

**NECTARINE**

and

**THE POETICS OF PERCEPTION  
IN THE JOURNALS  
OF R.F. LANGLEY**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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## **The Poetics of Perception in the Journals of R.F. Langley**

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## Abstracts

### *Nectarine*

The idea of a true past, in which life continues as it once did, seems only to exist in the sort of remote idea of a place, paraphrasing Wallace Stevens, where what is dead lives with an intensity beyond any experience of life. Recollection is a strange idea because it can seem to imply that memories are discrete and can be re-called or re-collected at will, like shelves of preserves marked with labels like ‘Thunderstruck Sunset’ or ‘Owl on a Phonebooth’. But we are contextual creatures, it seems, and these poems work to acknowledge that our memories, and so to a great extent ourselves, are reliant on place, and that it often does not seem to be a choice at all when a phonebooth owl or thunderstruck sunset rejoins the moment.

The poems in this collection are about what is both here and gone; about the seawall in things through which filters voices, memory, and the traces of ourselves and others. They are an attempt to accept, if not embrace, the feeling that each time we give something a glance, we are giving some of our rations of glances to those things.

### *The Poetics of Perception in the Journals of R.F. Langley*

This thesis explores R.F. Langley’s poetics of perception and argues that it develops out of the perceptual concerns and dilemmas which are negotiated in the journals. I argue that a central dilemma that the journals explore is the potential for the ‘instance’ of Langley’s own direct experience—his unmediated experience of the world—to be collapsed by the ‘continuum’ of self, knowledge, and history, which might be brought to bear on it. The apparent contradiction in using language to address perceptual concerns is, I argue, a crucially productive one for Langley, who develops ways of saying which, themselves, resist and negotiate the perceptual dilemmas which his journals identify. I offer close readings of Langley’s journal entries and related poems, in order to demonstrate both their shared poetics of perception, and the way in which the poems restructure and amplify concerns and interests which the journals discover and explore.

This thesis also offers a phenomenological reading of the journals. This reading, situated in the context of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s late writing on art and aesthetics, and contemporary phenomenological-literary studies, looks closely at the phenomenological dimensions of the ‘instance’ of direct experience which the journals describe. I focus on one of the most distinct and distinguishing features of the journals, Langley’s use of colour, to demonstrate the phenomenological nature of his attention to the world that so preoccupies the journals. Further, I argue that Langley develops a way of saying or naming which, in its particularity, becomes its own ‘instance’ in the process of describing the particularity of direct experience. My discussion of the phenomenological dimensions of the ‘instance’ to which Langley attends offers a deepening understanding of his engagement with that philosophic tradition, while the poetics of perception he works out in the journals makes, I argue, an important contribution to twentieth-century poetics.

## Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification from this or any other university or other institute of learning. The first portion of this thesis, the collection of poems titled *Nectarine*, was published in May 2021 by Véhicule Press. Previous versions of these poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Literary Review of Canada*, *The Scores*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Carousel Magazine*, *Bath magg*, *The Walrus*, *The Montreal International Poetry Prize*, *The CBC Poetry Prize* and been anthologised in *Bafter C*, *The Next Wave: An Anthology of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Canadian Poetry*, and *Carcenet New Poetries VIII*.

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Finally, I want to thank, acknowledge, and remember my best friend, Aaron Mattes. I’ll see you again for a PC lager and what holds inside the windows against the snow.

## **NECTARINE**

*for Aaron & Annie*

One



## THE PHEASANT

The pheasant bled out in a field of heather.  
I heard the black-winged door open  
over the fields, the awful leather  
flap of feathers, even as the stroke of an oar.  
His irises growing wider in the sunlight,

as a statue by the fire seems to look toward  
the fire. Because I remember a time  
before I held myself apart, I lay beside  
the pheasant in his bed of heather, panting  
in the brightness. Not alone, but together.

## FUNK ISLAND

It gets cold late summer on Funk Island.  
A man takes two auks from a stone pen,  
retreats to a cauldron and breaks  
their bodies into sticks to kindle his fire.

This is not industry. Not the gear of  
some machine chugging coal shadows  
that walk into walls and never come back.  
This is night on Funk Island, as black

feathers unhook in water and no vision,  
where fate appears starkly as if in paint,  
has ever visited us like it visited the half-

skinned auks looking back over the isle  
at what the fire cast: the outline of a man  
boiling them, as if they'd last, to the last.

## THE FISHERMAN

Bent over a bucket, took out a knife  
and turned the blade of it into the work,  
scales fell silver, beryl, blue,  
the smooth exactness of his hand flaring

in and out of his jacket—it wasn't just  
me but boys behind the streetlamps  
and crates lashed with rope,  
growing thin as their eyes went lucent,

light casting angles into the waves,  
the knife in flashes coming as the bucket  
brimmed with scales, blue, silver,  
the boys almost nothings gone feral

in the shadows, a braille of eyes fixed  
on the man conducting the bright  
knife over the barrel and my body  
thinning too as wings of brilliant silver

blue spread from the man's back who  
flew away smiling over the waves.  
I rushed in then with the other boys, all  
wearing jackets that looked as if other men

had curled around them and fallen asleep,  
rushed in on the bucket to try and eat  
our fill of the scales, hungry for the bright  
of them, the bright of our teeth turned

into the work as the streetlights brayed  
peril over the breaking waves  
and we did our jackets up, men again:  
ravenous and separate in our ways.

## THERE

across the river, black-red coursing  
for it's been raining now for days

in the mountains, in the conversation  
of leaves camouflage to all but a few

grey boulders, in grey stands of birch  
mute as blown matches, I am

deep in the ministry of its waiting on  
dart shifts of scaled bodies, so quick

you missed it and only know by wet  
feathers that the young heron flicked

its head underwater and stands again,  
taut with the arrow of its own attention.

## SEA SNAIL

Who comes  
rising on the water  
column at night,

six translucent  
horns dusted beryl,  
pale blue, pewter?

This one.  
Glob of sun. Honey  
nebulae. Fragile who

if the moon  
rises abruptly will  
abandon her mouth

and fall below  
the waves. And waves.  
When it is night,

and farther into  
night than night goes,  
she phosphors:

blue-lipped  
body tracing chalk  
eons in figure eights.

An altered ocean  
corrodes her, her  
violet shield, the once

inviolable heart  
flaring a bit further into  
night than night goes.

## SANDERS RARE PRINTS

Two-thousand-pound cherry blossom prints  
hung inside the doors. Illustrations collect  
dust in sunshine. Nothing has a use.  
Fashions have no seasons, maps of city  
streets lead carefully nowhere, because  
the streets no longer exist. Sparrow; swift; crow;  
a bright kingfisher lodged like a blue spirit  
in the hollow of a tree; flick quickly through  
the prints and they alter. A woman  
lights the thin tip of her lithographic cigarette  
as casually as fire reaches for a door.

I paid for a print and found a seat  
in a chapel across the road. Seven small  
girls with their faces painted green  
sang until the sun fell out of the windows.  
It's something the print knows, this staying  
behind to hear the silence sweep the voices;  
the stained-glass eyes of peculiar saints grow  
tired by the fires of the bodies they tend.  
Dragging its bag of names through the door,  
you could almost think time forgot you.  
A little mouse hidden safe inside the walls.

I went to drink where people had been  
drinking continuously for centuries:  
an alleyway pub with such low beams  
the owner pulls pints with a bruised forehead.  
It's one thing I like about drinking  
slowly but with persistence, to feel – as I look  
again – the looking might not have to end.  
For the sense, walking the canal home at night,  
that in the place I just left, something  
is spreading its brilliant wings behind me.  
Some bright kingfisher I missed.

## INDIANA

I cheers my own glass by accident  
the day after Christmas, though  
you wouldn't know it by the tartan

scarf hanging in the warmth, useless  
as the neighbour's snowblower parked  
at the half-dark edge of her garage.

But it fits. Sweet spirits and chance  
solitude chiming with themselves,  
as this winter it seems there is no silver

thread left that ties my kin to me.  
I could call it too much free time,  
the goldfish heart choking its pond,

call it too many nights spent drunk  
in the prairies or what the woods  
might have said had I walked in them.

I don't like what I've become.  
Sitting idle. Tossing darts at balloons.  
I'd rather let the glass say cheers

on its own than endure another  
dream of the old house or of you,  
Indiana, wrapped in the alphabet

sheets that swaddled me as a boy,  
in the roots I snapped with a blunt  
shovel to stand and see a man

inadequate in his prayer.

## THE TIN-LEGGED GOD

Night takes off the ceiling. In the alleys  
you can see this town is set

nervously in the dark, like it was built  
on the bedrock of some indecision

or sense, just outside the limits, a tin-legged  
god passes silo to silo, listening

for glaciers of steel and coal, who rests  
her toes in the rust of the power

plant's weir, pulling her companions  
from the quiet where the prairies tatter.

And I had to stumble from the night train  
states away to split a smoke with a boy

in the boiling light of a stadium to hear  
her climb the tower's sides and fit

the green stained-glass window over  
her eye to see both our worlds:

our figures and the figures who remain  
in loops, like the one I left at the Foxhead

dancing with friends by the pool table,  
as the last bugle player in town stands

like something is about to change,  
and plays like nothing's changed.



## HATCHBACK ENGINES

He'd lick his gold tooth when he told me  
this used to be a mining town,  
like he could get the taste of it on his tongue  
and head back into the shafts with a lantern—  
find, finally, a treasure better  
than the fishing lures and stag-head beer  
bottles crowding his window over the river.

The booms of it came through the woods:  
sudden, percussive enough to set the door  
frames rattling and beagle whose friend died  
barking in his red-roofed hut at the garden's edge.  
The dynamite-prospecting mining company  
left open-shelled shipping containers,  
and shacks like hollow tortoises in the forest.

If you came on one you'd swear some  
figure of the forest had grown through a window  
just to sit in a bleached chair and stare back  
out at itself. Spindly-legged things  
with thin beards more grey mist than hair.  
The burned-out hatchback is still there  
where a boy was found holding the dynamite.

## NAMELESS

Fifteen minutes in any direction is all  
cornfields antlers and leaning  
barn definitions of extinction,  
porch collections of tins and paint  
brushes writing down the most recent

myth of where our ghosts go  
and whether they'll hold  
here like the oldest teacher in town,  
uncertain if he emptied the vodka  
before his cup filled with rain.

The town good fortune drove  
through and kept on going, left  
generations to sweep dust,  
letters fallen from the theatre  
marquee and the smell of diesel

persistent as the mottled  
bark of the sycamores that cracked  
before the brick face of the town  
turned red and laid the rest  
in the old river dreaming.

And you, who left the town,  
city after city while you sleep  
curled like a question, are taken  
back on these walks, eyelids  
ghosted along the bare lit streets

lost looking for the reason  
the shape of your leaving became  
the shape of your seeing.  
Nameless as the fifth season  
of the old river dreaming.

## THE FIFTH SEASON

In slim peripheries, in the rows,  
houses soldered behind dark  
windows: the fire goes out.  
What is left?

Night a bison in the river shaking  
beads of water from its hide,  
a table where two shadows sit  
as a glass dusk hammocks  
the raccoon who sleeps  
in the safety of built things.

Night finds each strand of your  
red hair, and yes, it is a river,  
and yes, it extends—the season  
on which all my seasons depend.

## FOURTEEN WINDOW SONNET

for Laura Armstrong (1975-2016)

Not about the mountains.  
Or the waterfall that fell down  
steps from the birch. I didn't want  
to talk any more. I drank  
until I felt sick and left my name  
on the conference table.

A ceramic bowl  
by the open bathroom window,  
smoke filters through the screen.  
I would be the smudge of a deer,  
the humid night struck hot  
white by a black heron's cries.

I taste red oil. Taste  
grey salt come in sprays,  
the beautiful guide explaining  
the secret life of whales  
as one ribbed jaw split clear  
seams in water. On the ocean

I wore the clothes  
a fisherman gave me. Knocked  
on doors of houses painted pink  
and hazel. He said I could  
keep them *because nobody lives  
there anymore*. I still look

for you, who patches  
your absence out of archipelagos,  
out of mirrors from our place  
on Saulter Street, where  
we slept under quilts of neon  
between boxes on the floor.

It took a small tough  
man from Nova Scotia hours  
to twist the couch through the door.  
A morning to sweep the forest  
grown from the tracks you left  
in the hall. Algonquin vanished.

At the pioneer village, slow  
 hurdling through the furred  
 hulk of their own hips, two bison  
 nudge forward to take the apple  
 from your hand as you fall  
 into the silence that waits

with open hands. I am a raft  
 again on wave after wave of  
 your body by the fire, naked  
 and coated in ember as the god  
 in the branches breathed in  
 and blew us into maps

of other lives. Mother waits  
 at the top of the fur shop stairs  
 with sequin stars netted in her hair  
 and enough powder to reunite  
 us long enough for you to spit  
 red wine inside my mouth.

We were hunters, once.  
 Look. On the walls our faces hang,  
 caught in expressions of anger,  
 yes, and shame. You sit beside me  
 in the bedroom with eyes  
 like curtains blown out a window.

Death is repetition  
 and in death you repeat, come  
 with the frost of early morning  
 shadows to see the face of another  
 season as the leaves crush suns  
 and turn red. And blue

washing through the pressed  
 wings of steam billowing from grates,  
 your name is a bright siren  
 for that cold corner of a shower  
 in the west where I refuse to see  
 your body behind the door.

The world is a poor custodian.  
 But the work is not against  
 forgetting. I remember you. So  
 I leave the deer, leave the window  
 and return to my name.  
 About the waterfall

that fell down steps  
from the birch and the leaves  
in the clouds between mountains,  
I speak about beauty, closing  
my eyes to see you standing in  
the dark, long black hair shining.

## HIVE REMOVAL

Wasps articulate the countryside in shifts.  
Jacket in, jacket out, they ticked  
the mouth of the asbestos-white hive  
hung like a bandaged chandelier  
from the eave of the broke-down trailer  
where I, pale-skinned, turned  
the canister, the chemicals, a label's  
encouraging words—you choose  
your moment, then you mourn it:  
the wasps dribbling out of that grey  
mess of a mouth I made of missing  
you, Laura, in the strangest lies.

## TWO



## PORTRAIT AS NECTARINE

They left their words and carried on,  
 little mixtures of what they saw,  
 what came in sideways, darted  
 behind the eyes and found their own  
 disguises in what had already been  
 left stored inside them all along.  
 Uncountable, unaccountable things,  
 nectarines and an oak tree outside  
 the window growing moss green.  
 They left their words and carried on,  
 until only the words carried on.

