, fill the glasse". Whalen comments that "the speaker is astonished at God's patience, regretting that man, unlike God, will "not lose a cup of

182 Izaak Walton, *Izaak Walton's Life of George Herbert*, (Salisbury: Perdix, 1988). 7 According to Walton, when Herbert sent the collection to Nicholas Ferrar (who would take on responsibility for editing and publishing it) he wrote, "he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus, my Master" when describing the content and structure of the collection.

183 Herbert and Wilcox, 2007.

184 Kathryn Walls, 'Learning as Wine-Press in George Herbert's 'the Pearl'', *Notes and Queries*, 45 (1998).

185 *Ibid*: 40

186 Robert Hilliard Whalen, 'The Poetry of Immanence: Sacrament in Donne and Herbert', (Toronto, 1999).

drink for thee” (8)” and “the same exasperation becomes a potentially heretical denial of the efficacy of atonement, the speaker asserting that man's “humours reign” and “make his life a constant blot,/ And all the bloud of God to run in vain”.”¹⁸⁷

An Uneasy Rest

Although neither Walls or Hilliard cite ‘The Pulley’ as one of their examples, I would argue that it too plays, equally parodically, with ideas of the sacrament as God ruminates “Let us (said he) poure on him all we can” in a poem that examines what stuff Man is made of. There are several plays happening here – between the liquid nature of Christian blessings and the pagan evils released from Pandora’s box, between the singular and plural nature of God, and between the uncapitalized divine “he” and the mortal human “he” that is being blessed. One of the definitions of *Prayer* that Herbert enumerates is “the soul in paraphrase” but here God himself is in parenthesis as Herbert paraphrases his words. The oxymoronic nature of the blessings God is pouring into humanity becomes evident in the lines “Let the world’s riches, which dispersed lie, / Contract into a span”. The full rhyme between Man and Span suggests human breadth, yet the span of humanity is merely a contraction of the possibilities both the world, and God as Creator of the world, contain. The riches described have their own agency: “Strength” makes its own way out of the glass; beauty, wisdom, honour and pleasure are given an active verb as they “flow” down. Here the conceit of the pulley and its counterweighting comes into full relief as Herbert shows that God is in control as he “made a stay” in his metaphorical rope before “Rest” can also descend. Rest is at the bottom of the glass but, of all God’s “riches”, is ascribed the most significance, a “jewell” to be bestowed. Interestingly, there is a commercial rather than a religious valuation attached – the language of money set against the language of blessing as if secular treasure is more attractive to

187 Ibid: 64

humanity than spiritual qualities.

The fear that Herbert ascribes to God is that if he bestows Rest upon humanity, Man would value the gift more than the giver: “He would adore my gifts instead of me, / And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature: / So both should losers be”. If God were to let man rest, man would find peace in Nature and not in the God who created Nature. This tug between the ethical valuing of God and the aesthetic valuing of Nature seems to have laying behind it an awareness of the Renaissance, and prefigure the Natural philosophy that within a few decades will be espoused by poets such as Margaret Cavendish¹⁸⁸. For Herbert this is fraught with danger: those who love Nature without appreciating God will be losers as much as the zealous God who desires their love. And so, in an almost heretical move, Herbert rewrites Biblical intent. For whereas the Biblical God commands Man to rest, Herbert’s God allows man to keep “the rest, / but keep them with repining restlessness”. His punning word-play transforms the meaning of the word from sleep to everything but sleep, and the sibilant ‘s’ sounds that whisper through the end of the poem (“rest... restlessness... least... goodness... weariness... tosse... breast”), quicken the tone and bring out the underlying discontent and exhaustion in the narrator’s voice. Herbert’s God understands man’s failings enough to know that gratitude might not be the driving force behind their relationship, but instead “weariness / May tosse him to my breast” – fatigue and need may lead Man to God when nothing else does, and we are left with a sense of God’s need for Man almost more than Man’s for God.

Yehudah Amichai struggles with God and with weariness as much as Herbert does. Like Herbert he elucidates God’s dependence on Man and sees them as co-creators of each other:

188 Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle and Egerton Sir Works edited or with prefaces by Brydges Brydges, *Select Poems of Margaret Cavendish ...* Edited by Sir Egerton Brydges, (Lee Priory, Kent: Privately printed, 1813). For a discussion of her scientific thinking see E. M. Walters, 'Science, Nature and Politics : Margaret Cavendish's Challenge to Gender and Class Hierarchy', (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of Edinburgh, 2005).

I say with perfect faith
that prayers precede God.
Prayers created God.
God created man,
And man creates prayers
that create God who creates man.¹⁸⁹

Like Herbert, Amichai is almost heretical in the way he reverses standard Biblical tropes, for example polemically challenging the notion expressed in Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, “For everything there is a time, a season for everything under the heavens” with his protestation:

A man doesn't have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
Was wrong about that.¹⁹⁰

Both Herbert and Amichai are surrounded by religious and biblical texts, and religion is the lens through which they see the world, even as they argue with the texts they engage with and reimagine them. For Amichai, the Bible is a metonym for life, and reading the Bible becomes a metaphor for living. Ted Hughes extolls the fact that “behind Amichai [is] the internal and external history of the Jews of modern Israel”.

One component of that Jewish history - the biblical component - already sets him in a wholly different category from others. It sets his imagination in a vastly different mythic and historical order, one that is also a more universal order - to some degree shared by all peoples touched by the Bible.¹⁹¹

The Amichai poem which I have chosen as the counterweight to Herbert’s ‘The Pulley’, for its parallel awareness of “weariness” as a motivating force for the choices humanity makes, is ‘I’ve Filtered out of the Book of Esther’¹⁹². In this poem

189 ‘Gods come and go, prayers remain forever’, trans. Karen Alkalay-Gut in Yehuda Amichai, *Poems of Jerusalem ; and, Love Poems : A Bilingual Edition*, (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Sheep Meadow Press, 1992). To hear Alkalay-Gut discuss her process of translating Amichai, see the audiovisual recording: Reed Whittemore and others, ‘Contemporary Israeli Poetry’, (1985).

190 Amichai, Hughes, and Weissbort, 2000.

191 Ibid. xii

192 ‘I’ve Filtered Out the Book of Esther’ translated by Yehuda Amichai and Ted Hughes. Ibid. 53-4. YA/TH’s joint translations of Amichai’s poems were first published in Yehuda Amichai and Ted Hughes, Amen, (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Amichai ironically employs a persona who is so exhausted that he states a desire to ‘filter’ the most painful and difficult stories out of the Bible and cut and paste the rest back together, suggesting that by censoring the uncomfortable stories out of the Bible one can live a peaceful life. However, Amichai undercuts this idea in two ways: firstly, by listing those Biblical passages which the narrator claims are too painful to read, the poem Amichai writes presents us with only those passages, confronting the reader with his or her own discomfort and forcing the reader to engage with the meaning of those stories; secondly, Amichai goes on to demonstrate how a censored life is an unengaged life – his ‘pasted’, ‘peaceful’ persona is unable to face up to the reality of living in a war-torn world, and cannot communicate a woman’s death to a mutual friend. However, it is only through close analysis, that it is possible to unpack in more detail what he presents as ‘truth’ in order to listen closely to the polemic insistence on engaging with every word that lies beneath the surface meaning of this poem.

In the first stanza of ‘I’ve filtered out of the Book of Esther’ Amichai’s narrator seems incapable of reading the disturbing, messy Biblical stories that arouse complex emotions or advocate problematic positions. The poem begins with an image of purification as the narrator filters out the “residue” - the concentrated, problematic debris that, once removed, will leave behind a clear, untroubling, but weak text. Initially his desire for a “new Bible” seems to echo Primo Levi’s account of the “sorrowful, cruel and moving” stories of the victims of Auschwitz, which Levi claims to be “simple and incomprehensible like the stories in the Bible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?”¹⁹³ However, Levi, a secular, Italian, Holocaust Survivor wishing to confront his suffering, claims that stories of recent experiences of persecution should replace the Bible in the collective Jewish memory, whereas

193 Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man ; the Truce*, (London: Vintage, 1996).72.

Amichai's narrator seems to be arguing that we should retain a filtered form of the Bible, while disposing of the distressing parts.¹⁹⁴

I've filtered out of the Book of Esther the residue
of vulgar joy, and out of the Book of Jeremiah
the howl of pain in the guts. And out of the
Song of Songs the endless search for love,
and out of the Book of Genesis the dreams
and Cain, and out of Ecclesiastes
the despair and out of the Book of Job - Job.

The narrator lists texts that contain a variety of feelings he wishes to avoid facing - each example he gives shows a different facet of potentially painful emotions aroused by the Biblical passage. His desire to discard the "vulgar joy" of the 'Book of Esther' is possibly a reaction to discomfort with what happens when a persecuted people gain power and visit revenge upon those who sought to harm them; and he is not able to confront Jeremiah's "howl of pain in the guts". 'The Song of Songs' can be read as a religious metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel or as the story of an erotic encounter. The narrator cannot face the passionate torment of an "endless search for love", and by not embarking on the quest, he limits his chance of ever being fulfilled or truly encountering another. The "dreams" of Genesis are also about the encountering of an Other, although, in this case the Other is God. According to Diana Lipton's *Revisions of the Night*, the "book of Genesis contains ten clear-cut cases of dreaming" each of which contains "politics and promises".¹⁹⁵ The story of Cain records the first murder, but also challenges the reader to understand accountability and responsibility, with the now iconic question: 'Am I my brother's keeper?'¹⁹⁶. Ecclesiastes's "despair" at the hopelessness and meaningless of his experience is equally emblematic, epitomised by the verse: "vanity of vanities, all is vanity".¹⁹⁷ The last Biblical story that Amichai wishes to censor is the Book of Job. When "limiting"

194 Ibid: i. See the poem 'Shema' which prefaces 'If this is a Man'.

195 Diana Lipton, *Revisions of the Night : Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999). 18

196 Genesis 4:9

197 Ecclesiastes 12:8

his engagement with all the other Biblical texts, the narrator retains the majority, even while disregarding the concentrated essence but, by the time he encounters Job, he does not select the part that troubles him most but ironically negates the entire story by throwing “out of the Book of Job – Job”. This suggests that Job’s suffering is completely beyond the narrator’s ability to deal with it, both because of the nature of Job, and, moreover, because the narrator’s own utter dejection renders him incapable of engaging with the Book even to the point of selecting what aspect of it he finds the most problematic.