What came out, what carried on  
 began, coming out, to carry on  
 in ways that couldn't have been planned:  
 a statue sent to live in the river,  
 three months and four days isolation,  
 sudden rain after a long dry spell  
 hatching magpies in the eaves—  
 each had their way with a bowl  
 of nectarines. They stood at the forest  
 mouth with a spade for a path  
 and then contended with the trees.

Three fruit sherbet compote. The best  
 part of what was left might have been  
 stolen from an advertisement  
 for nectarines, as if you really could  
 freeze the best taste of summer, set  
 eager trees on a sunlit slope and train  
 easing grandiose towards homesteads  
 (glad orange yellow carriages)  
 through its own belt of curious smoke  
 in a glass of frozen nectarine halves  
 on a table made of ice. The best

part of what carried on might not have  
 belonged to them at all, but still  
 wouldn't, without them, have carried on,  
 taken place, taken shape, taken up  
 that little space and though the overall  
 mood of the poem might recall a tree,  
 when the eyes wind inside it  
 they reveal, strangely, in a way  
 that can't be adequately accounted for,  
 the shape of someone high in the leaves.  
 Someone else was with them.

The one who stayed and carried on  
 after they stopped and were gone.  
 It puts us in the curious position of one  
 who can see what, sitting at a desk,  
 watching out of the corner of the eye,  
 a train pushing its blunt nose between  
 the leaves of a tree and a bowl of  
 nectarines on a mantel, they couldn't:  
 how, against the tree, its moss green  
 leaves and a sunlit slope in memory,  
 they were flickering with glances.

Each glance a glance less, a small part  
 of them that reached out and reaching  
 out left a little less, how they would be  
 outlived by their own glances,  
 and so how the oak's flickering hem  
 was the pale flickering of them.  
 Like paper cuts in the tissue of air  
 we might, momentarily, smell sweet  
 nectarine in their hair and feel the urge  
 across the years to cross the years  
 and sit beside them to bandage

the wounds of their diminishing eyes.  
 Though there would be nothing to do  
 but sit, as you do now, beside them.  
 Fit warm disguises to the silence  
 for them to carry into silence.  
 Here is a portrait with smooth red  
 and yellow skin that takes and lets  
 you take reflections: a few more  
 of the rations of your glances,  
 and a nectarine frozen in a bowl  
 like the warm taste of summer.

## A TIN OF ORANGES

*So this is what it will be like*  
the impression in the sheets,  
ingot on ingot of silver  
blue air. *Let there be at least*  
*a tin of oranges.* I woke counting  
back in decades and stood  
behind a waterfall of  
objects falling out of touch:  
an ocean of shoes and loose  
clothing, the school bell on  
the windowsill calling  
the ancient children home  
out of habit. Habit. The hands that reach  
through the bedroom dark  
part the air like curtains.  
But I was already sailing  
past my last day, the bed  
a berth in the hull of a ship  
on a sudden sea, my body folded  
like the clothes across my knee.

## THE KILN

Bent white paper. I smooth it out.  
Could be the tired face of a moon.  
Or a night by the cove. Alone,  
the trees courage that *yes*, the briar

of the silent world might compass us  
into what sustains the long-masted  
forests sailing in their place, or some  
flare at the back of the tongue

warm our words under what the cold  
kiln of coastal light splays on the sand.  
On the sleeping whale of a boulder,

uncurl a hand from around our flash-  
light and see if across the wave-backs  
an answer to divide the aloneness comes.

## THE INVENTION OF GLASS

Mercury in the belly of the lighthouse  
walks light over the winter waves.  
The landscape turns on its own slow greys.

This is the kettle lake where the wolf  
stared down at the calf that fell through  
the ice and froze. These are the pebbles

of its blue eyes turning from the right  
to the left. Long after and so long before  
the invention of glass to cover our windows.

## THE MAP OF THE EARTH AT NIGHT

1

Each sleeper behind their door holds  
a face slow to extinguish in the ventilations  
of blue until only the eyelids confirm,  
underneath the earth, the orchids are conferring  
on varieties of dark that are harder to record:  
the weight of night in a chandelier,  
a girl who put a pebble in her mouth  
and pulled back out the sea, where it is  
always night, and the sun touches the dark  
like a door it cannot open. The anonymous  
monk who kept a cloud in his closet is  
closing his door: like the grey pillar of a whale  
asleep over a mountain in the ocean,  
his god waits for him. I lay beside a man

2

with a difficult wound. He smiled (faintly)  
when the doctor offered him an orange  
liquid to make the nerves fluoresce  
around the tumours pressing in his throat.  
“The way we need maps of cables before we dig.”  
the doctor explained and left the room.  
I’d listen as his boy kept vigil. As he ran  
a sponge soaked in ice over his father’s lips.  
I had a set of paints when I was a boy.  
Twenty or so pots with lids you could flip  
open with a thumb. When the paints dried  
you’d have to dip your brush in water,  
turning the bristles in small circles to coax  
a layer of wet colour from the surface.

3

I thought about those paints when the man  
asked the priest what he could take with him.  
That each night he dreamt he was climbing  
out of his body on a ladder toward paradise,  
but that by the time he reached the clouds  
he'd squeeze through such a narrow opening  
his memories showered back on the ground.  
His body had shrunk and seemed to hang  
in his bed like a tarp full of rain. He was  
a big man, once, you could tell by the size  
of his hands. "Good for engines," he said.  
When the fountains flooded on outside  
he'd press his face back into the sheets,  
a paintbrush still wet with colour and distant



4

as Kejimikujik where the sky sets mica fires  
in the coast's silt pelt. Where you can sway  
in the head of a pine watching the long lines  
of the dead who cannot turn their caravans  
home. I told him about the coast. But I can't  
tell you where he is now. Only that you can  
stand like I stood, opened along that shore,  
and feel, not the man, but a memory of him,  
staring from your body at the sky's grey belly.  
If he made his way still depends on whether  
when the sun sets in dream it rises again  
in the head of its brother. All I know is if  
they're written, no one get the letters from  
the wounded man climbing toward the clouds.

## TOWN FIELD AND SKY

Threshed gold corners break in slow  
waves of grain: seeded rows

what the keels of barns left dragged  
in the wheat, vireos' cries, houses

slatted with light at the horizon  
where the prairies thought to stand

but fell asleep, heavy with yellow.  
Past the tin-legged gods, silos

whistling at the threshold of storms,  
the oil fields are colic where the city

wind sews its lonely jackets.  
Nothing to report. Not a word

when I return to sit with the others,  
mute on the matters of lightning.

A late car sounds out the distances.  
Near from far. The gift I never gave

hangs in the living room: a paper  
lantern folded like the morning star.

The bottles lined along the porch  
catch the setting sun: buoys the night

glides through like a glacier. Silent.  
And empty. In the lacquered dark

the bedroom stairs rise. Forest. Trees.  
I think these are my redwoods now.

My mind won't stop working.  
It ticks like an engine in the cold.

## SPIDER

When it is night you are there  
in the spaces between wood slats

under the roofs where you spin  
a harness of silk waiting on

the fibres of the sky as the lamp  
light cycles further in the darkness

not even the moon can find you

## STONES AND SWEEPER

What news do you bring us?

*It's October. The leaves have fallen.*

From where? The thicket on the slope?

*No. Higher on the ridges, the oaks.*

What of the ranger? Of the coast?

*The tine of his lantern on the coast.*

Who will sweep the leaves from our stones?

*I will sweep the leaves from the stones.*

Like the women painted the watches' hands?

*Yes, pointing the brushes with their tongues.*

You will come to us? October and October?

*October and October and October.*

And in the meantime? Where will you go?

*I will be with the ranger.*

Upon the coast?

*The thin tine of his lantern on the coast.*

We will wait by our stones.

*My radium ghosts in the radium oaks.*

## YELLOW PEBBLES

Seventeen years away from the canal,  
mottled water, the sogged rope  
fender's hatch, porthole  
arcadias and each flame-  
headed marigold in its planter.  
I shouldn't have gone back there,  
or filled my pockets with yellow  
pebbles from the tow path.  
I planted them in a glass on the desk.  
The rations of glances of you  
I didn't know I had left.

## THREE

## MILKWEED

Shrivelled soft as the in-  
side of a Spaniel's ear, I am  
warbled like beaten  
copper. Black moonless  
nights formed me.  
Mind of winter. A finger  
left out in the cold.

## THE COLD

aches the windowsill and sweeps the field,  
husks the milkweed, blues the corn, is after  
the flint of your wrist with the same grey  
tendrils that slows sap in the living quarter  
inch of wet laburnum. Call it fleet. Call it  
the sense, turning your head in a high wind,  
all this time someone has been singing from  
the treeline. It winnows at the keyhole, would  
blow out the ember and sweep the dust of you,  
who sits in the brittle heat of a cast iron stove  
thinking the sky is so vast you had better  
wrap your child in amber: brief in her bed  
as the cold smell of rain on a stone.



## TUNNEL WALKING

1994

In a quarter-mile tunnel bored  
through the heart of a hill, the lock keeper  
lifted me high enough to feel the stone  
our narrow boat slid under like an arm  
through a sleeve. He said there used to be  
men who would lay on their backs,  
feet fit to the bricks of the ceiling,  
pedalling their cargo through the dark.  
How steam would replace them,  
but not in time to save even one man  
falling from the roofs of the boats  
like meat from a bone. I stared down  
into the water. Pale faces stared back up.

1999

The lock keeper sat in his basement  
tracing his history back through the records  
until the records gave way to a sound,  
I imagined, like the cool exhalation of air  
from the model train tunnels he'd cut  
into the walls. He hummed a song  
I recognised, but couldn't place, whenever  
we drank from the mugs for brushes he used  
to paint the miniature city behind his desk.  
When he flicked them on with a little  
white switch, I'd picture myself staring  
back from one of the tiny windows.  
I buried that sound when I was young,

2014

it pulses under the work I do  
like the roar when you cover your ears  
or the rain clouds above one of those men  
laying in a bright field, practising the sky  
forward as steam poured from his eyes  
like the shallow barrels of a gun.  
I think about him. About the last time  
I saw the lock keeper – painting himself  
deeper inside his miniature city, singing  
in baritone as he fixed the moon to a wire.  
About the sound, like a forest's heart after  
a storm, of water dripping through moss  
and loam. Of voyages we make alone.

## AT THE SURABAYA ZOO

The last eyes retreat. A shiftwork  
of waiting for food until morning begins,

when she's led from the brick  
hutch to the pens. Nearby, a bear

stares brokenly at some apples.  
Day opens. She stretches out again.

White tigers are especially rare. Look  
how white she is, how fine her tail,

how black the stripes that leap  
braille for her violence and force—

the titillation of a hungry shadow  
loping through a field of snow.

Her wings are striking: what becomes  
of corded haunches as the fat burns

out of them like a starved queen gobbling  
the leather off her throne. So thin

you could make a wish, run around the yard  
flopping those two gaunt things.

At least that violence is quick. Better  
than the saint of neglect who sits

beside her with his reverse eyes weeping.  
Send a deer by. Clap. Open the gates.

They make a sound she can't hear.  
Someone's taken or amputated her ears.

## ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

At this height, the rays of light grow  
straighter, splitting cloud

cover, making mountains lighter  
in their burden. Francis spreads

his wings, a faint V ferrying up  
the dead and leaving each

accumulated sorrow to fall back  
in rain like salt fermenting mist.

For the living, who sleep in the mist.  
Red Wolf, Black Rhino, the Dusky

Sparrow. Too heavy? Too many.  
Francis, who won't stop working,

works with the broken neck of a swan.  
Something must be wrong.

## M. ISABEL WELLWOOD

Her children hid their scraps  
under the lip of the table.  
I felt for them with a finger.  
The silverware looked unwell.

Small stars or empty citadels,  
her things busy collapsing  
in on themselves. Soon  
they'd turn their faces within.

In her hospice bed, she heard  
a wild blue boar stamping  
on the cover of a well. The final  
sound was a hull, knocking.

There used to be a painting  
on that wall of a figure  
standing by a lamp in the rain.  
I put my finger over the hole

left by a nail in the plaster  
and heard the face of things  
hesitating, the passenger ships  
sailing slowly from the earth.

## BIG RED HILLS

And in the wide field of corn  
he set his easel down. In small  
measures applied the yellow  
and watched the yellow harden.

Hard, he thought, to capture  
the corn, the trepidation  
of the baskets, each of them  
waiting to be borne away.

The sun set slowly like a match  
lowered in glass, a thought,  
which he decided was too rich,  
and left alone. As, one at a time,

out of the gloam, the carriers  
came to carry away the corn,  
set in baskets, ready to be borne,  
as the yellow hardened. And in

his heart, he felt it, the permanent  
thorn of trying, even as it was  
borne away, to capture the corn.  
So took the canvas from the easel

and let the easel frame: the carriers  
carrying the corn away, leaving  
nothing but the big red hills,  
the bones of the big red hills.

## MIRROR, I KNOW

The gate is open.  
A few corridors of yellow in the buildings,  
the red-black wax of maples.  
Night with a mouthful of feathers.

Silver balloons  
cast thin tines of dusted white light  
where each line-up ends at a telescope  
pointed like a finger at the sky.

I could be whale  
watching as the planets turn, pebbling  
their bellies along clouds that seem  
close as water bulged in a ceiling.

But it's oil. And heat.  
Emanations of faces that leave  
after-images like embers in the night field.  
The line shortens. A girl with a flash

light turns circles  
around her mother: when she glances at me  
the blades of her features glow. Mirror,  
I know. I don't want to have to go.

## CHROMOPHILIA

One drunk night watching  
solar flowers on a hillside in the prairies,  
a poet told me an elegy will swim into the ocean  
until you either fall together underneath the water  
or swim back ashore, where life, she said is waiting.