Stanza two relocates the narrator to the everyday and, in doing so, cleverly inverts his message. His encounter in the second stanza is with a person, rather than a Biblical text, and the same depression which has “limited” his capability to face the pain of Biblical stories affects his ability to communicate with the woman he meets on the street. Unable to face telling her about the death of a mutual acquaintance, he mutters the lie “she’s fine, she’s fine”. Not only can he not face his acquaintance’s death, his inability to pass on the information to the woman he meets denies her the truth and her own chance of coming to terms with the bereavement. The result of a non-engagement with the problematic is another kind of death: in daily terms the death of feeling, the death of truth, the death of communication and the death of relationships; in Biblical terms, the death of understanding. The whole weight of the first stanza lies on its last word “peace”, seemingly arguing that censoring and limiting emotional engagement can be restful. However, a careful reading of Amichai’s original Hebrew version of the poem clears up the possibility of misunderstanding his message - the word he uses in Hebrew is “*b’shalom*”. The “b” in front of “shalom” gives the word a deeper inflection: the closest English understanding would be using

the phrase “rest in peace”, connoting death.¹⁹⁸ Thus, while a surface reading of the poem might seem to suggest non-engagement as a coping mechanism, I would argue that Amichai is actually advocating the opposite: in order to survive the complexity and pain of the current conflict, those experiencing it should constantly, totally and irrevocably be engaged with the process of living and interpreting.

For the poet who reads both the black writing and the white space, who sees what is there and what is not, is the one equipped to voice the challenge to the military and cultural leadership. And while Amichai frequently speaks as “I” in his poems, as we have seen above, it is a complex “I”, sometimes confessional, frequently ironic and often eliding into the persona of another, usually Biblical, character. For example, in ‘King Saul and I’, Amichai becomes the voice of Samuel the prophet, and explores the dynamic of prophecy (the role of “prophet” providing the closest Biblical correlation to that of poet) as opposed to that of Kingship: “My arms are short, like string too short / To tie a parcel. / His arms are like the chains in a harbour / For cargo to be carried across time.” The inadequacy of the commentator versus the power of the military leader seems to be his theme although the poem concludes with the futility of both: “He is a dead king. / I am a tired man.” The lethargy resulting from living in a time of war can overwhelm the narrator of ‘I’ve Filtered out of the Book of Ester’ yet in ‘King Saul and I’, the tired prophet, wrestling with his own discomfort, manages to find some consolation: “My sleep is just / my dream is my verdict.” Despite his military service, or perhaps because of it, the dream that Amichai voices in his poetry is that of a settled peace: “A peace / Without the big noise of beating swords into

198 My recourse to the original Hebrew text perhaps calls into question my choice to quote an English translation of the poem. However, I did so for two reasons - the first is that making the poem available to the reader in English empowers your own interpretation. Secondly, Amichai’s co-translator, Ted Hughes, states, ‘The translations were made by the poet himself. All I did was correct the more intrusive oddities and errors of grammar and usage, and in some places shift about the phrasing and line endings. What I wanted to preserve above all was the tone and cadence of Amichai’s own voice speaking in English, which seems to me marvellously true to the poetry, in these renderings. What Pound called the first of all poetic virtues - ‘the heart’s tone’. So as translations these are extremely literal. But they are also more, they are Yehuda Amichai’s own English poems.’ Ted Hughes unattributed editorial to *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Spring 1967) cited by Daniel Weissbort in his Afterword to Amichai (2000) 133.

ploughshares / Without words”.¹⁹⁹ It is a peace “without words” because words can be traitorous and for Amichai language itself is a major concern:

To speak, now, in this tired language
Torn from its sleep in the Bible –
Blinded, it lurches from mouth to mouth –
The language which described God and the Miracles,
Says:
Motor car, bomb, God.²⁰⁰

Awakened Language

Amichai’s language is not commonly picked up on by his English readers, as it is his use of the visual image that makes his poems easily translatable; he has become known more for the filmic quality of his work than his linguistic denseness. But to read his poems in Hebrew is to be overwhelmed by the pervasive allusiveness to the Bible that lies within his language: although his content and context is strikingly contemporary, his own words are also torn from their Biblical sleep. For instance, a poem ‘Fourth Resurrection’, which considers the transience of human life through the image of a heap of old seats in a lot by an abandoned cinema, asks: “Where are the feats and where are the words that were on the screen?”²⁰¹ Robert Alter points out that out of the possible three Hebrew words Amichai could choose for “where”, ‘he picks not the ordinary “*eifo*” or the modern middle-diction “*heikh*” (which he uses a little further on in the poem) but the archaic “*ei*”’.²⁰² Any Hebrew reader will recognise that this diction belongs to the poetic layer of biblical language and so Amichai’s questions expand to encompass the whole of Jewish history. Chana Bloch responds to this aspect of Amichai’s use of Hebrew when she writes that “it is precisely because I am

199 Yehuda Amichai ‘Wildflowers’ in Yehuda Amichai, Chana Bloch, and Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, Newly rev. and expanded edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). 88

200 Yehuda Amichai, ‘National Thoughts’, *Ibid.* 57

201 Amichai, Bloch, and Mitchell, 1996. 61

202 Robert Alter, ‘The Untranslatable Amichai’, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, (Fall / Winter 1994).71

troubled at the daily abuse of language by those in power, I am drawn to a writer like Amichai, whose life's work honors the word."²⁰³

Amichai's rootedness in Biblical language could be read as a natural consequence of the time and place he was writing and typical of the generation of poets he grew up with – Dahlia Ravikovitch, Nathan Zach and David Avidan to name just a few of those he was in a writing group with in the early 1950s – all of whom were working in the shadow of the first generation of modern Hebrew poets. The 'great old men of modern Hebrew literature' as Amichai called them²⁰⁴, poets such as Bialik, Tchernikhovsky and Shlonsky, were those who had immigrated to Palestine from Europe at the turn of the century and, although working in Hebrew, were heavily influenced by Russian, German and French poetry. Often formally ornate, their language was much closer to classical Hebrew than their successors since Modern Hebrew was still evolving under the influence of their contemporary, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Lexicographer Ben-Yehuda, author of the first modern Hebrew dictionary and founder member of the *Va'ad Ha'Lashon* best translated as 'Committee of the Language' (although *lashon* literally means tongue), which later became the Academy of the Hebrew Language, arrived in Palestine in 1881 and consciously set out to replace Yiddish (the *lingua franca* of most European Jews) with a common language that could be used by Jews who were coming from all corners of the world. He borrowed several thousand words from other ancient and modern languages, but the majority of his vocabulary and syntactic and grammatical structures came from Classical Hebrew – the language of the *Torah* and *Talmud*. However, Ben-Yehuda spent his career battling with the ultra-Orthodox who decried the secular use of *Lashon Kodesh*, the 'holy tongue' they believed should be reserved for prayer and religious study. For Bialik, Tchernikhovsky et al, their relationship with religion was

203 Chana Bloch, 'Yehuda Amichai Remembered', *American Poet*, (Spring 2001).21

204 Yehuda Amichai, 'Paris Review', ed. by Lawrence Joseph (Spring 1992).

complicated and their work often highlights the polarity between the religious life of the shtetl they had fled, and their modern world in a new country. For them, using Hebrew was a political act in itself and Haim Nachman Bialik famously authored the often misquoted line that “Whoever knows Judaism through translation is like a person who kisses his mother through a handkerchief.”²⁰⁵

While the English language has evolved over 1500 years and its modern incarnation is far distant from its Anglo-Saxon roots, twentieth century Modern Hebrew was a language in its infancy and therefore permeated with allusions to its source texts.

However by 1951, when Amichai’s first poem was published and he begins meeting Rahvikovich, Zach, Alterman, Benjamin Harshav (who would later become one of his English translators) and others in the cafés of Tel Aviv, Hebrew was more established and more flexible than the version used by their predecessors, encompassing additional loan words and loan concepts. While some level of Biblical influence was still inescapable, using a heavily Biblical language was a conscious choice. For Amichai particularly, who was also fluent in the German of his birth country, the language he chose to write in was both a ‘natural choice’ and made a clear statement about his identity, as he articulated in a *Paris Review* interview with Lawrence Joseph in 1992:

My thinking was why not use the language I talk in as well as the language of my Orthodox background—the prayers, the Bible—together, juxtaposing and blending them. I discovered that this was my language. It was, I think, due to my unique personal background—I’d been raised in a very Orthodox home and the language of the prayers and the Bible were part of my natural language. I juxtaposed this language against the modern Hebrew language, which suddenly had to become an everyday language after having been a language of prayers and synagogue for two thousand years. This was very natural for me—there was nothing programmatic about it. This kind

205 Haim Nachman Bialik, 'Nation and Language [Heb.]', idem, *Devarim shebe-□al peh 1* (1935). It has inaccurately become common currency to say that Bialik described translation as ‘like kissing a bride through a veil’. Not only does this misquote the family member and transform handkerchief to veil, it also becomes a generic view of translation, whereas it is clear from the original context that Bialik was very specifically referring to reading Jewish texts in a non-Hebrew language’

of mixed sensibility or imagination of the language was my natural way to write poems.

While Amichai ascribes this kind of writing to his “unique personal background”, it is actually a background and style of writing he shares with many of those writing in Hebrew in that period. Although her topics are mostly very different from Amichai’s, the expressly feminist Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936-2005), has a similar fluidity and lyricism, fusing the modern and classical into a nuanced language that makes careful use of her Biblical allusions in political ways. Amichai cites Auden and Eliot as influences²⁰⁶ and Ravikovitch translated poems by Eliot and Yeats into Hebrew. Amichai suggests that, post 1948, “what we were experiencing was a free-fall into modernism at exactly the same time a Jewish state had begun. It was more than a turning point in the Hebrew language—it was a time of radical change.” This is true not only of the poets of the period, but also the prose writers. Yizhar Smilansky (1916 – 2006), more commonly known by his pen name S. Yizhar, wrote many books, but his most famous *Khirbet Khizeh*, describing the IDF’s expulsion of Palestinian Arabs from their villages during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, was first published in Israel in 1949. David Shulman, who wrote the afterword to the 2008 English edition translated by Nicholas De Lange and Yaacob Dweck, describes Yizhar’s language as an “experimental mélange of wild, lucid lyricism, often dark and menacing, pointed biblical allusions that go off like hand grenades.”²⁰⁷ Shulman’s reference to ‘hand grenades’, while being a perfect description of the powerful, pointed allusiveness of Yizhar’s courageous writing, has echoes of Amichai, who frequently plays with the fact that the Hebrew word for ‘hand grenade’ *rimon* (pl. *rimonim*) also means pomegranate. After Amichai’s death, Paul Muldoon’s poem ‘in memory of Yehuda Amichai’, first published in *The Guardian* on the 29th October 2000, uses exactly this concept as the central image of his poem. Titled ‘Pineapples and Pomegranates’,

206 *ibid.*

207 S. Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizah*, (Ibis, 2008).

Muldoon compares his encounter with an Irish pineapple, “a world-wide symbol of munificence. / Munificence - right? Not munitions” to the Israeli pomegranate.

Alluding to Amichai’s line ‘that the fist, too, / was once the palm of an open hand’,

Muldoon concludes his poem by referencing both poets’ desire for peace in their respective war-torn countries:

As if the open hand
might, for once, put paid
to the hand-grenade
in one corner of the planet.
I'm talking about pineapples - right? - not pomegranates.

The circumstances surrounding George Herbert’s use of language are very different, and less urgently politically charged, yet there is also an awareness of

“awakened language” that Heaney extolls in Herbert. As we have seen, for Herbert it is the constant battle with words and The Word that he claims to find so wearisome:

“Wounded I sing, tormented I indite, / Thrown down I fall into a bed, and rest”.²⁰⁸

Herbert’s constant use of chiasmic parallels and reversals presents a complicated understanding of the God to whom his poems “sing” out, and the even more complex

nature of the prayers he articulates. When Herbert needs to “mollifie all pain”,²⁰⁹ he looks to the ‘Holy Scriptures’, most notably in a pair of sonnets that both

independently, and more so together, fold their meanings back into themselves and

show a link to the Bible that is as urgent as Amichai’s. The “Book” that Herbert

apostrophizes, seems at times to take the place of the sacraments in becoming the body

of God: “thou art a masse / Of strange delights” is a clever pun on the Eucharist. The

position of “masse” at the end of the line, just before a line-break, gives it a

remarkable stress, despite the fluid enjambment, and in case the pun wasn’t apparent

enough, Herbert gives it a full-rhyme with yet another “glasse”. Here the glass is a

208 George Herbert, “Joseph’s Coat” Herbert and Wilcox, 2007.

209 George Herbert, “Holy Scriptures I” *ibid.*

mirror, a ladies looking-glass, “that mends the lookers eye”, reflecting the reader back to themselves in a better state than reality, for the “glasse” that stands for the Bible is a “well / that washes what it shows”. The Bible therefore becomes a water source: vital for life, cleansing the image, providing the reader with an opportunity to see their best self. The perspective of the metaphor is a wavering one – the final couplet shows the Bible as having the level plane of the surface of a mirror or of a well: “heav’n lies flat in thee”, yet one needs to bend to it on your knees, as when lifting someone up to mount a horse or, obviously, in prayer. The text is not the object of those who mount it, but the “subject”, it is active not passive, and immensely powerful.

In ‘Holy Scriptures II’, the text is shown to be multi-faceted and many layered, with many “constellations of the storie”, as Herbert begins a new conceit, comparing the content of the writing to the multitudinous stars in the sky as the Bible becomes “this book of stares light”. Perhaps Herbert is also thinking of his own writing as he meditates on the complexity of reference: “This verse marks that, and both do make a motion / Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth lie”. Roland Barthes writes about the text as a “space of many dimensions”²¹⁰ however, whereas Barthes would use this idea to argue against the notion of an “author-god”, for Herbert, it is the work needed to do to understand it, that suggests its divinity and the necessity of reading actively and closely. Several centuries later, Simone Weil would draw from Herbert’s work her concept of “patient attention”, a notion that the challenge is to be open to the world and to God, and that attentiveness allows meaning to be revealed. In a letter written in Marseilles on the 15th May 1942 to her friend Father Perrin,²¹¹ she describes how she comes to this realization in a mystical experience when she first reads George Herbert’s ‘Love’, “I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it

210 Roland Barthes, ‘Death of the Author’ in Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

211 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, (Routledge & K Paul, 1951).

and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines”. In the poem, God, figured both as Love, and as Master of the Household, refuses to let his human guest, “serve” his meaning in the accepted way, but welcomes him in and insists he actively partake in the feast: “‘you must sit down’, says Love, ‘and taste my meat’”. To continue the metaphor, Herbert’s role as writer and reader, is not just to taste, but to fully digest. He opens his sonnet ‘Prayer’ with an initial definition of “Prayer, the church’s banquet” then explores, in one of the most famous list poems in the English language, a whole variety of possible metaphors for prayer, including another gastronomic one – God’s gift of manna. The one he concludes with, “something understood”, is contingent on having fully explored, masticated even, all the previous ones, before realizing that it is the very process of full engagement with words and their meaning that is the essence of prayer.

For Amichai, the banqueting hall experience is slightly different, and engaging with the figure of God is even more complex. In ‘Great Serenity: Questions and Answers’, Amichai is bedazzled by the coarse light thrown on issues when “People in a hall that’s lit so brightly/ it hurts / spoke of religion.” He does not find his answers in this discourse but by opening “an iron door that had written on it / *Emergency* and I entered within”. His door through to a place of answers is made of the same metal as weapons of war, the iron swords that proliferate through his work. For Amichai, it is the pressure of the conflict situation, rather than the grace of God, that allows him to form “questions and answers”, the concluding phrase of his poem. Like Herbert, the process of engagement and wrestling with faith has taken him to a place where he can begin to articulate his thoughts and, in doing so, Ted Hughes, Amichai’s close friend and co-translator, claims that he “found a voice not just for a people in crisis but... for a global political drama at the crux of two deadlocked civilizations.”²¹²

212 Amichai (2000) xiii.

It is important to note that while, as Hughes wrote, Amichai writes about both the Israelis and Palestinians locked into a cycle of violence in the Middle East, he does so from an explicitly Israeli perspective and a position which both a mirror image of, and vastly different from, the leading Palestinian poet of the late twentieth century, Mahmoud Darwish. Amichai, who says that, “it’s mainly been Palestinian poetry that’s interested me” and claims affinity with “poets such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih Al-Qasim, powerful, strong poets who mix traditional and modern forms and techniques and language with political subject matter” believes that “Israeli Arab and Palestinian poets are trying to do the same things within their traditions that Israeli poets are trying to do within theirs. In a way, we are working on common ground—not only literally, within the same reality, the same landscape, but also on common spiritual ground as poets.”²¹³ While his championing of Palestinian poetry, even to the extent of arguing for the inclusion of poems by Darwish on the Israeli School Curriculum, is admirable, the eliding of their situations glosses over the fact that Amichai’s ground is a land he lives in, while Darwish spent much of his life exiled from the place he called home. When Amichai claims himself as primarily “a poet of love” as well as a political poet, he does so from a place of privilege whereas, as Ruth Padel points out in her introduction to Darwish’s diaries *A River Dies of Thirst*, Darwish saw “love poetry too as a form of resistance”, quoting Darwish’s statement: “If I write love poems, I resist the conditions that don’t allow me to write love poems.”²¹⁴

It’s important to note that however much the two liked each other personally, often participating in International conferences and panels together, and however much their work is woven with echoes and coherences, there is an ambiguity in

213 Ibid.

214 Mahmoud Darwish, *A River Dies of Thirst*, (Beirut and London: Saqi, 2009). 18

drawing them together since both are uneasy regarding the tensions between their political and poetic projects. In 2002 Darwish said of Amichai: “His poetry put a challenge to me, because we write about the same place. He wants to use the landscape and history for his own benefit, based on my destroyed identity. So we have a competition: who is the owner of the language of this land? Who loves it more? Who writes it better?” And while Amichai clearly articulates his admiration for Darwish, he is also a realist: “I have no illusions. It’s quite difficult for poets to communicate with one another in a society that is politically torn apart the way that ours is.”