I could see the town she was  
talking about: the weathered blue door,  
the black boots beside it. Good boots. Worn.  
For the black of the boots, for the blue of the door,  
for a long time I thought it was the dead who asked

for colour. I studied painting,  
bought illustrated guides on the history  
of art and fed them scraps like a school of fish  
in my desk drawer. I went back again and again  
to galleries for colours: the yellow of a saint's upturned

eyes, the bright kingfisher  
raising itself by the sketch of a branch  
in its beak, one brother bearing his twin other  
through shallow water from one shore to another.  
I sat, early in the morning, watching the sun lift blue

from the grey of the page  
and the final red like breath returned  
to a drowned figure's cheeks. And in the sun  
I wrote pale poems: flat, personless poems, hating  
how flat light can be. It was a long time ago I felt them

let my ankles go, but I caught them  
by the hand, put my ear to their mouths,  
and wrote. It's me who swims now: for the black  
of the boots, the blue of the door, for my brother's  
driftwood body where I left it tumbling on the shore.

## THE UNFINISHED POEM

Run the dry fountains blue,  
set a red leaf on fire with a brick.  
They say one brushstroke changes the composition.  
It's true. Ink rains through the cupboards

outlining, where I could not, you—  
who always changes, shifting like the coast  
where a tugboat trawls the only evidence of a line  
between the horizon and sky.

My brother said when he read  
the new work, he felt like he was standing outside.  
But I invented the wet pine fire that brought  
the thin tine of the ranger's lantern so persistently

it shines between the lines of these poems.  
I've entered an age of recovery. And not like before.  
When I thought the dead left some part of me unsaid  
and sifted their rivers for tongues. Now?

Others return. The boy who climbed  
away on a silver rope, the addict in bed with eyes  
like curtains blown out a window as cars reflected  
in miniature on the ceiling drove in

and out of his head. When I try  
again, and fail, to plant the evening with its prayer,  
I climb toward the finished poem—though it startles  
up the staircase of itself like a firefly into the air.



## ASHMOLEAN RINGS

People like clay less than painting.  
 The museum's pushed back east wing  
 is not where the best windows are.  
 But the cabinets are crowded—  
 vases cluster behind their glass  
 like orphans waiting for a train.  
 A small flock of glances hovers  
 before the cordoned off display,  
 while crowds push inside the forests  
 painted in the adjacent room.  
 Dreams collected in this fork's tines:  
 what its owner (a bishop) craved,  
 the vows to himself he bandaged  
 carefully, each morning, the red  
 stains of beets on his wooden teeth—  
 unlike the painting where we can  
 always see the painter dimly  
 losing bet after bet to time.  
 We are given little glimpses,  
 can put them down to the sunlight,  
 the ring's shadow under a ring,  
 a ghost's finger jutting forward  
 and fifty years they wore the ring  
 erased whenever daylight drifts  
 through the window disfiguring  
 what the bishop heard after dusk.

Gold as honey but fat as slugs,  
 some rings look too big for fingers.  
 My watch with the glowing numbers,  
 how a child played with her toy horse  
 in the final evenings of Rome:  
 every time that we lose something  
 or some thing is lifted away  
 a shadow is left behind it.  
 Kids are fat with time as butter,  
 but old men are mostly shadows.  
 The pieces move across the board  
 like midnight crossing a table  
 where light perched to wash its feathers.  
 The sun sets, painters place their bets,  
 bishops swim from the tines of forks,  
 and the darkness rinses its tongue  
 in preparation for eating  
 today's heart out of tomorrow.

It's not a practical table.

It looks like a peacock's bright tail.  
 Each object a constellation,  
 each has a violin's bow held  
 against its face: you look to make  
 out what song the player will play.  
 Glint of silver, glint of a life,  
 it all goes under the hillside  
 until some little girl fishes  
 a garnet feather from the dirt.  
 In the red washes of the long  
 panel painting of a fox hunt,  
 ten riders ride into the dark,  
 except for one, who is riding  
 away from the trees with a hand  
 held up like a lantern shining.  
 The dark swallows. He lost his ring.  
 His love lies in another room  
 full of paintings, but he keeps on  
 lighting the impossible length  
 it would take to break from the paint.

At the centre of the forest  
 the fox pants in a hollow root.  
 The leaves shiver. Looking away,  
 distracted by all the sunlight,  
 the painter dashes between trees  
 and continues with his painting.  
 But staring into the canvas,  
 unable to do more than stare,  
 to run a finger over their lips  
 in the symbol of a lemon,  
 the painting makes itself a ghost  
 of the figure at its window.  
 Turning around, looking outside,  
 our own end remains hard to see—  
 just the birds pulling out the pins  
 that have pinned down the scenery.  
 The bishop sits mute with his fork.  
 The hunter holds his lamp so still  
 the paint around his hand is cracked.  
 That intruder shouldn't be here,  
 but he has come along with us:  
 however the curtains might part,  
 however the hunter might try  
 warming his hands by the firelight,  
 time drifted in the paint and froze.  
 A sun held just under the tongue,  
 a candle's glow against the teeth,  
 the painter smiles into the frame.  
 The hunter's lamp is lit with eyes.

It's only a mile to the Thames,  
past the hard bones of the bishop,  
who wouldn't, looking up, have known  
fire meditated in his floor.  
By the time it might get to us,  
the smoke has already blown off  
from the fires on the horizon.  
What was, what is, but cannot stay:  
the old song keeps alternating  
like sound and silence on the page.  
If it's lost then it is a world  
and this one moves a bit quicker  
than the string of newborn goslings,  
and slower than the greying weir  
losing its way under the oaks.  
A young couple labours their boat  
up the hillside with the canal,  
as night gathers inside the locks.  
What is left behind is as slight  
as what shadows are left to sing  
from lamps in the forest's heart  
and the windows that blink open  
in a gold Ashmolean ring.

## THE THREE COINS DINER

Eggs over easy. Buttered rye toast.  
Coffee pours warm and goes quickly cold.

Behind the counter, cooks' hats glide;  
crumpled birds on a lake of smoke.

The sun rises like an elevator button  
in a bank of office windows, where,

half-hidden under the arms of a fire  
escape, a young cook times his break

with a poorly hidden fifth of whiskey.  
I pay. Take a mint from a little bowl.

The dishwasher looks up, enveloped  
in a cloud of lime-scented steam.

Let the dream be taken from me this way:  
lift my jacket off the peg and head

back into the corridors of snow  
as the tunnel opens and diner doors,

behind me, chime themselves closed.  
A face, yes. A lamp in the window.

## HE'LL COME TOO

One day we wake to find our bodies a house—  
rooms swaddled in linens, the doors locked.  
But someone waves. It's the future! Maybe.  
The promise, in time, of a new body. And if  
the limbs aren't quite right, that'll be okay.  
And if the unexplored touch of the designers  
fails to upload, that's alright. And if the desire  
to escape death was a boy, then he'll come too.  
A point might come when the machines will  
self-repair: tin-can limbs and copper wire feet  
scraping over earth. A collector among them,  
maybe, who will pick up fossils and bones.  
Shards of glass, words, and other old stones.

**THE POETICS OF PERCEPTION  
IN THE JOURNALS  
OF R.F. LANGLEY**

## Introduction:

### The Field of Attention – R.F. Langley’s Journals

In the sequence you never really get in touch with things, they stay way off at the end of your skin while you are looking for the next one to touch... hand on the wall, small flowers in the mortar, what you are doing is trying to contact and by ‘contact’ all I can mean is ‘make available for full recall’ which itself involves feeling it as here and real, not slurring through it looking a-head. Keep the thing kicking so that there is no sequence but a network in space all alive and as fresh there.<sup>1</sup>

The above excerpt is taken from R.F. Langley’s earliest published journal entry, 19 August 1970, in the journals he kept from 1969 to 2010.<sup>2</sup> The awareness in the excerpt that the ‘living’ instance of a particular thing, like ‘small flowers in the mortar’, might be overwhelmed by the process of observation itself, can be located within Langley’s concern throughout the journals that the ‘instance’ of his own direct experience might in some way be collapsed into the knowledge which might be brought to bear on it.<sup>3</sup> His self-stated project of making ‘contact’ with the outside world, and the things of that world, is also necessarily a linguistic one, as it takes place in the context of experience recollected in language: ‘contact’, as Langley writes, is a matter of ‘recall’.<sup>4</sup> The question of how direct experience recollected in language might be kept ‘alive and as fresh as there’ is, this dissertation argues, central to the journals.<sup>5</sup> This short passage introduces perceptual and linguistic concerns which I

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<sup>1</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘The Self is Gone’, *PN Review*, 248.45 (2019) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=10527](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=10527)> [accessed 4 January 2020] (para. 8 of 16).

<sup>2</sup> The journals, a selection of which were first published by Shearsman as *Journals* in 2006, continue to be published posthumously by Langley’s widow, Barbara, in *PN Review*, after Langley’s death in 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Langley, ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16. The ‘instance’ is a term used throughout this dissertation in two, related senses: (1) to refer to the ‘instance’ of direct experience, conceived of phenomenologically as our experience of the world as it is revealed to us by our senses, and (2) to the ‘instance’ of a chosen point of attention within that experience, for example an insect, bird, plant, built space, or artwork. In both cases the ‘instance’ refers to direct perceptual experience, the difference is whether the focus is broad (direct experience as a whole) or narrower (a given thing within that experience). This term is distinguished from, and counterposed with, the ‘continuum’, which can refer to any of several elements that might mediate the ‘instance’ of our direct experience, which include, but are not limited to, prior knowledge, history, or the self. I will return to the ‘instance’ and the ‘continuum’ as terms in greater detail at the beginning of Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

<sup>5</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

propose the journals negotiate over the course of the forty years they cover. In doing so, they produce a poetics of perception concerned with how knowledge might texture but not collapse the ‘instance’ of direct experience, and how language itself might resist and negotiate this potential collapse.<sup>6</sup>

Langley, who started publishing poetry in 1978, was an established poet by the time excerpts of his journals were first published in *PN Review* in 2002. In 2006, Shearsman published a selection of journal entries from 1970 to 2005, and divided the entries by decade.<sup>7</sup> In order to better map the formation and development of the perceptual dilemmas which I propose the journals explore, I divide the journal entries into an early period (1970-1991) and a late period (1992-2010). Dividing the journals in this way is not to suggest that Langley’s thought does not undergo change within those periods *or* that it undergoes a sudden shift in 1991. However, as the first chapter of this dissertation explores, Langley does develop new ways in the 1990s of negotiating the perceptual dilemmas which his early journals propose.<sup>8</sup>

In the preface to the selection of entries published by Shearsman as *Journals* (2006), Langley distinguishes the journals from his poetry: ‘these journals have run alongside the poetry that I have been publishing during the same period. This is not an accident. Sometimes the poems feed directly off the journals, but they have to do with experience in their own way’.<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Noel-Tod, who edited Langley’s *Complete Poems* (2015), writes that the journals should ‘not, therefore, be regarded as “first draft” poems, although readers will [...] discover

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<sup>6</sup> By ‘collapse’, a term which I use throughout this dissertation, I refer to the potential for the various ‘continua’ of self, prior knowledge, and history, to in some way obscure, override, or overwhelm the ‘instance’ of direct experience.

<sup>7</sup> Specifically, 1970-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2005.

<sup>8</sup> This division of the journals also aligns with the longest break in Langley’s poetry publishing career, between ‘Mariana’ (1985) and ‘Man Jack’ (1993), and his poetry, as Jeremy Noel-Tod writes, ‘underwent a distinctive stylistic shift in the 1980s’, ‘Dramatic Monologue: R. F. Langley and the Poem of “Anyone in Particular”’, in *Forms of Late Modernist Lyric*, ed. by Edward Allen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), pp. 215-242 (p. 229). Langley does not explicitly mention a shift in the journals in the 1990s, however he opens the August 1992 journal entry: ‘So long since I wrote. A year. Who cares?’, R.F. Langley, *Journals* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2006), p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Journals*, p. 7. Throughout this dissertation I will refer to the journals published in *PN Review* and the Shearsman *Journals* collectively as the ‘journals’.



correspondences between the poems and the entries that appeared in *Journals* and in *PN Review* magazine'.<sup>10</sup> The journals, as Mark Byers notes, 'are works in their own right and often approach problems of perception and knowledge with the same rigour as the poems'.<sup>11</sup> This dissertation explores the 'way' the journals have to do with experience, not as rough work for the poems, but as a site where Langley works out a poetics of perception in language which addresses its ways of looking in its ways of saying. This 'poetics of perception', I argue, both informs, and is taken up and restructured by, his poems.<sup>12</sup>

Reading the journals in terms of a poetics of perception both aligns with, and departs from, existing critical discussion of the journals. Peter Larkin and Stephen Benson locate the journals in an English tradition of journal and essay writing which includes Dorothy Wordsworth, John Ruskin, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and J.A. Baker.<sup>13</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, in 'All the Animals in My Poems Go into the Ark' (2016) puts the journals briefly into conversation with those of Hopkins and Ruskin as examples of similarly 'energized' prose which shares borders with the poetry of their author.<sup>14</sup> Benson, meanwhile, notes that Langley further 'inflects this inheritance [of the 'loose' tradition outlined above] with his reading in phenomenology and psychoanalysis, each understood as a form of descriptive attending to experience'.<sup>15</sup> I argue that more than just an 'inflection', Langley's engagement with phenomenology and psychoanalysis constitutes a second line of inheritance in its own right. Not only is this second line of inheritance clearly established in the bibliographical record to the poems, which Noel-Tod compiled from the three notebooks in which Langley recorded

<sup>10</sup> R.F. Langley, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jeremy Noel-Tod (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015), p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Byers, 'R.F. Langley: Seeing Things', *English*, 66.255 (2017), 331-350 (p. 344).

<sup>12</sup> I have chosen to refer to 'ways of looking' and not 'ways of seeing' throughout this dissertation, because the former carries with it connotations of volition and purposefulness which align with my focus on Langley's attentional practice.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Larkin, 'Being Seen for Seeing: A Tribute to R.F. Langley's Journals', *Intercapillary Space* (2008) <<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2008/08/being-seen-for-seeing-tribute-to-r-f.html>> [accessed February 2021]; Stephen Benson, 'Description's Repertoire: The *Journals* of R.F. Langley', *English*, 67 (2018), 43-63.

<sup>14</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, 'All the Animals in My Poems Go into the Ark', *Poetry*, 207.4 (2016), 409-25 (p. 412).