An exploration of the parallels and differences between Amichai and Darwish is too complex to take on here, and deserving of a thesis of its own, but for this particular essay, the important thing is that, however difficult it was for the two of them to communicate, both *about* their poems and *in* their poems, they still kept trying to speak and were constantly engaged in the struggle. Amichai always tackles the issues of the Arab – Israeli conflict head-on, just as he does his tensions with God and the Bible. In ‘I’ve Filtered Out of the Book of Ester’, while articulating all the things he struggles with, Amichai does not suggest dispensing with the Bible as a whole, nor does he make a general statement censoring all the problematic passages, rather he itemises and distinguishes them separately. The “vulgar joy” of revenge in the Book of Esther, the “despair” of Ecclesiastes, Cain’s murder of his brother, and Jeremiah’s “howl of pain” each trouble Amichai’s narrator and are symptomatic of different narratives of the current conflict. But to paste the remainder together is to limit our understanding and censor the debate, and leave us, as readers, unable to relate to others. Amichai is suggesting that to cut them out entirely and pretend they have not happened is not ethical: the peace of the unengaged is the peace of being “dead” to the realities of human existence. Silence might be safe, but safety is not something the

Jewish reader has been used to in the past, or, as Adrienne Rich argues, needs for the future:

There is also the safety of the ‘armoured and concluded mind’... the safety bought and sold at the cost of shutting up. And this safety becomes a dead end in the mind and in the mapping of a life or a collective vision. I want to say that though the longing for safety has been kept awake in us by centuries of danger, mere safety has not been the central obsession of the Jewish people. It has not been an ultimate destination.²¹⁵

If the safety of “shutting-up” is not an option, what does it mean to speak? Amichai describes his decision to write political poetry of the conflict in relationship to the choice made by Jewish / Roman historian Josephus: “Yosef ben Matityahu (Josephus Flavius) was a field-commander of the Judean Army in the Galilee that fought Vespasian and Titus. He went over to the Romans, and wrote the history of the campaign he had fought. He chose to write about what he had been involved in. I agree with Josephus. I want to be involved and avoid writing, and then be detached and write.”²¹⁶ This seems like an uncontroversial statement for a writer until Amichai adds, “The debate continues as to whether Josephus was, or was not, a traitor.”²¹⁷

Seamus Heaney claims that ‘writers have to start out as readers’²¹⁸. I would argue that Josephus’s and Amichai’s paradigm of initial involvement in a situation, then detaching from it in order to write about it (or even seeming to swop sides) is not the mode of a traitor, but rather of an implicated and invested reader. To write authentically about a situation in which one is implicated, one has to be able to detach to some extent, to have the wider view which can only come from distance but, I would argue, an initial tangible involvement lends a valuable ‘truth’ to the writer’s words and, as long as there is a degree of self-reflexivity, the resulting creative tension

215 Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry : Selected Prose, 1979-1985*, 1st edn (New York: Norton, 1986).206.

216 Yehuda Amichai in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Spring 1967) cited by Weissbort in his afterword to Amichai, Hughes, and Weissbort, 2000.133-4.

217 Ibid. 134

218 Heaney, 1995.6.

is desirable rather than problematic. Amichai implies that he, too, could be considered a traitor. It would not do to underestimate the power of his words, or the personal cost of his choice to speak. While his poems come across as painfully honest accounts of a man struggling with the reality of the life he was living and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are also confrontational, sometimes ragingly so, accounts of grief and anger: “These words are like/ glass splinters, which you can hurt yourself with,/ or cut veins.”²¹⁹ Herbert’s poems too come at a painful cost as he cries: “Wounded I sing, tormented I indite”. Speaking in the voice of the Biblical dreamer Joseph, cast out by his brothers, he makes clear that his suffering engenders his creativity, but in turn this become something that torments him, that he has to endure.²²⁰ However, both Amichai’s and Herbert’s acts are ethical rather than traitorous. They provides a paradigm in which writing becomes for Amichai a political act, and for Herbert an individual act that contributes to society. Moreover, I would argue that it is also a brave, and deeply theological, act on an individual level and, by extension, a communal level: ‘It is only by taking the real risks of language, by rupturing the autistic safety of silence, that the self can reclaim itself. To venture into words, narratives, is to venture everything.’²²¹

219 ‘Letter’ in Amichai (2000) 112

220 George Herbert, “Joseph’s Coat” in Herbert and Wilcox, 2007..

221 Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture : Reflections on Exodus*, 1st Schocken pbk. edn (New York: Schocken Books, 2011).15. She , in turn, is citing Søren Kierkegaard, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, *The Sickness Unto Death : A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).35.

Chapter Three

‘To Know the Place For the First Time’²²²

On the Biblical Eco-poetics of
Andrew Marvell and John Burnside

Liquid Times, Liquid Spaces

“In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.”

T.S. Eliot, *The Metaphysical Poets*²²³

In 2007 the political sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, published *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, expounding his theory that, at least in the “developed” world, we are living in a phase he describes as “liquid modernity” where forms “decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set”.²²⁴ This leads, he believes, to “a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite”, and he further claims “a life so fragmented stimulates ‘lateral’ rather than ‘vertical’ orientations”.²²⁵ Having devoted several chapters to contextualising his theoretical position in discussions of contemporary events, particularly through the figure of the refugee, he continues by thinking about the notion of a modern utopia where these issues might be addressed. He postulates three models for the utopian actor: those of “gamekeeper”, “hunter” and “gardener”.²²⁶ While Bauman concludes the fragmentation of contemporary society is because “we

222 ‘Little Gidding’ in Eliot, 1969. 191-8

223 Eliot, 1953.119

224 Bauman, 2007.1

225 Ibid. 3

226 Ibid. 98-99

are all hunters now”, he suggests it is gardeners who are “the most keen and expert utopia makers” as they are able to “engrave their image on a plot [of land]”.²²⁷ As I discussed in the Introduction, Eliot also saw the world as infinitely fragmented. If there is, as Eliot advocates, a direct connection between the age of the Metaphysical Poets and modernity, Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity*, which is essentially a political sociology of place, might prove a useful framework for conceptualising modern Metaphysical Poetry as it relates to land.²²⁸ Andrew Marvell, a “quintessentially European poet” according to Eliot, was both the most interested in the pastoral and the most politically engaged of the original Metaphysicals.²²⁹ Therefore in this chapter I test the paradigm I derive from Bauman against the work of Marvell and use it to explore the writing of modern poet John Burnside. To summarise: Bauman identifies issues of i) form; ii) the splicing together of political history and individual lives; iii) fragmentations and dislocations; iv) lateral rather than vertical orientations; v) the ability to engrave an image on a plot [of land]; and what reading Eliot suggests is that the successful poet is the one who manages to unify these into a coherent whole. A question hangs over whether a notion of “unity” is applicable to a post-modern world where we seem comfortable with fracture; to counter this, those contemporary poets I identify as ‘Metaphysical’ are held within an overarching system dependant on the possibility of wholeness – they have a religious consciousness and explicitly address issues of faith or the numinous.

God’s Sacred Mirror

After the solidity of Elizabethan verse, one of the innovations of the Metaphysical Poets was an intellectual sensuousness and formal liquidity (both in terms of versification and in relationship to social and political structures): although

227 Ibid. 100

228 My thanks to Professor Robert Hampson for suggesting Bauman as a theoretical referent.

229 T.S. Eliot, ‘Andrew Marvell’, (31st March 1921).

the work is ‘finished’, there is the illusion of a heightened awareness of the poem doing its own thinking while it is being written / read. Bauman’s concern about forms in modernity is their ephemeral nature: they “decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set”.²³⁰ This was addressed by Marvell in ‘On a Drop of Dew’.²³¹ Like Bauman, Marvell’s poem uses parallelism – the poem is self-mirroring in its structure, the first half describing a real drop of dew, the second applying the description of the dew drop to the soul. The very nature of a dew drop is transitory: “Restless it rolls and unsecure, / Trembling lest it grow impure: / Till the warm sun pity its pain, / And to the skies exhale it back again.” The soul too will soon morph and head to heaven: “How loose and easy hence to go”. Behind Marvell’s poem is a trope associating dewdrops with tears in classical literature. Marvell is grappling with the metaphysical notions of soul/body relationships and with apostrophising a God, implied in “the Almighty Sun”. Marvell also describes the sun in *Upon Appleton House* (II. 635-8): “...its yet muddy back doth lick,/ Till as a crystal mirror slick/ where all things gaze themselves, and doubt / if they be in it or without” and this link between God, the Sun, and a Mirror is a profound one. Marvell’s father, Andrew Marvell Senior gave a sermon on 28th April 1927, dedicated to Anne Sadleir of Standon, called *Israel and England parallel’d* which I will return to later. It had a big influence on the writing of the younger Marvell, and in it Marvell senior uses the simile of the Bible as a looking glass, “God’s sacred mirror”²³².

“As men are more or less mirroures to each other, such was Mr Marvel to the world” [sic]²³³ wrote Edward Thompson, one of Marvell’s first biographers, reminding us that Marvell looked inwards as a way to also look outwards. Marvell’s existence

230 Bauman. *Ibid.*

231 Marvell and Smith, 2007.41. *On a Drop of Dew* was first published in 1681 but opinions vary on the date of its original composition – Donno assumes it is written while Marvell is residing at Nun Appleton (1650-2) while Smith believes it to be earlier, suggesting the late 1640s.

232 Archival Ms. London, Inner temple Library, MS 531.C.

233 Edward Thompson in Andrew Marvell and Edward Commodore Thompson, *The Works of Andrew Marvell Containing Many Original Letters, Poems and Tracts, Never before Printed. [Edited] with a Life of the Author by Capt. E. Thompson. L.P.* (London, 1776).III. 435.

was a highly politicised one. From relatively humble origins as the son of a clergyman, he became the tutor first to the daughter of Sir Thomas Fairfax, head of Cromwell's New Model Army, then, in the summer of 1657, to William Dutton, Cromwell's nephew and ward. As a result of his tutoring Dutton and a recommendation from John Milton, that autumn he was appointed as assistant to Milton, Latin Secretary for the Commonwealth and, in 1659, was elected MP for his hometown Hull. For the last twenty years of his life he engaged in diplomacy at home and abroad and wrote controversial (occasionally so controversial that he published them anonymously) political pamphlets and satires.²³⁴ His poetry, while a more private endeavour in that it was not widely published until after his death, was not a wholly insular act. He dedicated poems to Cromwell, to Lord Wharton, as well as to his main patron, Lord Fairfax – all major puritan figures. However, he retained Royalist friends, and was a member of Parliament and known poet during the reign of Charles II. This seems to place him as either a man with split loyalties or one capable of difficult perceptual negotiations, the political situation making it impossible for him to always tell it straight. Marvell is aware of this, and also of the damage writing for other reasons than vocation could do to his art.