<sup>15</sup> Benson, pp. 43-44.

the sources of poems (and is included in the *Complete Poems*), but phenomenology, as a philosophy of perception, also offers a crucial reference point for understanding the poetics of perception which Langley develops in the journals.<sup>16</sup> This dissertation builds upon this second line of inheritance, particularly in the second chapter where I read the journals in terms of how they offer a deepening understanding of Langley's engagement with phenomenology.<sup>17</sup>

British psychoanalyst Marion Milner's *A Life of One's Own* (1934) is one of the most frequently cited books in the bibliographic record to the poems, and sits at a juncture between the phenomenological and psychoanalytic lines of influence mentioned above. An edited version of a series of journals which Milner kept for seven years, *A Life of One's Own* is the result, as Benson writes, of her 'decision to abandon psychoanalytic theory, temporarily, for a more direct observation of the self and its experience of the world'.<sup>18</sup> This decision would produce, in its detailed accounts of the perceptual dilemmas attendant to attempting to experience the world more directly, a work of applied phenomenology. *A Life of One's Own* can be read as an essential influence on Langley's own journal writing in terms of providing precedent and roadmap to how a journal might be used to explore the perceptual concerns of an attentional practice in language which in turn enlivens, and deepens, that practice.<sup>19</sup> This dissertation draws Milner's own attentional and journaling practices into conversation with

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<sup>16</sup> Philosophers and phenomenologists Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger, each appear in Noel-Tod's bibliographical record, as do psychoanalysts Marion Milner, Melanie Klein, and Sigmund Freud. See *Complete Poems*, pp. 163-174.

<sup>17</sup> While Langley's journals can certainly be located in the traditions of English journal and nature writing that includes Wordsworth, Ruskin, and Hopkins, the focus of this dissertation is on describing and mapping the perceptual concerns and preoccupations that develop out of the attentional practice which the journals record, first, and how they are problematized by, and negotiated within, the linguistic field of the journals, second. These concerns, I propose, insofar as they have to do with how we perceive, are phenomenological in nature and thereby particularly well-suited to a phenomenological reading and to be put in conversation with the second line of inheritance I propose for Langley.

<sup>18</sup> Benson, p. 334. Milner also often features in critical discussion of Langley's poems: for example, in Noel-Tod's discussion of the inspiration for 'Jack', the central figure of the *Jack* sequence of poems which Langley composed in the 1990s, and in Byers' discussion of Langley and Milner's shared epistemological 'ambivalence' about 'indirect or propositional knowledge', Byers, p. 333. See Noel-Tod, 'Dramatic Monologue', p. 232.

<sup>19</sup> By attentional practice I refer to Langley's practice of looking, the 'intense looking which', as Noel-Tod writes, 'is so often the occasion of Langley's *Journals*, 'Dramatic Monologue', p. 216. The journals themselves demonstrate that this intense looking is very much a practice; journal entries across the breadth of the period of time the journals record, and which this dissertation explores, describe Langley's ongoing attempts at inquiring into and honing his own attention. Quoted by Noel-Tod in his introduction to the *Complete Poems*, fellow Cambridge poet and friend J.H. Prynne writes of how Langley's 'alertness to perception was enhanced by a studied practice of taking up an immobile, silent stance [...] to open his gaze and thoughts over an extended period', *Complete Poems*, p. xiii.

those of Langley, in both the close reading at the end of this introduction and in the first chapter's discussion of Langley's attentional practice.

I explore the ways in which Langley describes using his journalling practice to reflect on and deepen his attentional practice, but also the ways in which the language of the journals is enlivened by features of the attentional practice it describes. As such, my work can be read in relation to critical discussion which also considers features of the journals' prose. Benson offers a detailed reading of the *Journals* in order 'to enumerate the rhythms and figures of Langley's prose' as 'a test case for description's new found contemporaneity'.<sup>20</sup> I also consider what Benson describes as the 'sentience' of the prose, and Ravinthiran calls its 'molecular wonders', but in the context of the way in which the prose of the journals is particularised in the act of describing the particular without, as Conor Carville writes, 'having a human subjectivity foisted on it'.<sup>21</sup> While Byers considers how 'Langley's epistemological concerns are worked out [in the journals] at the level of prose device', and examines how features of the prose demonstrate Langley's negotiation of modernist concerns with perception and knowledge, I will be situating my approach in the phenomenological contexts mentioned above.<sup>22</sup>

My work in part aligns itself with those writers who, as Benson notes, have looked at the 'illumination of Langley's poetry by his prose, and vice versa'.<sup>23</sup> Like Carville, in "'The Degree of Power Exercised": Recent Ekphrasis' (2013), and Jack Belloli in 'So Smart and Tight: a Review of R.F. Langley's *Complete Poems*' (2016) and 'Bruno Latour and R.F. Langley' (2017), I am interested in the way that the poems can be seen to not only refer to the

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<sup>20</sup> Benson, p. 45.

<sup>21</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 413; Benson, p. 54; Conor Carville, "'The Degree of Power Exercised": Recent Ekphrasis', in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 286-302 (p.287).

<sup>22</sup> Byers, pp. 344-345.

<sup>23</sup> Benson, p. 45.

experiences recorded in the journals, but to take up and restructure aspects of the poetics which Langley explores in the journals. The correspondences I develop between the journals and the poems often call attention to where their perceptual and linguistic concerns intersect. In some regards, my work most closely resembles that of David-Antoine Williams in ‘Etymological Recirculation in Seamus Heaney, R.F. Langley, and J.H. Prynne’ (2021). This is in part because Williams, through his theory of ‘etymological recirculation’ (which proposes that etymology becomes a way for Langley to ‘recirculate the historical into the subjective, and vice versa’), demonstrates one of the ways in which Langley negotiates his concern that his writing ‘get the outside world in’.<sup>24</sup> Specifically, a way in which knowledge, in this case etymology, on the one hand, might *texture* the direct experience and, on the other, how direct experience might enliven a body of knowledge. Yet while the etymological dimension of Langley’s writings is the focus of Williams’ work, I focus on the perceptual and linguistic dilemmas which Langley, in part, negotiates through his use of etymology.

My reading of the journals is also suggested and shaped by Langley’s own, albeit few, comments on the journals and his compositional practice for the poems, as well as critical discussion surrounding the poems themselves. More allusive than definitive, Langley’s own comments on his compositional practice nonetheless highlight some of the concerns which I propose the journals explicitly take up: for example, with how his poems might be textured by, but not collapsed into the source materials, like the journals, which inform them. Critical discussion has called attention to features of the poems which highlight and bring into focus the concerns of the journals. These comments and critical discussion have to do with the poems, but are also valuable in bringing sharper focus to some of the shared concerns of the

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<sup>24</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed by R.F. Walker’, in *Don’t Start Me Talking*, ed. by Tim Allen and Andrew Duncan (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), pp. 237–257 (p. 244); David-Antoine Williams, *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 114.

poems and journals, and ways in which they explore aspects of a common poetics. I begin with a brief explanation of how the critical discussion around the poems suggests both a way of reading the journals and a set of questions that can be asked about them, before shifting my attention directly to Langley's own comments about the journals and compositional practice.

Much critical attention has been paid to the apparent purposefulness with which a Langley poem seems to at once invite and rebuff interpretation. Peter Riley describes the poems in terms of their 'particular form of refusal, [their] particular balance between saying and withholding'.<sup>25</sup> Williams writes that 'once the structure [of a poem] is established', the reader is left with '[a] surface rendering of natural imagery, literary and historical reference and allusion, and lyric contemplation and reflection'.<sup>26</sup> Belloli reads the 'rendered' surface of the poetry as 'Langley's implicit invitation to see poetics as a mode of holistic reading', one that 'demands as much attention to the previous line in the poem as to what's happening in a hedge or to Wollheim's *Painting as an Art* and – more challengingly – demands that these different forms of attention inflect one another'.<sup>27</sup> Byers proposes, in the case of the early poem 'The Upshot' (1984), that the 'emptiness' the speaker requires of themselves to apprehend the immediate reality of the poppy-head bench ends is 'a state of mind' the poem, in not divulging its internal references, also demands of the reader.<sup>28</sup> Williams' 'surface rendering' can also be read as *surface tension*, in that Langley's poems seem to invite the reader to explore their allusive surfaces in a manner not unlike that ascribed by Langley to

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Riley, *A Poetry in Favour of the World* (London: Form Books, 1997), n. pag.

<sup>26</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> Belloli here refers to British philosopher Richard Wollheim, whose works, beginning with *The Thread of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), begin to appear in Noel-Tod's bibliographic record to Langley's *Complete Poems* with the later poem 'The Barber's Beard' (1997). Belloli refers specifically to Wollheim's *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), which is frequently cited in the bibliographic record for Langley's later poems and which he, as I take up in the first chapter of this dissertation, referred to in interview in the context of his conception of the formal elements of his later poetry. Jack Belloli, 'So smart and tight: a review of R.F. Langley's *Complete Poems*', *3:AM Magazine* (2016) <<https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/so-smart-and-tight-a-review-of-r-f-langleys-complete-poems/>> [accessed 1 July 2022] (para. 5 of 20).

<sup>28</sup> Byers, pp. 336-337.

painter John Middleton's 'Study of Rock and Trees' (1847): "'Know this", it says. "Know this and that makes at least two of us who do"''.<sup>29</sup>

Riley argues that with 'his skill', Langley could have made it clear in his poetry 'what the occasion is and let [their] figurations expound themselves in a more linked mode or one to which the reader would be more of a witness'.<sup>30</sup> He offers his close reading of 'The Upshot' in 'wilful ignorance of the information about it given in [...] interview', in order to develop answers to why, given his skill, Langley 'doesn't [...] invite the reader into the picture'.<sup>31</sup>

Riley proposes that one effect of Langley withholding the 'links' and references within poems is that the 'moments' of which they are comprised are 'no longer "his" moments' and 'can enter a different life because they are not trapped in a circumstance'.<sup>32</sup> The 'discrete' units of the poem thereby become 'unrecognised instances' that ask the reader 'to find them a home'.<sup>33</sup> I call attention to this particular vein of the critical discussion of Langley's poetry because of what it suggests about his source materials: that the poems appear interested in being textured by, but not collapsed back to, the materials of their own composition. This dissertation looks specifically at how this is an interest that is also a central concern of the journals and which thereby represents a poetics common to both.

As Noel-Tod makes clear, while the notebooks from which he compiled the bibliography to the poems do not 'contain the complete account of any poem's inspiration', they do set out Langley's 'main sources of material for composition'.<sup>34</sup> These sources comprise the

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<sup>29</sup> *Journals*, p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> Riley refers to Langley's 1996 interview with R.F. Walker, 'R.F. Langley Interviewed by R. F. Walker', collected in the previously cited collection of interviews, *Don't Start Me Talking*, Riley, n. pag. Daniel Eltringham, similarly, argues that Langley's 'extremely deft [and] difficult' poetry suggests its 'privileged moments of subjectivity' are a matter of 'structural insistence'. Daniel Eltringham, "'The idea of the bird": Bird Books, the Problem of Taxonomy, and Some Poems by R.F. Langley', *PN Review*, 210.39 (2013), 50-53 (p. 50).

<sup>31</sup> Riley, n. pag.

<sup>32</sup> Riley, n. pag.

<sup>33</sup> Riley, n. pag.

<sup>34</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 158.

autobiographical (the journals), the bibliographical (the various, and often diverse, texts which are cited for a given poem), and the etymological (material which Langley drew, primarily, from fourth edition of Walter W. Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* [1910]).<sup>35</sup> The diversity of sources for a given poem offers an unusually detailed sense of Langley's field and range of reference. Langley's comment that his poems 'keep reworking the same territory' can be extended to his source materials: the journals often return to the same locations (the rural landscapes and churches of Suffolk, for example), while the same authors, and often specific texts (like Milner's *A Life of One's Own* and Wollheim's *Painting as an Art*) recur across the bibliographic record.<sup>36</sup> Langley's comments suggest that the autobiographical, the experience recorded in the journals, occupied a primary position in his poetry.

In interview, Langley indicates that he wants his poems 'to be transparent and get the outside world in: first of all from the stuff that goes into the journals'.<sup>37</sup> The journals are 'inspired', in the sense of being prompted by, the experiences which they record, but they are also, as Williams points out, 'the experience of the experience': they at once refer to experience and, by allowing for further reflection, often informed by Langley's own reading, re-experience the experience.<sup>38</sup> The poems, in this sense, are at least two steps removed from the experience they hold at their 'centre', and it follows that there are two, albeit interrelated, sources of inspiration at play in a given poem: the 'inspiring' portion of a given journal entry, and the experience to which the journal refers.<sup>39</sup> We might return, here, to the excerpt quoted at the

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<sup>35</sup> David-Antoine Williams notes that while Langley referred to his copy of Skeat's dictionary as the 1916 edition, personal communication with Langley's family revealed that he in fact owned the 1910 'New Edition Revised and Enlarged' fourth edition, 1963 impression, David-Antoine Williams, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 244.

<sup>37</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 253.

<sup>38</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 118.

<sup>39</sup> A late poem like 'Cakes and Ale' (2000), set 'in the bar / on an outer planet' and populated by metal-wearing 'barbarians', itself questions the notion that the inspiration for *all* of Langley's poem lies within his own direct experience, *Complete Poems*, p. 77. Langley's 4 August 1990 journal entry does describe the washroom of a bar and the 'alien faces' of 'grass-moths on the green painted wall', *Journals*, p.51.

beginning of the thesis and say that, from the vantage of his poetry, to ‘make available for full recall’ might also be to ‘make available’ for re-inspiration.<sup>40</sup> On the assumption that the poems do, as Langley suggests, rely on the journals for the direct experience at their centre, one might say that the inspiration for the poems derives from this textual ‘encounter’.

Textual encounter would also seem to play a central role in Langley’s compositional practice, which he describes as potentially incorporating a number of such ‘encounters’. Langley’s response in interview to a question about his creative process offers further insight into the centrality of textual encounter to his writing:

I’ve usually got bits and pieces lying around, and sometimes over a period of 10 years or more, say a line or two, which got thrown aside from a previous piece, or an alternative start. Something that something might be made of. Sooner or later. And I pick up these and keep reading them. It’s that Valery business: that the poet is the reader of his own first line. You only need a first line and you read it again and you react to it like a reader would react to it and then that – it’s a composite business between you and the first line.<sup>41</sup>

If a poem is written from a scrap of another poem, which at some point drew on a journal entry, which itself referred to or described a direct experience, then a finished poem of Langley’s is potentially four times removed from the direct experience which it apparently contains. That direct experience exists at a distance to the finished poem is straightforward enough, but it is interesting that, despite the degrees of remove seemingly at play in Langley’s compositional practice, he still maintained his poems could be ‘transparent and get the outside world in’.<sup>42</sup> Given the potentially lengthy period of time between the writing of a ‘previous piece’ and when Langley re-encounters it as the potential material with which to start a new poem, we might say that a new poem begins with an encounter with an object

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<sup>40</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

<sup>41</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 255.

<sup>42</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 244.



possessed of the ‘bright particulars’ (as Langley wrote of the objects in his journals) of its own linguistic (e.g. sound and sense) and referential properties (the experiences or poems it might refer to).<sup>43</sup>

Langley likened words to leaves in both the journals and poems, and one can imagine these ‘pieces’ of previous drafts like ‘leaves’ left behind, or ‘fallen’ from the poems to which they originally belonged.<sup>44</sup> One could perhaps go even further and suggest that, by leaving ‘bits and pieces’ of poems around to be discovered ‘over a period of 10 years or more’, Langley places himself in a position to forget what he wrote and thus open to re-inspiration by the language and experience which a given piece contains.<sup>45</sup> In the prefatory ‘*Note* (1994)’ to the *Complete Poems*, which Belloli describes as ‘the closest that he wrote to a poetics’, Langley likens the position of the poet who responds as a reader would to their own first line to that of Robinson Crusoe on his apparently uninhabited island: ‘Crusoe standing thunderstruck, looking at the footprint, toes and heel, facing wide-reaching options’.<sup>46</sup> One might say that in terms of the compositional practice he describes, Langley places himself in a position to be surprised, looking at a ‘print’ in language and facing the ‘wide-reaching options’ of what might become a new poem.<sup>47</sup> This position is not unlike the one that Riley proposes the ‘instances’ of Langley’s poem place the reader in: instances which ask the reader to find a home for the referentiality they at once suggest and withhold.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, *PN Review*, 243.45 (2018) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=10295](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=10295)> [accessed 26 April 2020] (para. 2 of 10).

<sup>44</sup> See, specifically, the journal entry for November 1997, in which Langley talks about how the yellow leaves outside two sets of windows ‘speak’ in colours (*Journals*, pp. 82-84), and his 23 January 2007 journal entry in which he directly compares words and leaves, ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 5 of 10. Leaves and tongues also feature in many of the poems that were first collected in *The Face of It* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007); see, specifically, ‘After the Funeral’ (2002), and ‘Cash Point’ (2004), *Complete Poems*, pp. 93, 105.

Langley’s likening of leaves to words might also play on the definition of ‘page’ as a ‘leaf of a book’, derived, as noted in Skeat’s etymological dictionary, from the Latin *pagina* (a page, or leaf), so called because ‘the leaves were once made of strips of papyrus fastened together’, and thereby also related to the Latin *pangere* (to fasten) and ‘pact’; the leaf as a pact between world and word. Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, rev. and enl. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 422.

<sup>45</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> Belloli, ‘So smart and tight’, para. 7 of 20; *Complete Poems*, p. xvii.

<sup>47</sup> Belloli, ‘So smart and tight’, para. 7 of 20.

<sup>48</sup> Riley, n. pag.

That Langley maintains his poetry is transparent to the outside world, despite the chain of textualizations he describes reaching from direct experience through to the journals and the ‘starts’ of previous poems, is compelling in its own right. Equally interesting are the relational dynamics implicit in these textualizations. Whether as the reader of his own journal, a reader of an alternate start to a poem, or ‘of his own first line’, which he then reacts to ‘like a reader would react to it’, Langley places himself ‘outside’ the object of his attention.<sup>49</sup> He is then free to attend and respond to the textualizations not only as their author, but as he might the experience which inspired a given journal entry: as an object (like a scrap of poem dense with reference), or a landscape (as in a semantic and phonic ‘landscape’), like the ones he might encounter in his own direct experience.<sup>50</sup> Langley’s repositioning of himself in relation to his source material not just as an author but as a reader and observer, thereby free to respond to the experience of encountering (or re-encountering) a scrap of a poem as an object of attention, could also be said to prevent the collapse of that source material into some variety of ‘self’.

Langley’s comments about his compositional practice suggest that believes his poems could, despite being potentially several textual removes from it, still be ‘transparent’ to his own direct experience.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that the journals, the first textualizations of that direct experience, might also negotiate their own variety of ‘transparency’ to the world they describe. The concern which I propose the journals explore, with the potential for knowledge to collapse the ‘instance’ of direct experience, appears to be reflected in a compositional practice which seeks to in some way carry ‘the outside world’ into the poems through these

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<sup>49</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 255.

<sup>50</sup> In a 10 August 1982 journal entry, Langley curiously reflects on thoughts themselves as objects with existences outside the individuals who might think them: ‘I realise that I usually assume that the world if full of thoughts, spaced out in the air waiting for passing heads to entertain them’, *Journals*, p. 31.

<sup>51</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 244.

textualizations<sup>52</sup> Critical discussion of the poems, like that of Williams and Riley, suggests that they become something of their own ‘instance’: textured by, but not resolvable back to, the materials of their own composition.<sup>53</sup> The journals and poems, as Langley writes, ‘have to do with experience in their own way’, but Langley in part develops his poetics of perception in relation to this dilemma of the collapse of the ‘instance’ of direct experience, an interest in ways of looking which the journals, like the poems, take up in their ways of saying.<sup>54</sup> Before summarising the chapters of this thesis, I will first offer a close reading of the poem ‘Man Jack’ (1993), in order to demonstrate how the journals and poems can be read in terms of the perceptual concerns they share and negotiate.

The August 1992 journal entry cited in the bibliographic record for ‘Man Jack’ is concerned with things which seem to act as vessels, what those vessels hold, and the limits of their holding. The first ‘vessel’ is the setting itself. Westhall Church holds ‘the unspeakable standing of silence’, into which, through the doors and windows, as if gates to the building’s senses, comes ‘the scent of lime’ and ‘changes of light through each day, never losing connection with the whole world under the sky, but never less than complete’.<sup>55</sup> The nature of the vessel, the entry proposes, is twofold, at once connected to the world by what it gathers in, and a world unto itself: both linked to a macrocosm and itself a microcosm. Langley likens the church interior to the entry’s second vessel, grass heads ‘between me and the dropping sun’, which ‘carry heads of all I’ve ever seen of God’s fire’.<sup>56</sup> Present, too, are the implicit, and perhaps nested, vessels of memory and language: language which gathers into the ‘silence’ of the page sweet lime and fire from the ‘vessel’ of memory.

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<sup>52</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 244.

<sup>53</sup> Riley, n. pag.

<sup>54</sup> *Journals*, p. 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Journals*, p. 60.

<sup>56</sup> *Journals*, p. 61.

The way of looking which connects church interiors, grass heads, and by quiet implication, memory and language, calls attention to another, more unsettled, way of looking. ‘But, simultaneously, nowhere at all is so stark as just matter, as is uncommented Westhall’.<sup>57</sup> The notion that it is perhaps only ‘comment’ which constructs connection seems to travel back from the world to the writer and into language: Westhall appears ‘shrunk back on itself’, its colour faded, ‘brown with no red in it’, as the ‘skull in your head, knocked if tapped’, perhaps similarly filled only with the faded materials of memory.<sup>58</sup> ‘Grass heads burn, lucent, constant, lovely, silvergold sprays of thin, ranged flecks of flame, like water halted’: the prose turns fine as the sensation of the fingertips it describes touching the grasses.<sup>59</sup> But both language and touch are troubled in terms of whether they can make contact or are rebuffed by a ‘thinginess [that] is so dense, so alien [...] it dents your fingertips’.<sup>60</sup> The sensorial and linguistic overlap here in a shared anxiety as to whether they are points of contact with, or merely call attention to, the untraversable borders of the world.

A butterfly (of the species known as ‘holly blue’) rescues the entry from collapse into total isolation, in a way not unlike what Belloli proposes, quoting Langley’s early poem ‘Mariana’ (1985): ‘any subjective view will resist self-absorption because it will acknowledge that view’s inflection by the agency of other “seeing things”’.<sup>61</sup> Langley writes:

The blue of a holly blue, also out late, flitting by, quickly done, into the empty paleness of Bohun aisle, tall, whitewashed, dirty, cobwebbed, full of dead touches, yet here, still. Heartstopping littleness of the huge space. The unreasonable strength of everything which is nothing more. The Virgin’s flask. The glass carafe. Precious free electricity, one coin to light every window ever.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Journals*, p. 61.

<sup>58</sup> *Journals*, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> *Journals*, p. 61; Ravinthiran refers to moments of such density in Langley’s writing as its ‘molecular wonders’, places where the language itself, to borrow from the entry, takes on a dense ‘thinginess’, Ravinthiran, p. 418.

<sup>60</sup> *Journals*, p. 61.

<sup>61</sup> *Journals*, p.8; Jack Belloli, ‘Bruno Latour and R. F. Langley’, *Religion and Literature*, 49.2 (2017), 266-276 (p. 268).

<sup>62</sup> *Journals*, pp. 61-62.

Here Langley alludes to ‘The Parable of the Ten Virgins’ from Matthew 25, in a rare biblical reference: a parable in which five of ten virgins carry oil in flasks to light their lamps when it is dark. The presence of the allusion is suggestive, not explicative. The vessels to which the journal entry attends contain what is not *strictly* present within them—sweet lime, daylight, and ‘fire’ from elsewhere: they luminesce with absences that are a part of their own presence. The vessels in the journal entry at once gather in what is elsewhere and are outpourings of those things: in this sense, we might say they have both oil and flame, their own ‘precious free electricity’.<sup>63</sup>

‘Man Jack’ is part of the five poems in the *Jack* sequence—together with ‘Jack’s Pigeon’, ‘Poor Moth’, ‘The Barber’s Beard’, and ‘Tom Thumb’—collected first as an Equipage pamphlet in 1998. The *Jack* poems arrive after the longest hiatus in Langley’s publishing career (between ‘Mariana’ [1985] and ‘Man Jack’ [1993]), and extend from what Noel-Tod refers to as ‘the distinctive stylistic shift [his work underwent] in the 1980s’, which saw him exploring new persona and compositional strategies.<sup>64</sup> ‘Man Jack’ introduces *Jack*, the dramatic figure who runs across (and perhaps between) a sequence of poems made unusual, in part, for having the same figure run through them. Asked in interview for a ‘thread outside the labyrinth’ of the poem, Langley noted a ‘telephone call that Barbara [...] made to Jane from a telephone box at night with an owl sitting on the telephone pole watching us do it’.<sup>65</sup> That autobiographical source material is in the poem; midway through the piece, notably, we find: ‘The owl watches as we try a / phonecall from the isolated box’.<sup>66</sup> But as Noel-Tod writes, Jack himself can be read as ‘a projection of rapid perception, an idea partly suggested to Langley by Marion Milner’s book *A Life of One’s Own*’, in which she proposes a small

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<sup>63</sup> *Journals*, pp. 61–62.

<sup>64</sup> Noel-Tod, ‘Dramatic Monologue’, p. 229.

<sup>65</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 248.

<sup>66</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 6.

mobile point of her own attention which can be sent out into the world to fetch the instances of her own ‘intense delight’ and which she practises ‘once on a night journey in a train’.<sup>67</sup> It is there, in Jack as a figure of perception, that the links between the Westhall entry and the poem begin to disclose themselves. The poem, like the journal entry, is concerned with vessels nested within vessels, as both it and Jack are vessels for the materials of their own composition. Langley himself notes ‘you know who Jack is don’t you? he’s that little figure you see running alongside beside the train jumping over the hedges’:<sup>68</sup>

So Jack’s your man, Jack is your man in things.  
And he must come along, and he must stay  
close, be quick and right, your little cousin  
Jack, a step ahead, deep in the hedge [...]<sup>69</sup>

Taken as a figure of attention, the reason that Jack, ‘the errand boy’, has ‘nothing up his sleeve’ is because his errand is one of attention.<sup>70</sup> Langley’s 1992 journal entry, cited in the bibliographical record for the poem, is concerned with whether the world(s) that vessels, like grass heads, language, and memory, seem to contain are in fact presences within them. Jack, in the poems, acts as sort of emissary between world and word: “‘Today we’ll have [...] those other /apples’”, ‘he’ll fetch them in and put them roughly / in a row. The scent will almost be a presence / in the room’.<sup>71</sup> In this sense, Jack is born of perceptual experience, but also, as Langley notes, of language, as part of his inspiration was ‘the dozens of columns’ in the *OED* for the word ‘Jack’.<sup>72</sup> Jack, as the bibliographic record and Langley’s comments indicate, is,

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<sup>67</sup> Noel-Tod, ‘Dramatic Monologue’, p. 232; Marion Milner (‘Joanna Field’), *A Life of One’s Own* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 46-47. See, also, Langley’s 3 May 1998 journal entry, in he describes his introduction to the ‘three Jack poems’ at a reading in Cambridge: ‘I [...] tell them about Marion Milner and her sending out a part of herself when listening to music, and that part being the inception of Jack’, R.F. Langley, ‘From the Journals: 3 May 1998’, *PN Review*, 251.46 (2020) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=10661](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=10661)> [accessed 13 September 2022] (para. 7 of 10).

<sup>68</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 248.

<sup>69</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 248.

like the poem 'Man Jack' itself, comprised of three varieties of source material—the autobiographical, the bibliographical, and the etymological—a 'living' microcosm of the poem he moves within.

If Jack is a perceptual agent who fetches objects of attention like apples, who connects language and world, who makes contact, then the owl in the poem is his shadowy second – a creature of language who exists at a remove: 'the owl [that] watches', 'the owl that hears', the owl who takes the shape of the apples Jack fetches, who sits 'round as such / upon a shelf'.<sup>73</sup> Toward the end of the poem, the owl steps into the place, 'an emptiness', 'left by Jack' when he is no longer there.<sup>74</sup> The poem stages a crisis of connection similar to that of the entry in which the 'vessel' of things seems to crack and connections leak away: 'The apple is not fire. And yellow is / not sweet. Jane's voice from miles away is just / a speck and almost lost'.<sup>75</sup> The speaker has moved through a kind of union with the seen—a state of connection in which each 'thing' is a world within a world—that now undergoes a kind of collapse. Jack, that figure of attention, is no longer 'there': extended too far, or perhaps, the extended moment of attention broken. While the connections *within* the poem might undergo a kind of collapse, the experience which it draws on does not, as the perceptual concerns of the Westhall entry, that only 'acts' of perception and language construct connection, give life to the action of a figure who enacts perception in language.