In 'The Coronet', thought to be written during his last weeks at Cambridge, Marvell uses the figure of Christ's crown of thorns to stand for poetry and describes how the writer goes "through every garden, every mead" to gather flowers ("my fruits are only flow'rs") in order to weave "so rich a chaplet". However, undermining his efforts is a serpent "that, twining in his speckled breast, / about the flow'rs disguised does fold, / with wreaths of fame and interest." Robert Wilcher sees the poem's quatrain form and envelope rhymes [abba, cddc etc] as enacting the poem's subject matter. In the fourth quatrain the established pattern of rhyming is broken [ghgh] and Wilcher suggests: "The function here is to imitate the sinuous windings of 'the serpent

234 Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell : The Chameleon*, (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University Press, 2010).

old' whose corruption and all-pervading presence is discovered in lines 13-16 – the very quatrain which disrupts the rhyme-scheme.”²³⁵ Marvell’s shepherd learns that worldly motives are bound up with his religious intent and Marvell the poet discovers that “fame and interest” have the power to corrupt his art.

Therefore in his patronage poems, to avoid the pull of the serpent, the poet himself often seems to disappear. For example in ‘Upon Appleton House’ (II. 623-4) with perhaps an ironic wink, Marvell mentions the fate of the narrator: martyring by drowning. Nigel Smith believes this tendency towards evasion impacted on his work: “Marvell’s poetry is full of the confession of this erasure or impossibility of expressed identity [...] Marvell found his poetic identity in a negative way.”²³⁶ While Smith acknowledges this means Marvell weaved himself more tightly into the pastoral, there is an implication that his choice of the word “negative” is not only in a photographic, reflective sense. However, I believe the demands of politics and patronage that necessitated this evasiveness were also positive, often making Marvell reach for metaphysical tools and so produce subtler, more complex poetry full of the charge of the tension in his loyalties.

The Abyss

Marvell uses biblical images to make political comments, as his father did before him. In Rev Marvell’s 1927 sermon *Israel and England parallel’d*²³⁷ criticising the people’s actions under Charles I, he compares men with grasshoppers, anticipating an image in his son’s great pastoral poem, ‘Upon Appleton House’.²³⁸ In late June – late August 1651 Marvell stayed at Nun Appleton, one of Fairfax’s Yorkshire residencies. ‘Upon Appleton House’ is dedicated “to my Lord Fairfax” and “deals in

235 Robert Wilcher, *Andrew Marvell*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). 70

236 Smith: 339

237 Archival Ms. London, Inner temple Library, MS 531.C.

238 Nigel Smith draws attention to this in his biography of Marvell, *The Chameleon*, 20.

depth with many aspects of Fairfax’s antiquarian and literary interests, and the place of the Fairfax family in history”.²³⁹ Nigel Smith reads it as a poem written while Fairfax was debating his next steps as a politician and military leader. However, Vitaliy Eyber²⁴⁰, in his analytic commentary, decries critical scholarship that focuses on the political dimensions of the poem as he argues it has “done little to advance the main end of responsible criticism – helping readers see what it is about a likable work of art that makes them like it, helping them see what makes it beautiful.” This seems to respond to Marvell’s own insistence that “the gard’ner had the soldier’s place, / and his more gentle forts did trace”(ll.337-8). However, it is possible to see ethics and aesthetics intertwining: reading laterally the biblical resonances of Marvell’s poetry shows that it is both beautiful art and a deliberate political endeavour. As the narrator of the poem moves from the House to the meadows around it, he describes what he sees:

And now to the abyss I pass
 Of that unfathomable grass
 Where men like grasshoppers appear,
 But grasshoppers are giants there:
 They, in their squeaking laugh, contemn
 Us as we walk more low than them (ll.369 – 374)

The “abyss” is literally a field of grass, but is a very charged word. Smith perhaps over-reaches when he suggests a double resonance. Firstly, he sees it as a play on “abbess”²⁴¹, alluding to the poem’s earlier meditations on the House as a nunnery and implying a critique of the Roman Catholic Church: “the replacement of the world of unnatural Roman Catholicism with a godly appreciation of nature”. Secondly he suggests the “meadows are imagined as an ocean”, referencing a contemporaneous Crashaw translation of an Italian poem where “Ocean” and “Abyesse” are used interchangeably. He links this quotation to line 377 of ‘Upon Appleton House’: “to see

²³⁹ Marvell and Smith, 2007. 210.

²⁴⁰ Analytic Commentary Ibid.14-15

²⁴¹ The comparison is with “an abyesse of delights” in *The English Nunne* (Saint Omer, 1642) 134

men through this meadow dive”, men who are, in l. 381 “mariners”.²⁴² I would challenge Smith and offer alternative suggestions . It is possible to see that in his use of “field” Marvell could be alluding to a field of war. The meadows are a contested space: metaphorically both the contested space of Biblical Canaan and the contested space of England during the Civil War. Metaphorically, I agree that we are pushed to read them as a body of water, but I would suggest “sea” rather than “ocean” is the appropriate referent. In ll. 388 - 392 Marvell describes the “mowers” entering the meadows, ‘Who seem like Israelites to be, / Walking on foot through a green sea. / To them the grassy deeps divide, / And crowd a lane on either side.’ The reference is to Exodus 14:21-2, where the Israelites, fleeing the Egyptians, are led by Moses through the splitting of the Red Sea.

If the “mowers” are Fairfax’s men, cutting the grass, men who have returned home from war, they are also soldiers literally as well as metaphorically. We know that Marvell has linked the role of soldier and gardener previously and the major Gardener, whose land this is, whose instructions the “mowers” are executing, is Fairfax. Looking at this through a biblical lens, if the mowers are “Israelites” then, by implication, Fairfax is their leader Moses. And the Biblical moment we are in is one where Moses has to make the decision whether to lead the Israelites into Canaan, claiming the “promised land”. What Moses does to aid his decision is send twelve spies to check it out and report on the situation. Ten of the twelve come back with negative views saying: “The land that we have gone to search out is a land that consumes its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of a great stature. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight.”²⁴³ In the biblical paradigm, the enemy are giants, viewing the Israelites as grasshoppers. The usual, surface, reading of

242 Marvell and Smith, 2007.227. The reference is to Marino, trans. Crashaw, ‘Sospetto d’Herode’ (1646) V, ll.1-2
243 Numbers 13: 32-3

Marvell's parallel would suggest England is a Roman Catholic (ie. Royalist) abyss, Fairfax's Puritan army are the heroic underdog Israelites whom God is with, and the Royalists they fight are biblical giants who will eventually be vanquished. However, I believe we need to read much more carefully and not take anything for granted. Smith tells us:

Fairfax was a Presbyterian, his wife an enthusiastic one. Like the Presbyterians, he disapproved of the trial and execution of the King. He later claimed that he had always understood his charge as soldier and commander in the Parliamentary cause as a Royalist act: to rescue the King from evil counsel. He did not think of himself or his family in the long term as being separated from those who fought for the King, and he would eventually play a critical role in sanctioning the Restoration.²⁴⁴

Biblically, the escape from Egypt across the Red Sea and the entry into a land that will be claimed as Israel are two very different political situations. The first was a flight from slavery and a corrupt Pharaoh, the second an assumption of leadership of one's own land. Rabbinic commentators suggest that Moses was not allowed by God to enter Israel because the person who leads a people during a phase when they are victims of terror and is traumatised by that situation, employing a level of military violence, is not the right person to create a new state and rule it in peace.²⁴⁵ Marvell elides the roles of grasshoppers and giants, of hero and villain: "but grasshoppers are giants there". Is he suggesting to Fairfax that Cromwell's Puritans risk, in executing the King, becoming what they have decried? And is he doing this to please Fairfax, whose own split sympathies he must have been aware of, or to challenge him? If this is a poem for his patron's eyes, rather than public society, why employ evasive strategies to say what he wants to say? And if he is angling for a job with Cromwell to raise his own status, and believes the poem will be more widely read, why even hint at these issues at all? Do these elusive / allusive political meditations make the poem

244 Smith, 2010.88

245 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Sefer Torat Emet*, (Lemberg.: A. Druker, 1865).

better, more artful, or like the serpent, strangle it? The answer has to come from Marvell's poetry itself: "Where men like grasshoppers *appear* / But grasshoppers are giants *there*" [my italics]. In a poem driven by rhyming couplets, the deliberate discordant slant rhyme of *appear* / *there*, stands out. Perhaps it echoes Marvell's own hesitancy in making these comparisons and in his political views. Marvell, as well as Fairfax is engraving his own image on the land he describes, but only a careful reader will unpick his allusions. Marvell is describing his own conflicted loyalties and nuanced perspective here, and demanding a careful reading. He is not so much reaching out to his reader, but requiring a reader that will invest time and thought in his work to fully uncover his meanings.

Not Self, But Place

Like Marvell, Burnside is using the internal dialogue of body and soul to articulate larger, and very difficult questions about human existence. He too demands effort from his reader and writes about land through Biblical metaphors. 'Saint Nazaire', the first of his Eliot-inspired 'Four Quartets', opens with plane leaves drifting around the Catholic church, "freeze-dried, silent, wrapping-paper brown".²⁴⁶ Burnside begins with the thingy-ness of things, locating his ideas in closely observed concrete details in a way that would satisfy even William Carlos Williams. The leaves take us to the landscape: "they gather in the nooks between abandoned / hair salons and shuttered pharmacies, or swirl around in broken alleyways / till everything is powder". Suddenly the natural is jammed up against the urban, the whole lot disintegrating, "leaves and stalks / and sand-drift, all / *in pulverem*" [Burnside's italics]. And with the Latin phrase we immediately shift register: the powder transforms into the dust of death; walking alongside us through the "windless

246 Burnside. 49

innertown”, with its “breeze-blocks, mongrels, smashed glass” is the Psalmist, calling out supplications on behalf of the poor.

As Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts warn, there is a danger that these kind of liminal landscapes become “merely a backdrop for bleak observations on the mess we humans have made of our lives [...] using the edgelands as a short cut to misanthropy”.²⁴⁷ Burnside avoids this trap because not everything is pulverised, what stays intact are “the rock-cress in the kerbstones and the char-black /ganglia of fallen Judas pods”.²⁴⁸ “Ganglia” – synonymous with “clusters” in computer-speak – leads us to imagine bundles of black wires, plant-life taking on the hardness of a plastic artifice. What has “fallen” (even the verb returns us to the Bible) are seed pods from the ‘Honesty’ plant, known for having the appearance of coins: the allusion is to Judas Iscariot and his thirty pieces of silver. Money for betrayal – a body of wealth gained, a betrayed human body wracked with the pain of a tortuous death. This takes us back to “ganglia”, used anatomically for a mass of nerve cells, providing an instant, painful, political comment on our modern consumerist society and the inequality of suffering it has produced, through an intricate and finely-tuned network of religious reference and description of place.

Burnside’s poems, while acknowledging the limitations of the flesh, are about a reaching for “self”: “the self / that loves what it will / and watches us quicken and fade / with the passing of time”. We are drawn to “its deftness, on nights like this, / its immutable grace”. (‘Ama Et Fac Quod Vis’)²⁴⁹ This seems particularly true when reading Burnside’s *Gift Songs*, the title a nod to the Shakers whose test of a song’s

247 Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands : Journeys into England's True Wilderness*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011). 9

248 Burnside. 49

249 Burnside, 2007. 7

goodness was how much of a gift it was.²⁵⁰ He presents the poems to the reader like wine and communion wafer, so that in the mouth they'll mutate into blood, into flesh. This is religion as realignment: the book deconstructs the etymology of *re-ligere* as meaning "renewal of connection", and the "gracile revelation" of 'De Corporis Resurrectione' is an intensely physical one; both his language and epidermis simultaneously becoming more transparent, the reading of the poems itself a process of osmosis, "leaching away through the glass / like remembered skin."²⁵¹ Far more than Marvell (perhaps because for him it is less risky), Burnside invests his own body into the conversation:

as if it had long been decided
that flesh is a journey,
something immense in the blood,
like a summer of locusts,

or something not quite visible, but quick
as birchseed, or the threading of a wire
through sleep and rapture, gathering the hand
that reaches from the light, to close, or open.'
(‘For A Free Church’)²⁵²

Burnside's gaze is that of an insect's multi-faceted eye (a locust's rather than a grasshopper's), each surface refracting light along a slightly different dimension, building up a far richer vision. His hand is constantly outstretched, open to the reader but also receiving "always the gift of the world". The corporeal is an elastic concept, extending past his own physicality to the creaturely and, beyond that, to the corpus of Christian text, before finally reaching towards the horizon: "the scent of beasts arrives;/ the biblical;// rudderless gazes/ turned to a farmer's sky." Throughout this sequence the stanzas are elegant, the language tightly condensed, but the mind behind them is expansive.

250 Ibid.

251 Ibid. 3-6

252 Ibid. 42

That Burnside, like Marvell, requires a multi-dimensional reading seems obvious from the generosity with which he reads others. In an essay for *Poetry Review*, 'Dreaming A Buffalo'²⁵³, he uses Lucie Brock-Broido's 'Self-Portrait On The Grassy Knoll' as a call to think in technicolor and possess more than "a black and white picture of the world". He sees the yellow of Brock-Broido's "mustardseed" as not just "a genetically modified crop"; it is the "vivid colour and fuzziness of the lived experience" and "invokes Matthew 13:31 – 'the kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field'". In Burnside's reading of Brock-Broido's lines, the tiniest of plants booms with resonance along both horizontal and vertical axes: encompassing time and depth; the personal and the mythic. In the same way, his own poetry requires us to find the whole world in "the nothing at my shoulder", a space which is simultaneously "miracle" and "utter void" ('Ny-Hellesund')²⁵⁴.

As I suggested earlier, Burnside seems to be constantly reaching for the intangible, searching for the numinous in lack and absences: "the gap between darkness and light has already vanished/ [...] all that remains [...] / is the scent on his skin, a scent he mistakes for the spirit."²⁵⁵ In 'Notes Towards A Supreme Fiction', Wallace Stevens suggests "not to have is the beginning of desire"²⁵⁶. In Burnside's universe it seems fiction and faith are inextricably linked, and desire for presence becomes a driving force. One of the epigraphs to *Gift Songs* is a quotation from another American poet, Rodney Jones: "Fiction's inside like faith. / It doesn't count unless you believe it, and / you don't have to know it for it to be the truth."

253 John Burnside, 'Dreaming a Buffalo', *Poetry Review*, 100 (2010).

254 Burnside, 2007.⁷⁹

255 Ibid.

256 Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber, 2010).

There are inner truths here, in invisible spaces, but for John Burnside they are located and framed by the body “and what the body offers of itself”. His other epigraph is from *Genesis* 32:29, when Jacob asks the Angel to “Tell me, I pray thee, thy name.” Jacob’s search to pin down divinity results in a different naming as his own is changed to “Israel” – one who wrestles with God. The philosophical exchange is located in a corporeal one; this episode happens after the Angel has prevented Jacob from continuing along his path, and in response Jacob and the Angel have physically fought, swopping blow after blow. For Burnside, the body is essential as a frame for “any journey, any secret thing / that passes in the dark and flits away: / not self, but history; not self, but place”.²⁵⁷ History and place can be found in other bodies as well as the human one, in “chapel and harbour and hearth” (‘Le Croisic’) and also “in everything in between: the sea and sky”.²⁵⁸ Burnside’s gifts of song – of dreams, water and the body – like Marvell’s, reflect the subjective nature of our distinct experiences as individuals, but reach beyond that, attempting to touch another consciousness while holding in tension an awareness that the attempt is both creating a fiction and containing deeper truth.

257 Burnside. 79
258 Burnside. 78

Conclusion

‘The End Is Where We Start From’

On Modern Metaphysical Praxis

In Conclusion

Harmony

Late Middle English: via Old French from Latin *harmonia* 'joining, concord', from Greek *harmos* 'joint'.

1. The combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords and chord progressions having a pleasing effect.
2. The quality of forming a pleasing and consistent whole.
3. An arrangement of the Gospels, or of any parallel narratives, that presents a single continuous narrative text.

– Oxford English Dictionary²⁵⁹

The introduction to this dissertation asked whether an understanding of ‘Harmonious Discord’ could provide a way to negotiate the tensions between the Eliotic impulse towards unity and post-modern awareness of fragmentation and help a poet to express religious and spiritual questions in a secular age. In order to answer this it is first necessary to interrogate what *Discordia Concors* actually means. Samuel Johnson’s definition of “a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike”²⁶⁰ requires careful unpicking because “things *apparently* unlike” are, in fact, alike but only appear different. “Apparently”, “appear”, are words that reinforce an awareness that this is all about ways of seeing: of envisioning and representing the world. “Harmony” is about joining together, but it is

²⁵⁹ Maurice Waite, *Paperback Oxford English Dictionary*, 7th ed. / edited by Maurice Waite. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁶⁰ Johnson, 1968.; Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ *ibid.* 115

also about performativity, and the production of “a pleasing effect”. It is a word for a kind of “whole” ness that is made up of parts: the different choral voice or the varying narratives of the Gospels that are wound together to tell a complex story. As John Hollander points out, the ancient principle of *harmonia* was “a matter of distances, intervals and proportions, not necessarily of physical entities expressing themselves in unison” claiming, with particular reference to Dryden’s ‘Song for St Cecilia’s Day’ which opens “From Harmony, from Heav’nly Harmony / This universal frame begins”, that in the Seventeenth Century “the sky was untuned”, tracing a “gradual process of disconnection between abstract musical mythology and concrete practical notions”. Hollander’s focus is on the change from the “Medieval Christian view that all actual music bears a definite relation to the eternal, abstract (and inaudible) ‘music’ of universal order, to the completely de-Christianized use of such notions, in late seventeenth century poetry as decorative metaphor and mere turns of wit”.²⁶¹

Interestingly, perhaps the key word that Hollander uses here is “inaudible”. In her Blood lectures on *Silent Letters of the Alphabet*, Ruth Padel points out that when a string is bowed on a violin or plucked on a guitar, “we do not here that note alone. We also hear others, the octaves above that note, the thirds and the fifths, even though it sounds like hearing only one [...] These unconsciously heard notes are the harmonics”.²⁶² Padel compares the way harmonics vibrate together to poetic composition: “This is how words in a poem work too. Unheard harmonics buzz above and between all the words”. What’s most striking about Padel’s comments is how she sees these resonances with “sense as well as sound”, drawing a comparison with the range of associations, “the baggage of knowledge and memory”, both the composing poet and responding reader bring to the poem. These “hooked atoms” or the “mesh and cross-mesh” in the George Steiner phrase that she quotes, means that for Padel,

261 John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky. Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

262 Padel, 2010. 40

“*harmonia* is all about relation” and, drawing on Plato, that body and soul are “held together by tensions and opposites”. This emphasis on tension, complication, means that she perceives that harmony “exists on a knife’s edge”, “is the still eye of the storm”, a “dangerous business”. In an equally heightened way, focussing on the tautness and complexity of writing, Jorie Graham explains what poetry “can, must, and will always do for us: it complicates us, it doesn’t “soothe”; it helps us to know our paradoxical natures, it doesn’t simplify us. We *do* contain multitudes.”²⁶³ This thesis aims to be a story of coming together, building relationships between writers working hundreds of years and several continents away, but whose concerns are the same: they are all grappling with experiences of political conflict, religious identity, questions of language, time and place. However, the hope is not to smooth out or elide their differences but to acknowledge their particularity while yoking them together, creating a vibrating harmony, an amplitude of understanding.