Though the poem cautions the reader not to 'look at [Jack] as if he were a jug', the line does mark a moment when another of the sources listed in the bibliographic record, Martin Heidegger's essay 'The Thing' (1971), enters the poem.<sup>76</sup> Heidegger poses the question,

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<sup>73</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 7.

<sup>75</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 7.

‘what is a thing’, in part to challenge the ‘scientific’ notion the ‘reality’ of a thing can be determined by isolating its constituent parts.<sup>77</sup> He develops this challenge through an extended meditation on the jug as a thing which is simultaneously a vessel for, and an outpouring of, that which it holds or contains:

The spring stays on in the water of the gift. In the spring the rock dwells, and in the rock dwells the dark slumber of the earth, which receives the rain and dew of the sky. In the water of the spring dwells the marriage of sky and earth. It stays in the wine given by the fruit of the vine [...]. In the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug. [...] In the gift of the outpouring, earth and sky, divinities and mortals dwell *together all at once*.<sup>78</sup>

Jack, we might say, is simultaneously a vessel for, and an outpouring of, the materials from which he is composed, as the journals gather memories and ‘pour’ them into language. The vessels in the entry itself at once gather in what is elsewhere and are outpourings of those things (as the grass heads ‘gather in’ and ‘pour out’ the setting sun). The nature of the poem, and of Jack, is, like the vessels in Langley’s 1992 journal entry, twofold: at once connected to the ‘worlds’ they gather in (their source materials) but complete unto themselves. The poem and its titular figure are composed of source materials which cannot be collapsed back into any one in particular – the poem, like the scraps of paper that it might have begun with, is at once an invitation to respond and an object with many faces, like the ones Jack takes on from his name’s connotative potential.

Langley returns to lines from ‘Man Jack’ in a 14 May 2002 entry in which he revisits many of the concerns of both the poem and the 1992 entry. The entry introduces another perceptual intermediary, not the owl of ‘Man Jack’, but a ‘ghost’: ‘Sometimes you coincide with

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<sup>77</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971), p.168.

<sup>78</sup> Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 170-171.



yourself, and there is a feeling of contact and immediacy. Contact with your environment, with no ghost between you and it'.<sup>79</sup> The entry catalogues those things which seem to be able to fetch Langley into that state of contact – a nightingale's song, the feeling of one's own fingers near the mouth, and the slightly retooled lines of 'Man Jack': 'The apples are a gift. You see them with that sharp look that seems like the cry of a sick man touched on a wound, and there is nothing ghostly'.<sup>80</sup> The 'pain' of the thing that brings us into contact being, perhaps, that it is simultaneously a reminder of time spent out of touch, 'directed' by a 'ghost', shrunk back into oneself like the interior of Westhall on that day in 1992. Here, unusually, instead of laying out the terms of engagement of the subsequent poem and one of its initiating moments, the journals cast a retrospective attention at Langley's own process, a further 'reading' of the poem from an observer's perspective, still feeding on its perceptions and bright particulars.

Langley's recycling of the lines from 'Man Jack' demonstrates a democratizing of inspiration between the journals and poems, as the former feeds into the latter and vice versa. The poems are full of echoes of the journals, as the journals are full of echoes of themselves and, in this case, the echo of a poem. Langley closes the 14 May 2002 entry with a question and answer, something which functions like one of the 'internal gesture[s]' which Milner describes using to shift her attention from the 'tower' of her thinking mind out into the observable world.<sup>81</sup> He asks, 'So, what's to do' (perhaps recalling an owl's *te-wit, te-woo*), and replies 'Go out into Hoist covert again', sending his attention out into memory and calling it back into language again: 'The cloud is low, slate blue, then stained lemon, quickly mutating to a glowing pea-green [...]. The white water tower is dim, like a detailed painting of itself, not quite three

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<sup>79</sup> *Journals*, p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> *Journals*, p. 90.

<sup>81</sup> Milner, pp. 47, 49.

dimensional, but certainly not a ghost'.<sup>82</sup> The 'internal gesture' which shifts between ways of looking is also, in both Langley and Milner's journals, a shift between ways of saying. Milner describes 'incantation' as a way of saying that itself initiates a way of 'seeing':

So I said: "I see a white house with red geraniums and I hear a child crooning". And this most simple incantation served to open a door between me and the world. [...] My attention flickered from one object to the next like a butterfly, effortless, following its own pleasure; sometimes it rested on a thought, a verbal comment, but these no longer made a chattering barrier between me and what I saw, they were woven in the texture of my seeing. I no longer strove to be doing something, I was deeply content with what was.<sup>83</sup>

Milner implicitly draws a parallel between a way of saying, a description with no purpose other than to 'incant' the world, and a way of looking which itself relinquishes designs or to 'be doing something' with the world to which she attends: a non-utilitarian way of looking and a non-utilitarian way of saying in which thinking is not a 'barrier' to, but a 'texture' of experience.<sup>84</sup> In the journals, Langley explores how knowledge might 'texture' but not obscure, hold but not make hidden, the experience it describes.<sup>85</sup> This exploration takes place in and through a language which presents its own possibilities for negotiating the potential collapse of what it describes into concepts and classifications. The language in the journals often presents as one in which words, like the figure of Jack, are 'grown' out of both the landscapes of experience to which they refer and the 'landscapes' of their own usages and etymologies. The journals can be read as a site where Langley explores a central perceptual dilemma which poems like 'Man Jack' take up in their own ways: of how to prevent the collapse of the 'instance' of his own experience in the 'continuum' of the knowledge which might be brought to bear on it, or the language used to record it. My engagement with the

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<sup>82</sup> *Journals*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>83</sup> Milner, p. 55.

<sup>84</sup> Milner, p. 55.

<sup>85</sup> Milner, p. 55.

phenomenological dimensions of the ‘instance’ to which Langley attends offer a deepening understanding of his responses to that philosophic tradition, while the poetics of perception he works out in the journals makes, I argue, an important contribution to twentieth-century poetics.

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In the first section of the first chapter I look directly at the perceptual-experiential dilemma: how, in the attentional practice to which the journals refer, Langley frames, negotiates, and resists the potential for the ‘continua’ of thought, feelings, and knowledge, to collapse the ‘instance’ of direct experience. I look at Langley’s attentional practice itself as one in which he both strives to make contact with experience and to make that experience ‘available’ for recollection. I draw on the journals themselves, Noel-Tod’s prefatory and end notes in the *Complete Poems*, interviews with Langley, and those authors who he references or quotes in interview: psychoanalyst Marion Miler, philosopher Iris Murdoch, and poet Wallace Stevens.

The works of Milner and Murdoch to which Langley refers, *A Life of One’s Own* and *Sovereignty of Good* (1970), respectively, offer valuable insight into how Langley might have conceived of his attentional practice. Stevens, meanwhile, offers some initial inroads into the linguistic correspondences to the perceptual dilemma of collapse with his proposal of ‘the individual reality’ of the perceptible world and the way in which works of art achieve their own ‘significant reality’ resistant to such collapse.<sup>86</sup> I then turn to the evolution of Langley’s negotiation of this perceptual dilemma. I argue that the earliest of Langley’s published journals restage the perceptual dilemma of the attentional practice they describe, and reflect

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<sup>86</sup> Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1990), p. 236.

on the potential imprecision (if not incommunicability) of experience recorded in language. In the later journals Langley writes explicitly about modes of perception with a practiced capacity to distinguish and move between them. I explore, in these later journals, Langley's proposal that the 'continuum' of knowledge can both particularise perception and act as a steward to experience.<sup>87</sup>

In the second chapter of the thesis I turn directly to the 'instance' itself as it is described in the journals. The 'instance' which Langley describes in the journals is, I propose, one that is fundamentally phenomenological in the way it attends to appearances as an expression of what a thing 'is', a 'behaviour' or 'performance' of appearances—the instance of appearances—which cannot be separated from what a given thing is. In order to focus this discussion, I concentrate on one of what I propose is the distinguishing features of the journals, their attention to colour as a part of the 'instance' of the world of perception and the things which belong to that world. I argue that Langley develops corresponding ways of looking and ways of saying which resist the collapse of the 'instance' into the 'continua' of history, prior knowledge, and self. At the end of the chapter I turn to the 'instance' of the word itself, arguing that when words are themselves taken as objects of attention, the 'continuum' of their own histories and usages become, in Langley's journals and in the poems which share these concerns, a part of the behaviour and performance of language itself.

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<sup>87</sup> I distinguish between two primary 'modes' or ways of perceiving in this dissertation: a *utilitarian* mode in which the things of the world are, to borrow from Heidegger, 'set upon' as means to ends (for the purposes of knowledge, valuation, observations, classification, and so on), and a *non-utilitarian* mode, or modes, in which attention to a given thing is an end in itself. 'Modes of perception' follows Heidegger's distinction between utilitarian and non-utilitarian 'modes of revealing', Milner's different 'ways of perceiving', which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1, Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the 'utilitarian attitude' and 'lived-perspective', and Langley's own references in the journals to different kinds of perception. 'Modes of perception' can be distinguished from 'ways of looking', a related term used throughout this dissertation: where 'modes of perception' refers generally to our relationship to direct experience, 'ways of looking' is used more specifically to refer to the 'looking' or 'seeing' which the journals describe. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 115; Milner, pp. 78-79; Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39.

# Chapter 1

## Making Contact: Attentional Practice in R.F. Langley's Journals

### Introduction

Critical discussion of R.F. Langley's poetry has often focused on the texturing of its surfaces by the source materials which inform and subtend it, mapping the 'terrain' of those influences within the poems.<sup>88</sup> The 'terrain' of his journals is less well plotted, but is a crucial annex to the poems and, as an evolving poetics in its own right, merits separate attention. Langley asserts, in the preface to the *Journals*, that he thinks of the journals as 'raw material, as description' to do with 'the prime necessity, that of seeing'.<sup>89</sup> But the 'seeing' of the journals unfolds in a description that is, itself, deeply textured by 'the areas of patient study and exploration' which Langley engaged with over the course of his writing career, areas as diverse as botany, entomology, ornithology, literature, philosophy, art history and criticism, and etymology.<sup>90</sup> While the orientation of the journals might be primarily outward, toward the world they describe, the 'world' of the journals itself is one in which the immediate and the mediating, direct experience and prior knowledge, are ways of looking and saying that inflect one another.

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<sup>88</sup> By 'surface' I mean the language of a given poem without, as Noel-Tod puts it, 'the wider context' that might be provided by the source materials which inform and subtend it, *Complete Poems*, p. 157. David-Antoine Williams makes a similar distinction, as noted in the introduction to this dissertation, between the 'surface rendering' of the poems (of 'natural imagery, literary and historical reference and allusion') and the 'structure' of a given poem, where structure refers to the 'conceptual web' which source materials, like those derived from Langley's etymological explorations, provide and that 'all but vanish from view' in the finished poem, David-Antoine Williams, p. 128. Langley himself makes the distinction in interview, asserting that, 'whatever the surface looks like', his poems are based on 'careful observations on exact perceptions', Matias Serra Bradford, 'The Long Question of Poetry: A Quiz for R.F. Langley', *PN Review*, 37.5 (2011) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=8261](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=8261)> [accessed April 2019] (para. 11 of 15).

<sup>89</sup> *Journals*, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 116.

Criticism on both Langley's journals and poems often considers these ways of looking in epistemological terms and in relation to the modernist traditions with which they are conversant. For Mark Byers, Langley's observation 'is often informed by – and structured around – knowledge and theory' while simultaneously registering 'the *obfuscation* presented by [that] knowledge'.<sup>91</sup> The 'torque' between direct experience and prior knowledge represents a central 'epistemological dilemma' of Langley's writing, which Byers locates in the context of his engagement with modernist concerns with perception and knowledge.<sup>92</sup> Jeremy Noel-Tod writes that 'Langley's late modernist poetics of perception' is marked by an ongoing negotiation of 'subjective and objective modes of knowledge' and a 'tension' between the ability to know the world and an 'epistemological doubt' that the world can be known at all.<sup>93</sup> He examines how the alternation between these modes of knowledge that marks the 'intense looking' of the journals also occupies the poetry as a complex and shifting dance of perspectives in the context of another 'modernist fascination: the dramatic nature of lyric voice'.<sup>94</sup> Where these critical discussions locate the tensions between modes of knowing in the context of modernist concerns over, and fascinations with, perception and the lyric voice, my dissertation focuses on the perceptual concerns which emerge from the attentional practice the journals record and explore.

My work aligns with that of Noel-Tod and Byers in that I am similarly interested in how Langley negotiates the tensions between direct experience and knowledge, but departs from theirs in that I do not frame or discuss them in wholly epistemological terms. In part this is a reflection of one of my primary concerns in this chapter: the attentional practice to which the journals refer. The practice Langley describes, I argue in this chapter, is one in which

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<sup>91</sup> Byers, p. 333.

<sup>92</sup> Byers, p. 333.

<sup>93</sup> Noel-Tod, 'Dramatic Monologue', pp. 214, 219.

<sup>94</sup> Noel-Tod, 'Dramatic Monologue', pp. 215-216.

‘knowing’ is only one of the many ways of relating to direct experience and the things within that experience, just as knowledge is only one of the things which might be ‘gained’ from such interactions. In a sense, I am distinguishing ways of looking from ways of knowing. Because I am arguing that one of the central dilemmas which Langley works to negotiate in the journals is the potential for direct experience to be collapsed into knowledge or the process of knowing, I require terms that do not themselves ‘collapse’ the attentional practice to which I refer into epistemological terms. This is also why I refer to Langley’s attentional practice as *attentional* and not *observational*, because where the latter implies focus for the purposes of learning, knowing, etc., the former concentrates on the act of focusing itself.

This distinction is in keeping with contemporary phenomenologically-informed scholarship, such as that by Tod Balazic and Tim Ingold, the latter of whom proposes that the ‘world is not just an object of perception; it is also what we perceive *with*’.<sup>95</sup> Ingold reformulates Edmund Husserl’s famous postulate that ‘consciousness is always consciousness *of* something’ (my emphasis) as ‘consciousness is always consciousness *with*’, noting that where “‘*of*-ness” is intentional, “‘*with*-ness” [...] is attentional’.<sup>96</sup> The attentional *with* at once draws attention to, and shifts away from, the lingering relational dynamics implicit in the intentional *of*: that a ‘sovereign mind’, a ‘disembodied intellect’, is able to access their environment as a ‘repository of data’.<sup>97</sup> In this sense, the attentional *with* develops Merleau-Ponty’s position that ‘rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things’.<sup>98</sup> Langley’s practice in the journals, I propose, is one which actively attempts to negotiate an attention *with* the world, as opposed to necessarily one which takes things *as objects of*

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<sup>95</sup> Tim Ingold, *Correspondences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020), p. 31.

<sup>96</sup> Ingold, p. 41.

<sup>97</sup> Ingold, pp. 12, 33; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. by Oliver Davis (Oxford: Routledge, 1948), p. 56.

<sup>98</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 56.

attention. This is not to diminish the place or importance of knowledge and knowing in Langley's writings or journals, but to include and, to an extent, locate them in the context of the perceptual dilemmas of an attentional practice which sees, I propose, knowledge as only one of many ways of relating to direct experience.

Throughout this thesis I use the term the 'instance', which is conceived of in this dissertation phenomenologically, to refer to our direct experience of 'the world *as* we perceive it [and] is revealed to us by our senses and in everyday life'.<sup>99</sup> The 'instance' can be taken broadly to mean one's direct experience as a whole, but also the 'instance' of a particular thing within that experience: the 'instance' of a creature, an object, a painting, a built space, or even a word—in sum, the 'instance' of any of the things to which Langley attends in a given journal entry.<sup>100</sup> By contrast, I use the term the 'continuum' to refer to those things which might mediate that experience: this includes prior knowledge, but can also include the self, history, conceptual or technical applications of language, and the processes of thinking, knowing, and observation.<sup>101</sup> I have chosen these terms for a set of interrelated reasons: (1) they can be used to refer to, but are not themselves defined by, epistemological concerns, (2) in their temporal connotations they distinguish between a present-time focus of attention on a given thing and temporally determined ways of looking at or understanding a given thing, (3) the terms are sufficiently unladen with previous critical connotations to function within the different contexts in which I will use them.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39.

<sup>100</sup> In this sense the 'instance' does not delimit or imply a fixed duration of time, but instead refers to either our direct experience *as* we perceive it or to the occurrence of something which is attended to *within* that experience.

<sup>101</sup> Though the 'continuum' refers to those things which might mediate the 'instance' of direct experience, throughout this dissertation I will make clear the specific 'continuum'—such as self, prior knowledge, or potentially a process, like observation—that I am discussing. In some cases, I will use the plural 'continua' to refer to mediating factors, like the self, prior knowledge, collectively.

<sup>102</sup> For example, in the context of the attentional practice which the journals describe, the 'continuum' might refer to the process of observation itself as it overwhelms, or overrides, the 'instance' of the thing to which Langley attends, while in the context of the language which the journals use to describe the experience they record, the 'continuum' might refer to the taxonomical nomenclature which, if used in isolation, might collapse the 'instance' of the thing described into concept and category. The terms have enough flexibility to be used to describe epistemological concerns, but also perceptual ones.



The ‘instance’ and the ‘continuum’ are themselves benign as categories in the sense that the latter is not *necessarily* collapsing of the former, i.e., prior knowledge which might be brought to bear on a given experience is not inherently obscuring of that experience. Instead, I propose that the journals can be read as a space where Langley negotiates other relationships between knowledge and direct experience, in part because of the potential for the former to collapse or obscure the latter. In their careful attention to perceptual experience, Langley’s journals locate their description, as Merleau-Ponty writes, at ‘the moment when things, truths, [and] values are constituted for us’.<sup>103</sup> This is not, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, ‘a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation’ through attention to the ‘moment’ of perception, but ‘of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible’.<sup>104</sup> The dilemma which the journals describe, stage, explore, and attempt to negotiate, is how in certain *modes of perception* the ‘instance’ of direct experience of a given thing is potentially collapsed into some variety of the ‘continuum’, whether that be into the ‘continuum’ of knowledge, self, history, or language.<sup>105</sup>

Langley suggests that he in part understands what it is to make ‘contact’ with his own direct experience of the world—those ‘small flowers in the mortar’—as making that experience ‘available for full recall’.<sup>106</sup> This awareness, as I explore later in this chapter, sometimes results in an anxious double-vision that the copy in language (or memory) is perhaps all that is available and ‘contact’ with the world therefore not possible.<sup>107</sup> There is also a basic contradiction involved in Langley working out the dilemma of collapse in journals which are inherently a collapse or conversion of the experience to which they refer into language. I

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<sup>103</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. by William Cobb (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 25.

<sup>104</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 25.

<sup>105</sup> Specifically, as noted in the introduction, a *utilitarian* mode in which the things of the world are perceived as means to ends (for the purposes of knowledge, valuation, observations, classification, and so on), and a *non-utilitarian* mode, or modes, in which attention to a given thing is an end in itself.

<sup>106</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

<sup>107</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

argue that the negotiation of this contradiction is a profoundly productive one for Langley: a source of a poetics of perception in which he develops corresponding ways of looking and saying. This establishes a belief in language's ability *to correspond* which means his poetics operate at a different angle to language than that of many of the Cambridge School contemporaries with whom he is often linked.<sup>108</sup>

In this chapter I frame and explore a central concern of Langley's poetics of perception in a set of critically and bibliographically suggested contexts, some of which are considered in the existing critical literature. Stephen Benson notes that Langley inflects the literary 'inheritance' of his journals—via Dorothy Wordsworth, John Ruskin, and Gerard Manley Hopkins—with 'his readings in phenomenology and psychoanalysis, each understood as a form of descriptive attending to experience'.<sup>109</sup> Byers, meanwhile, writes that 'Langley shared with Prynne and other British late modernists an early critical interest in the problems of perception and the new literature of phenomenology, the key works of which began to appear in the early 1960s'.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, fellow Cambridge poet Prynne published a phenomenological primer for a British audience titled 'Difficulty and Resistance' (1961), while Langley includes Merleau-Ponty's seminal work of phenomenology, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), in a list of books he says he 'read[s] often'.<sup>111</sup> Langley notes, elsewhere, that 'there've always been a string of people that I've found interesting since Adrian Stokes who have been, you might say, preoccupied with object-relations', and

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<sup>108</sup> Langley, for instance, notes that where Prynne works in structures of language untethered by reference to experience, down 'a path where there isn't', in his own work language and experience remain 'tied', 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 243. Byers makes a similar distinction, writing that where Prynne 'exposes the linguistic and epistemic structures through which knowledge is controlled and instrumentalized, Langley maintains attention to the problem of perception and knowledge at the level of the experiencing subject', Byers, p. 349.

<sup>109</sup> Benson, p. 55.

<sup>110</sup> Byers, p. 349.

<sup>111</sup> 'The Long Question of Poetry', p. 18. Carville notes that another poet associated with Cambridge, Peter Riley (whose work on Langley I discussed in the introduction), has 'enduring interests in Heideggerian phenomenology', a further indication, as Byers notes, of the interest in phenomenology among Cambridge-associated poets like Prynne, Carville, p. 291.

these include Marion Milner, Melanie Klein, and Richard Wollheim (whose work also features prominently in Noel-Tod's bibliography to the *Complete Poems*).<sup>112</sup>

My rationale for taking up the phenomenological strand of influences on Langley's writing is largely a result of the focus of this dissertation on the perceptual dilemmas he describes in the context of his attentional practice. Phenomenology's attempt to situate itself in and describe 'the moment when things, truths, [and] values are constituted for us' is a sort of philosophical counterpart to the attentional practice I argue the journals describe: one in which Langley attempts to situate himself in the 'truth'-constituting instance of his own direct experience, an 'instance' which the journals allow him to reflect upon and further explore.<sup>113</sup> The journals can be considered a variety of applied phenomenology, in that they are a hybrid attentional-linguistic practice in part aimed at making 'contact' with, and understanding the perceptual aspects of, direct experience.<sup>114</sup>

There is a real sense in which phenomenology, particularly that of Merleau-Ponty, is itself an applied philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is active in that it intends upon application beyond the page; specifically, that articulated in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and a short series of lectures which distil the larger text, first published in 1948 as *The World of Perception*, develop a philosophy geared toward the rediscovery and reclamation of 'the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget'.<sup>115</sup> The two books, and the phenomenology that they articulate, are oriented toward 'the world of perception' or 'perceived world' (*le monde perçu*): 'the world as we perceive it'.<sup>116</sup> There is a project implicit in Merleau-Ponty's lectures and books, to 'teach' others about a 'world of

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<sup>112</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 241.

<sup>113</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 25.

<sup>114</sup> 'The Self is Gone', para. 9 of 16.

<sup>115</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>116</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 7.

perception [which] is, to a great extent, unknown territory as long we remain in the practical or utilitarian attitude'.<sup>117</sup> Langley's journals seem to have a different project in mind: a way of formulating a poetics, of generating material, and of developing concerns and interests which his poems also take up. But there is also a sense in which Langley's 'project' varied, but did not stray, from the one which he articulated in his August 1970, in which he writes that 'what you are doing is trying to make contact'.<sup>118</sup> Langley's journals are a record of a project in, and practice of, seeing. 'A record of the act', as David Herd writes, 'or rather process, of seeing' *and* the 'achieving of a language by which intensified perception becomes possible'.<sup>119</sup>

### The 'Continuum' of Self and Loneliness of Thinking

Langley's few comments on the journals are often responses to questions from interviewers about the autobiographical content of his poems and their apparent distance from everyday experience. Asked about poetry which is 'wilfully meaningless', Langley replies, with reference to Wallace Stevens, that his poems are 'led [...] first of all from the stuff that goes into the journals, the actual experiences that I've had' and that autobiography is 'one of those areas: "To break the loneliness of thinking"'.<sup>120</sup> In the prefatory 'Note (1994)' to the *Complete Poems*, Langley echoes this interview and again refers to Stevens:

The autobiographical experiences [...] the sharpening of their distinctiveness, and the sense of their being separate from each other, and from me, lift, as

<sup>117</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39.

<sup>118</sup> 'The Self is Gone', para. 9 of 16.

<sup>119</sup> David Herd, 'Emptying, Holding, Settling: The Poetry of R.F. Langley', *Edinburgh Review* (2019) <<https://edinburgh-review.com/extracts/article-david-herd/>> [accessed September 2021] (para. 10 of 17).

<sup>120</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', pp. 243-244.

Wallace Stevens said, ‘the loneliness of thinking’. The shocks of fear and joy that specific moments seem to carry, for me, are often what matters most.<sup>121</sup>

Langley notes, when asked about the apparent distance of his poetry from ‘accounts of everyday experience’, that ‘there are objections to positing the self as the primary organising feature of the writing’.<sup>122</sup> In response to the question of whether ‘wonder [is] an important part of the inspiration for the poems’, Langley refers to philosopher Iris Murdoch’s notions of beauty, self, and ecstasy.<sup>123</sup> These comments draw three writers—Stevens, Milner, and Murdoch—into dialogue with both the journals and poems and demonstrate their overlapping influences on Langley’s poetics. But each writer also gestures toward a central aspect of the perceptual dilemma that I propose the journals explore: how to prevent the collapse of the ‘instance’ into the ‘continuum’, specifically, of self. In this section of the chapter I draw these three authors into conversation with entries from the journals to better understand this element of Langley’s poetics of perception, beginning with Milner.

### *Marion Milner*

In a 1996 interview, R.F. Walker asks Langley, ‘Where is the writer in all this?’.<sup>124</sup> Langley’s reply goes further into his ‘objections’ to the self-as-organising feature, with reference to Milner’s journals:

Marion Milner used to make her diary at the end of day and put down what happened to her, and she always found that it wasn’t the dramatic bits that mattered at all. It was just some small item that she wouldn’t have otherwise remembered that she’d written down. And she collected that over months, didn’t she? And decided that she ought to redirect her life, because, obviously, the importance of her life was in areas she’d not suspected [...]. I know

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<sup>121</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. xvii.

<sup>122</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 245.

<sup>123</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 246. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985), pp. 77-101.

<sup>124</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 245.

because I keep a journal, that the things that would go into the journal as being important would not be moments of confrontation and extreme dramatic voicings of that sort. They would be objects which spoke very very quietly and implied things but didn't.<sup>125</sup>

Langley's answer is itself a careful redirection of the daily experience in his writings, away from the 'self' and toward 'objects which spoke very very quietly and implied things but didn't'.<sup>126</sup> There is a sense, here, not only of redirection toward the world described, but to the act of attention itself, to the careful listening implicitly required to hear the 'very very' quiet speaking of things, not unlike what Herd describes, in his work on Langley, as 'the state of listening [...] in which the world can be properly registered'.<sup>127</sup> The journals are described not so much as autobiographical records, but as records of a 'speaking' world; the self is not the subject per se, but its attention *is* directed toward the world and into, as Vidyan Ravinthiran suggests, 'energized minute descriptions of birds, beasts, and flowers'.<sup>128</sup>

Milner is a crucial reference point for comprehending Langley's journals' philosophical position: her attentional and journalling practices were born from a twinned suspicion that codifications of thought into bodies of knowledge (specifically science and psychoanalysis) and habitual and unreflective thinking, are responsible for a loss of contact with what she termed 'the world of perception'.<sup>129</sup> In *A Life of One's Own* she reflects at length on the relationship of science and scientific thinking to her own direct experience:

When I considered anything that happened to me in terms of science, I had to split it up into parts and think only of those qualities which it had in common with others, so it lost that unique quality which it had as a whole, the 'thing-in-itselfness' [...]. I wondered whether this was why sometimes, when I came out

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<sup>125</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 245.

<sup>126</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 245.

<sup>127</sup> Herd, para. 5 of 17.

<sup>128</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 418.