Chapter One explored how Isaac Rosenberg’s paradoxes create an “elusive” poet who is difficult to pin down. He is socially and culturally an outsider but feels free to raid the canon at will and is directly influenced by Donne in both content and tone. Rosenberg’s “allusiveness” adds a richness to his writing, and demonstrates the width of his reading, given an original twist by the combination of Eliot’s Tradition with his own cosmopolitan background. Amichai and Herbert, the subjects of Chapter Two, write out of specific, and very different, circumstances, but both employ pun and paradox to give vibrancy to their work and speak in an “awakened language”. Emily Dickinson described her understanding of faith in a letter to Otis P. Lord on 30th April 1882 as: “We both believe and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble”²⁶⁴. It is this wrestling with faith and doubt as a way to actively

263 Jorie Graham *ibid*

264 Emily Dickinson, *Selected Letters*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971). 279. Michael Ryan, writing on Dickinson’s vocation and religion in her poems, describes them as “sermons of unbelief”. Michael Ryan, *A Difficult Grace : On Poets, Poetry, and Writing*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000). 159

engage with religion that illuminates Herbert's and Amichai's prayers and gives resonance to their challenges to, and descriptions of, God. While Herbert and Amichai use images of the world to illustrate their writing about faith, John Burnside and Andrew Marvell use Biblical images to illuminate their understandings of the physical world using carefully connections and parsed syntax to mimic the fluidity of thought.

T.S. Eliot instructs the practitioner-critic to ask, "Of what *use* is the poetry of this poet to poets writing today?"²⁶⁵. This practitioner-critic would answer: the poetry of these poets widens the horizons of those who come after them. They are not afraid to confront difficult subjects and do so in varied and interesting ways. They express deep, complicated thoughts in clear, common language, turning the everyday into heightened moments of connection. Mark Doty argues, "A poem is more an embodiment of a question, a way of giving it form. When we give something a shape, when we hammer feeling into song, that act of making is in itself a consolation, a way of making the difficult bearable."²⁶⁶ Both parts of this thesis, creative and critical, aim to embody the question of how to be a religious poet in a secular world. The classical notion of Harmonious Dischord gives it the form of disparate elements coming together to create a world for those who are constantly caught between and provides a comfortably, uneasy home.

The House as Temple

While I ended the Poetry Collection that constitutes Part I on a note of longing for a physical and spiritual home, I am aware that the thesis itself has become a kind of house deliberately structured, as Herbert's *The Temple* is consciously arranged, to echo its content. After Herbert's death in 1633, when *The Temple* was first published, Nicholas Ferrar added a preface describing Herbert's life, a life that is played out

265 Eliot, 1953. 132

266 Clare Brown and Don Paterson, *Don't Ask Me What I Mean : Poets in Their Own Words*, (London: Picador, 2003). 60

across the poems in the volume, which Ferrar describes as "serving at God's Altar".²⁶⁷ From the early version of The Temple manuscript held at Dr. Williams's Library, it seems that Herbert's structure was Trinitarian, but each chapter of my thesis is a house with four rooms. The classical notion of *Discordia Concors* came from the image of four elements mingling and four is a key number in Jewish theology: the Passover Haggadah, which explores the story of the Exodus is built around four questions and the Talmudic method of writing and reading is derived from a cryptic fable.²⁶⁸ Four Rabbis enter an orchard: Ben Azzai looks upon it and dies; Ben Zoma goes insane; Aher cuts off the shoots; and Akiva leaves *b'shalom*, "in peace" or "complete" depending on translation choice. As the passage unfolds, the Talmudic commentators interpret the fable. They explain that the orchard (in Hebrew, *pardes*) is a metaphor for scripture and the word *pardes* (the root of "paradise") should be read as an acronym – PRDS – for *pshat*, *remez*, *drash* and *sod*, four different types of reading. *Pshat* means "plain" or "literal", *remez* means "hint", *drash* means "story" and *sod*, "secret" or "hidden". The Rabbinic paradigm is to read every text on at least four levels: for the plain meaning, the symbolic, the narrative and the mystical.

The introductory poem to the collection I present in Part I, *Discordia Concors*, describes a childhood in which I was torn between the scientific understanding of the world I gained from my mother, a geneticist, and the religious inheritance that came from my father, an observant orthodox Jew. However, what I realised was that these things are not inimical as I come from a Talmudic tradition of multiplicity and fragmentation where contradictory truths are allowed to co-exist: "these *and* these are the living words of God" say the Rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud²⁶⁹, and the tension

267 B. Blackstone, 'George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar: A Study of Thought and Imagery in Jacobean Devotional Literature', (Thesis (Ph.D.), University of Cambridge, 1936). 41

268 Talmud Hagigah 14b

269 Talmud Eruvin: 13b

between is creative. Meaning is a ‘living’ thing, constantly evolving and always plural. The notion of constantly reading and writing on multiple levels is infused into Jewish culture and what led me to become a poet, valuing the freedom and flexibility of white space as much as of the words themselves and holding in tension seemingly conflicting ideas and emotions: finding a balance between confessional writing and metaphorical conceits, the documentary and the lyric, English and Hebrew languages, British and European cultures, thought and feeling, intellect and sensibility, the metaphysical and the modern, academic intention and poetic astonishment.

The Rabbis are four different kinds of reader, who suffer a variety of fates. Reading is a powerful thing, and text can be dangerous: for example Aher’s experiences of close reading turn him into a heretic reading against, rather than with, the grain. The ideal, ‘complete’, reader is one who can use all the different methods as and when appropriate, and hold them together even when the meanings they reveal seem diametrically opposed. Reading in this way makes me suspicious of Western linear thinking about a single religious truth or the epiphanic moment, therefore the Western poetry I am drawn to is metaphysical, full of questions about faith and metaphorical conceits. Poet and critic Jeredith Merrin claims that reading George Herbert was crucial for Elizabeth Bishop, allowing her to create “her own secular poetics of spiritual struggle”²⁷⁰ and in the same way, reading Metaphysical Poetry has enabled me to find a poetic voice and ask both secular and spiritual questions.

Although the phrase “Harmonious Discord” owes its origins to a Christian literary tradition, for a Jewish writer who studied to be a Rabbi before deciding to research what it means to be a poet, it seems the perfect description of a reading methodology where, rather than making a linear, consecutive argument, I take an approach inspired by midrash. In this, practice-based dissertation, I’ve read a variety of examples of modern, contemporary and Metaphysical Poetry against each other and through

270 Jeredith Merrin, *An Enabling Humility : Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and the Uses of Tradition*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990).7

different thematic lenses to create a prismatic poetics: as an academic and as a writer exploring what it means to read and write in a multifaceted way, yoking together the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the narrative and lyric, religion and science, the intellect and the sensuous, the geography of mind, body and land, into a plural entity: a discordant harmony.

Ethics and Aesthetics

“Sincerity, in the proper sense of the word, meaning authenticity, is, or ought to be, a writer’s chief preoccupation... Some writers confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about.”²⁷¹

When praxis is consciously based on a reading and responding to the work of other poets, it raises questions about originality. Auden’s words above inspired the American poet, Michael Ryan, to muse, “Like happiness, originality comes as a by-product. To seek it, to will it, is the best way not to get it. As for authenticity, we are dying for it amidst all the fakery and fragmentation. It’s a reason to read and a reason to write...”²⁷² The tensions between authenticity and originality, and the difficulty of achieving either, underlie much of my work, and the thesis as a whole (both in the poetry collection and critical dissertation) has become a kind of self-portrait. There are many poetic variations on self-portraits, not least Marvell’s ‘Dialogue between The Soul and The Body’, but perhaps the most interesting contemporary one is John Ashberry’s ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, an ekphrastic poem about a Parmigianino painting which plays with the inadequacy of attempts at capturing reflection:

²⁷¹ Ryan, 2000.153
²⁷² Ibid.

This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way.²⁷³

Ashbery's is a poem that seems to echo behind Colette Bryce's 'Self Portrait in a Broken Wing-Mirror' which reflects the speaker back to herself in parts: fragmented, out of alignment, "a cubist depiction".²⁷⁴ In each section of the collection of poems presented in Part I, I refract myself through four different lenses – those of my mother, my friends and lovers, my father, my homes and homelands. All of these are complex, but that of my mother is particularly difficult as what I have found myself writing about is her mental illness and death. In a *Guardian* review of the Tate photography exhibition *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera*, Blake Morrison acknowledges "All art involves looking". However, he goes on to raise questions that I have constantly asked myself throughout this process, "But some looks are more invasive than others. Where's the line to be drawn? What's allowable and what's exploitative?"²⁷⁵

More than any other poems in my portfolio the poems about my mother are the ones I hesitate over – do I have the right to expose her, physically as well as emotionally, to a reader's gaze? What gave me the courage, was reading / viewing a book of photographs by Annie Leibovitz, *A Photographer's Life: 1990-2005*.²⁷⁶ Leibovitz was the partner of Susan Sontag, so the story of her life is inevitably also the story of Sontag's. And Sontag was not just her lover but the subject of many of Leibovitz's beautiful black-and-white portraits. In 2004 Sontag battled with incurable leukemia, an illness chronicled by her son in his memoir *Swimming in a Sea of*

273 John Ashbery, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror: Poems*, (New York: Viking Press, 1975).

274 Colette Bryce, *Self-Portrait in the Dark*, (London: Picador, 2008). 12

275 Blake Morrison, 'Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera', *The Guardian*, (22nd May 2010).

276 Annie Leibovitz, *A Photographer's Life, 1990-2005*, 1st edn (New York: Random House, 2006).

Death.²⁷⁷ The most controversial pictures in Leibovitz's book are those of Sontag on her deathbed; pictures that are startling, haunting and, for me, ultimately deeply moving. One of the obvious ironies around the debate was that Sontag's most famous critical work, *On Photography*, included several caveats about the uses of photography as *memento mori*: "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed."²⁷⁸ While Sontag's later work, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, contradicts much of her earlier thinking (inspired as it is by Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*²⁷⁹ and the issues around war photography) what remains consistent is an insistence on exploring ethical questions around the right of the viewer to recreate a representation of the dying.²⁸⁰ There has been much controversy over the publication of Leibovitz's photographs but, when challenged, she justified herself as follows:

Let me be very, very clear about this," she said in a long conversation in her studio in Greenwich Village, during which she alternated between speaking openly about intimate corners in her life that the photographs inevitably expose, and seeming to regret having said anything at all. "Every single image that one would have a possible problem with or have concerns about, I had them too. This wasn't like a flippant thing. I had the very same problems, and I needed to go through it. And I made the decision in the long run that the strength of the book needed those pictures, and that the fact that it came out of a moment of grief gave the work dignity."²⁸¹

Although I am writing about something felt deeply and potentially emotive, I hope these poems are still works of art. However, I am very aware that depicting illness or pain or horror, does not automatically transform the work or lend it "dignity" as Leibovitz hoped. Indeed, using such weighted material creatively can often be

277 David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death : A Son's Memoir*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover edn (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

278 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).14

279 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2012).

280 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 1st edn (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

281 Janny Scott, 'Annie Leibovitz: Life, and Death, Examined', *The New York Times*, (6th October 2006).

problematic. Her concerns are also my concerns. Poems came out of moments of grief, but I'm aware they often also emerged from anger. Jo Shapcott reminds us "the point is how to find a use for fury"²⁸²; sometimes there must be a transformation for the poem to work artistically. And, like Leibovitz, these are not just questions I am asking *about* my art but rather are emotional questions I am asking *through* my art.

The Making of A World

"The making of a world – of *home* – is determined by the spirit which the participants bring to the process. The right way to dwell is to constantly examine the making of home: where and what are its bounds? How do we belong there? What do we consume, and what do we have the right to consume in this place."

*John Burnside*²⁸³

While by no means claiming the comparison to Eliot, Donne, or any of the other poets I have written about in my thesis, I am aware that submerging myself in their writing as part of the academic process means that their poetry permeates my thoughts and influences my own. Their model is inspiring but also permission giving; they are not afraid to challenge their readers, to trust us to follow their diversifying threads. While for T.S. Eliot the negotiation between concreteness and abstraction is intellectual, the syntax of the thought winding its way through carefully punctuated sentences, George Herbert often depicted his poems in the concrete image of the thing he was describing, most famously, angel's wings. My poem, 'DNA', imitates him in this: centred and centrifugal, it is a palindrome or speculum poem, strands entwined like the double helix it describes. With the necessity of making each line reflect back on itself to read equally meaningfully forwards and backwards, and the engagement with highly charged personal material, this is poetry as extreme risk. Poets such as

²⁸² 'Letter to Dennis' in Jo Shapcott, *Her Book : Poems 1988-1998*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).
²⁸³ Herbert and Hollis, 2000. 259

Herbert, Marvell, Amichai and Burnside allow us to go outwards from the poem by following their exegesis of Biblical texts, then draw us back in, forcing us to read ourselves into the worlds they create and parallel their eisegesis with our own. It is the very opposite of ambiguity; permitting poems this kind of mystery requires utter precision of language. In search of an equally accurate music, I have edited my writing over and over again, but find I'm living with constant dissatisfaction. This is not just caused by my inability to fully realise Coleridge's requirement of "the best words in their best order"²⁸⁴ but a longing for, and fear of, the revelatory contact of opening my 'self' to others. There is white space here for the readers to read themselves into, but what will they – you – make of it? The demands of this kind of metaphysical writing can seem absurd, its rewards painfully uncertain.

Sometimes this is both explicit and immediate, such as in 'Grasshoppers', a long poem riffing off the moment in the Bible where Moses sends spies to investigate Canaan and they come back cowering, fearful of how they will be perceived by the land's current occupants: "We were in our own sight like grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight."²⁸⁵ From this epigraph grows a long, meditative poem about perspective, exploring the figure of the grasshopper and how it may be used as a metaphor to think about the role of the occupier and where the boundaries lie. It is a poem that takes its context (the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) from Amichai, its form and use of the corporeal from Burnside, and its central metaphor and title from Marvell but is drawn from my distinct experience: I am a woman, and one writing out of a Jewish not a Christian tradition; as a diaspora Jew my lands are both England and Israel; the liquid that holds my dreams has a more limited reach – I am not stretching across the harbour like Amichai's prophet, but situating myself in bathwater rather than

284 "I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose,—words in their best order; poetry,—the best words in their best order." Samuel Taylor Coleridge and others, *Table Talk*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

285 Numbers 13:33

Burnside's "firth" or Marvell's "abyss". If, like Burnside, I see "the body as metaphor", my body is a contested and occupied space with shifting boundaries. Yet despite these differences, there's a freedom these poets give me: to allow the personal, the infinitesimally small, to hold big political questions. And what I learn from them about craft is that it's important to frame the metaphysical, the existential, within a carefully controlled form. Marvell's tetrameter and rhyming couplets feel too restrictive but when I try out Burnside's stepped lines suddenly there's a vertical drive down the page – an openness blows into my poem, ideas fragment rather than following their usual, linear, path.

'Grasshoppers' tries to be both political and philosophical, but is written within the lyric range where I am most at home. I have tried to ensure the form echoes the content; the segments do not proceed in a linear fashion but hop from place to place as thoughts progress and connect. This is not quite circular thinking; perhaps it is best described as radial – with the grasshopper at the hub of the wheel and various spokes reaching outwards; the whole thing held together within a thematic circumference. This radial movement is characteristic of the ghazal, one of my favorite poetic forms, as couplet after couplet spins out from and leads into the central refrain. In Chapter 2 I explored the political and poetic force of Yehuda Amichai's poetry, quoting a comment Amichai made about his work referring to Flavius Josephus. Amichai concluded by saying, "I agree with Josephus. I want to be involved and avoid writing, and then to be detached and write. The debate continues as to whether Josephus was, or was not, a traitor."²⁸⁶ This constant agonised questioning of whether writing about one's own community in a detached, critical way, especially at a time of war, is a betrayal, underlies much of my work, and is at the heart of the ghazal that is my penultimate poem. I wrote it after first reading Agha Shahid Ali's 'Ghazal' which, in

286 Yehuda Amichai in *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Spring 1967) cited by Weissbort in his afterword to Amichai's *Selected Poems* ed. by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort (Faber and Faber: 2000) 133-4.

its calling to the events of Deir Yassin and apostrophizing of both Amichai and Mahmoud Darwish, positions itself at the crux of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict²⁸⁷. Ali, a Kashmiri-American poet who was responsible for popularising the ghazal in twentieth century Anglo-American poetry, used the form to articulate a diasporic identity that was simultaneously based on land, language and the handing down of traditional cultural forms.

As a diaspora Jew with strong ties to Israel, yet deeply uneasy with its current political leadership, my need to respond to Ali was overwhelming. However at first my ghazal felt as if it were not my own, but an appropriation of something rightfully another's since the way the ghazal is usually referenced in contemporary poetics is by its Arabic and Persian roots. I struggled with the writing until I figured out why this form resonated so strongly: its rhymes and refrains were a central prop of the Hebrew liturgical poetry that I had grown up reciting daily. The eleventh century Andalusian poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol used the ghazal as a tool for dialogue with the Arab poets he lived alongside, and as a way to debate theological concepts with his fellow Jews.²⁸⁸ The nature of the ghazal – with its hermetic couplets – allowed for a philosophical equivocation which many of Gabirol's Jewish contemporaries found heretical, but which I find permission-giving, and the ideal form for exploring a multifaceted identity and complex response to a complicated situation.

The ghazal that mine responds to (his with its refrain "Arabic", mine with the refrain "Hebrew") was the first Ali wrote. It began a fascination with the form that would last for many years as he continued to create his own, translate others' from

287 Agha Shahid Ali, *Ravishing Disunities : Real Ghazals in English*, (Middleton, Conn.; Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press; University Press of New England, 2000),9

288 For examples of Ibn Gabirol's work see Ted Carmi's anthology T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). There are also translations of some of his ghazals in Peter Cole, 'The Dream of the Poem', (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007). There is an excellent article on the medieval Hebrew ghazal by Ross Brann: Ross Brann, 'The "Dissembling Poet" in Medieval Hebrew Literature: The Dimensions of a Literary Topos', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 107 (1987). 39- 54

Persian, Urdu and Hindi, and publish an anthology of what he called *Real Ghazals in English* – contemporary American poems using versions of the ghazal’s couplets and repetition, although in his introduction he complained how few employed traditional rhyme and metre. In later years Ali rewrote his ghazal into a strictly metrical, rhymed poem although I far prefer the impulsivity and roughness of his original version. Despite this, when writing my own, I decided to use traditional metrics. I initially played with different accentual-syllabic metres, but they felt too European. In the end, since Hebrew poetic schema are normally based on numbers of short and long syllables, I decided that the closest thing in English would be a quantitative syllabics. Each line is ten syllables, with the refrain adding an extra three syllables to both lines of the initial couplet and the concluding line of the others. I kept to this scheme exactly apart from in the penultimate line “To resist complicity, ‘not in my name’”: by adding an eleventh syllable, I resist being fully complicit in the poetic form as well as in my political action.

The poem that follows, and ends the collection, ‘Moorish Home’ consciously plays with the ghazal form and with the notion of influence, written in couplets and referencing Lorca and Judah Ha’Levi, two great ghazal writers, as well as being dedicated to Mimi Khalvati who popularised ghazal writing in England. It is Janus-faced, as I believe final poems of a collection should be – simultaneously looking backward and forward – backward to a golden age of poetry, backward to a collection all about diasporic identity and homelessness and forward to a new time, a new home, a “new Jerusalem”. In Donne’s ‘Devotions’ (IV Prayer) he writes, quoting *Revelation* 22:2, “Even in the new Jerusalem, in heaven itself, it hath pleased thee to discover a tree, which is *a tree of life there, but the leaves thereof are for the healing of the*

nations.”²⁸⁹ For Donne, the idea of a “New Jerusalem” is a place of healing and growth, a world to come, a kind of paradise, while for Judah Ha’Levi and the other Medieval Spanish Jewish poets it had the more worldly sense of a safe place on earth where they could find a home.

²⁸⁹ Margret Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances : Sermons, Poems, Letters and Devotions*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). 85

APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Isaac Rosenberg, sketch enclosed in letter to Gordon Bottomley (1918)



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