<sup>129</sup> Interestingly, Milner uses this term in 1943, before the publication of the phenomenological texts like Merleau-Ponty's *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) which would use the same phrase, Milner, p. 150.

from reading in a scientific library, the first whiff of hot pavement, the glimpse of a mangy terrier grimed with soot, would make me feel as though I had risen from the dead. For this ‘dogness’ of the dog and ‘stoneness’ of the pavement which I loved so, were simply non-existent in abstract ‘dog’ and abstract ‘pavement’. It seemed to me then that science could only *talk* about things and that discussion broke up and killed some essential quality of that experience. Science was perhaps a system of charts for finding the way, but no amount of chart-studying would give to inlandsmen the smell of a wind from the sea.<sup>130</sup>

For Milner, the perhaps potentially abstract language of the books in the ‘scientific library’ is a ‘world’ in which, attending to no one thing, nothing is alive.<sup>131</sup> The doorway of the library is like a threshold between scientific knowledge and the world of perception, which she describes herself crossing like Whitman’s ‘tired and sick’ speaker in ‘When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer’ (1867) from his ‘lecture-room’ and back out into the world.<sup>132</sup> But the greatest obstacle to her own direct experience that Milner encountered was not historical codifications of thought, but a more private and particular form of thinking, which she termed ‘blind thinking’: ‘a perpetual self-centred chatter which came between me and my surroundings, and me and myself, and till I learnt how to silence it I was liable to live in a world of distorted make-believe’.<sup>133</sup>

Scientific knowledge and private thinking correspond for Milner in their capacity to ‘distort’ direct experience and distance one from it, but it was her ‘discovery’ of the latter which led her to explore the attentional practices which her book develops and records: a desire not to discard or stop thinking, but to bring it into a relationship with her direct experience that does not collapse that experience into the stuff of thought. Borrowing from Langley’s own comments on Milner’s journalling practice, one could say that *A Life of One’s Own* is the

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<sup>130</sup> Milner, p. 158.

<sup>131</sup> Milner, p. 158.

<sup>132</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; repr. 2009), p. 214.

<sup>133</sup> Milner, p. 157.

record of an attentional practice that, to a significant degree, aims to learn how to ‘redirect’ attention away from the automatic distortions of ‘self-centred’, blind thinking toward the world of perception.

*Iris Murdoch*

The notion that contact with one’s surroundings hinges on an absence of self features in another of Langley’s responses to a question about the presence of wonder in his poetry and its importance as ‘part of the inspiration for the poems’.<sup>134</sup> He references Murdoch in his reply, various works of whom appear in each decade of the period which Noel-Tod’s bibliography covers:

Yes. Oh yes. It’s the chief thing, isn’t it? The thing I value. Marvellous. Yes, wonder is quite a good word for it [...]. Iris Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good*: where she talks about how Goodness and Beauty might be the same thing, because they strike you with wonder, because they take you out of yourself. She’s got a passage about a kestrel, which would take you back to Hopkins again, wouldn’t it? You’re wrapped up in your own affairs, you’re screwed up by your own subjective feelings, and you know that you’re colouring the world with your own thoughts and resentments, and you see a kestrel outside the window hovering and it—what does it say? ‘The world becomes all kestrel’ or something. And so you forget yourself...and she’s making the straightforward case that’s central to her thinking too, isn’t it, that at a moment like that, what is beautiful is also good because it takes your selfishness away, removes your self. And that’s really what wonder would be.<sup>135</sup>

Observance of the world is here framed as an antidote to the ‘subjective feelings [...] thoughts and resentments’ that both *wrap* and *screw* the individual within themselves.<sup>136</sup> The self is

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<sup>134</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 246.

<sup>135</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 246.

<sup>136</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 246.



posited as preventing contact with the world and with the experience of wonder that can attend that contact. Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), to which Langley refers, is explicit that the thinking mind is 'a continually active, fabricating mind' that acts as a 'falsifying veil which partially conceals our world', so that 'by opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us'.<sup>137</sup> For Murdoch, it is the 'experience of beauty' which is the 'occasion' for what she terms 'unselfing': occasions when the 'brooding self' disappears in the ecstatic 'self-forgetful pleasure' of witnessing the 'alien [...] independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees'.<sup>138</sup>

Recent scholarship by Antony Fredriksson and Silvia Panizza among others, on attention and the phenomenological dimensions of Murdoch's writings, has highlighted her sense that the 'attentive self', as opposed to the 'egoic self', can be cultivated through a practice of attention itself.<sup>139</sup> This mode of attention is one in which 'attention becomes world-revealing by being directed towards the object, and not the self', but the means of cultivating such attention are left unclear in Murdoch's writings.<sup>140</sup> This was not the case for Milner, whose *A Life of One's Own* both explores the matter of cultivating attention and develops practices, such as journalling, for doing so. Langley's own journalling practice, particularly that from the period between the 1970s and mid-1980s, also demonstrates that he was actively attempting to facilitate modes of perception and uses of attention that could negotiate the potential collapse of his own direct experience. As Belloli notes, 'in Langley's journal entries [...] some kind of practice or structure is required to allow "the particular" to be appreciated with appropriate

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<sup>137</sup> Murdoch, p. 84.

<sup>138</sup> Murdoch, p. 85.

<sup>139</sup> Antony Fredriksson and Silvia Panizza, 'Ethical Attention and the Self in Iris Murdoch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 132 (2020), 1-15, p. 4. See also Silvia Panizza, 'Moral Perception Beyond Supervenience: Iris Murdoch's Radical Perspective', *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 54 (2020), 273-288.

<sup>140</sup> Fredriksson and Panizza, p. 7.

intensity'.<sup>141</sup> Langley reflects cogently on the importance of the particular in a 17 June 2004 entry, after considering the authenticity of a wedding done with 'no ceremony at all':<sup>142</sup>

That thought of authenticity came together with the notion about intense attention to the particular, anything from a ketchup bottle to a Bellini, which is the only way to eliminate the incongruities between objective depersonalised transcendent views of the state of things and the subjective self-absorbed view which they belittle, but which you need to keep close at hand. Non-egocentric attention to the particular.<sup>143</sup>

'Intense attention to the particular', we might say, is itself a means to separate self from attention: to cultivate (borrowing from Murdoch) the *space* necessary in the vessel of one's own attention for the kestrel to fill (if one happens upon a kestrel).<sup>144</sup> There is attention, but in being consciously directed toward the world, it is 'non-egocentric'.<sup>145</sup> Langley's 19 August 1970 journal entry was retroactively titled 'The Self is Gone' by his widow Barbara – a title that highlights its key concern. In it, Langley writes of attention as vessel and instrument, evoking the image of an analogue television set: 'To be aware of how receptive one is being is a necessary adjunct of seeing more and more [...]. Tuning of the instrument. Getting the static out of the tone', a state that when achieved, 'when it is pure...the self is gone and just the object one finds oneself saying, there filling the screen'.<sup>146</sup> Intense awareness to the particular is here described as particularising attention itself: pulling not only the world, but the *quality* of one's attention, one's receptivity, into focus. When 'the self is gone', the 'static' taken out of the 'tone', it is the object of one's attention that is left. The sense of an attentional practice is present in the verb 'tuning', suggesting an active participation somewhat absent in Murdoch's more passive waiting on moments of beauty. Langley mixes sight and language,

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<sup>141</sup> Belloli, 'Latour and Langley', p. 268.

<sup>142</sup> *Journals*, p. 117.

<sup>143</sup> *Journals*, p. 117.

<sup>144</sup> *Journals*, p. 117.

<sup>145</sup> *Journals*, p. 117.

<sup>146</sup> 'The Self is Gone', para. 10 of 16.

looking and saying, when he writes ‘the self is gone and just the object one finds oneself saying, there filling the screen’ (my emphasis).<sup>147</sup> There is a sense that there is a second ‘looking’ taking place in memory, and a calling of that seeing into language.

### *Wallace Stevens*

In the essay ‘On Poetic Truth’ (1957), Stevens draws a distinction between ‘the reality of isolated fact’ and ‘individual reality’.<sup>148</sup> ‘The reality of isolated fact’ is, for Stevens, the province of ‘thought’ and science, an abstract system of ideas which are ‘apprehended by thought not sense’ and reliant on ‘the dismissal of the individual and particular facts of experience’.<sup>149</sup> ‘Individual reality’, meanwhile, is the reality of the ‘particularity of the here and now’ that ‘we can touch and feel [as] solid’.<sup>150</sup> The particularity of ‘individual reality’ is, for Stevens, fundamentally inaccessible by thinking, which dissolves that very particularity into structurally generalizing concepts and categories. Both the particularity of ‘individual reality’ and the particularised ‘reality’ of the written work of art, are possessed of an individual aspect which is ‘foreign and alien in a way in which abstract systems [and] ideas [...] can never be’.<sup>151</sup> Stevens wrote about this irreducible otherness of both reality and the work of art in a passage from which Langley quoted:

And the wonder and mystery of art, as indeed of religion in the last resort, is the revelation of something “wholly other” by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched. To know facts as facts in the ordinary way has, indeed, no particular power or worth. But a quickening of

<sup>147</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 10 of 16.

<sup>148</sup> Stevens, p. 236. It should be noted that Stevens’ ‘On Poetic Truth’ is a compilation of several sentences and phrases from an essay by the English philosopher H.D. Lewis, of the same title, first published in 1946 in *Philosophy, The Journal of the British Institute of Philosophy*. Stevens’ compilation was found on his desk and added posthumously to *Opus Posthumous* by Samuel French Morse. Langley’s attribution of ‘the loneliness of thinking’ in the *Complete Poems* and ‘to break the loneliness of thinking’, in his interview with Walker, to Stevens are, then, misattributions of quotes which belong to Lewis’ essay. See Langley, *Complete Poems*, p. xvii; ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 244; Joseph N. Riddel, ‘The Authorship of Wallace Stevens’ “On Poetic Truth”’, *Modern Language Notes*, 76.2 (1961), 126-129 (p. 126).

<sup>149</sup> Stevens, p. 236.

<sup>150</sup> Stevens, p. 236.

<sup>151</sup> Stevens, p. 236.

our awareness by the irrevocability by which a thing is what it is, has such power, and it is, I believe, the very soul of art.<sup>152</sup>

Contact with ‘individual reality’ or the ‘significant reality’ of the poem is capable of breaking ‘the inexpressible loneliness of thinking’ because the particularity of the other is irreducible and irresolvable to conceptualisation or abstraction by the mind.<sup>153</sup> Said another way, a reality that does not dissolve itself into the mind is one in which we are not alone.

### Practices of Perception

Langley’s journals share his poems’ interest in communicating precise experiences in time, co-ordinating different kinds of language and attention in order to communicate not just experience but also the ways in which language can obscure or re-shape experience. In the early journals, Langley describes the perceptual concerns which attend his attentional practice. In his 19 August 1970 journal entry, Langley writes that ‘what you are trying to do is make contact’ with ‘it’, and admonishes himself to feel ‘it as here and real, not slurring through it looking a-head [...] so that there is no sequence but a network in space all alive and as fresh as there’.<sup>154</sup> This injunction is not only against the ‘thing’ itself becoming a means to observational ends—‘the sequence’ of observation overriding the ‘instance’ of the thing observed—but also, as the hyphenated ‘a-head’ suggests, against observation *as* a head.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Stevens, p. 237.

<sup>153</sup> Stevens, p. 237.

<sup>154</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

<sup>155</sup> R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 244; ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

Langley's early journals frequently return to the head as a centralizing site of what he alternately refers to as 'thinking' and 'knowing'. In the August 1982 entry set at Diffwys mountain, Langley writes: 'here I feel a valley without thoughts, and thus the effort and futility of a small head pushing out ideas it has to make for itself. Any thoughts would stop with the removal of the head'.<sup>156</sup> In his August 1981 entry, set in Westhall church, Langley notes that the 'angels in the nave roof' are 'urgently attentive all the more because headless'.<sup>157</sup> Susan Stewart rightly notes a long-lasting understanding of the head as the 'seat of reason' in Western philosophy, imagined as 'a kind of citadel, protecting the self against the onslaught of experience'.<sup>158</sup> Yet Langley's attentional practice often features attempts to consciously shift attention out of the 'citadel' of the head, through the body and into the world of direct experience. This was a practice which would have been known to Langley through Milner's own attentional practice as recorded in *A Life of One's Own*:<sup>159</sup>

My ordinary way of looking at things seemed to be from my head, as if it were a tower in which I kept myself shut up, only looking out of the windows to watch what was going on. Now I seemed to be discovering that I could if I liked go down outside, go down and make myself part of what was happening, and only so could I experience certain things which could not be seen from the detached height of the tower. [...] In these ways I began to understand that my powers of perceiving could be altered.<sup>160</sup>

In the same entry from Westhall Church discussed above, Langley also write of sending his attention down into his body and out into the church interior:

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<sup>156</sup> *Journals*, p. 31.

<sup>157</sup> R.F. Langley, 'Westhall Church, August 1981', *PN Review*, 231.43 (2016) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=9733](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=9733)> [accessed 9 March 2020] (para. 1 of 1).

<sup>158</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 18, 20.

<sup>159</sup> Though Milner first appears in Noel-Tod's bibliographic record for the poem in *Complete Poems* with the poem 'The Upshot' in 1984, the language of Langley's earliest published journal suggests that he was already engaged with Milner's *A Life of One's Own*. Milner writes, 'I began to want intensity, not extensity, to look for quality, not quantity, in living', and Langley, speaking of the relative intensity of memory versus the proliferation of details which 'flicker into movement claiming attention [as] extensive not intensive', Milner, p. 66; 'The Self is Gone', para. 10 of 16.

<sup>160</sup> Milner, p. 49.

The church fills with attention. My feet send out lines from my toes, not quite straight ahead, because I am locked into this stance, pigeon toed. These lines relate to the perspective of the sides of the benches, the run of the purlins and the roof beam. My verticality locks into that of the pillars of the arcade.<sup>161</sup>

As Stewart suggests, though the head as ‘citadel’ of reason protects the self from ‘the onslaught of experience’, this comes at the cost of feeling.<sup>162</sup> As Langley describes, here, making ‘contact’ involves ‘feeling it as here and real’, not ‘looking a-head’, but ‘going down’, like Milner, into his body and the environment with which it is in contact.<sup>163</sup> But in the early journals the negotiation of perception is often fraught with concerns about the nature of perception itself. In his August 1979 entry, in contrast to that of August 1970, Langley questions whether perception itself is structured to collapse the ‘instance’ of direct experience into the ‘continuum’ of time and memory:

Instead of coming closer to objects and events, I feel them moving off further into fiction. [...] The bent leaves are a sight I see. The furry ‘trunk’. The white plates of water in ‘puddles’. [...] The field of vision. Things behind the head are not strictly there while they are not being recounted, but are recovered each time I look. Strictly memories. How briefly the sounds come above silence. In the leaves, a tapping, as of hard moths on dry paper. Reality is not possible, because immediately the noise is in the past, and one of a pair or more of fictions.<sup>164</sup>

On the one hand, with regard to the experience to which the journals refer, Langley is concerned that perception instrumentalises experience, converting the ‘instance’ of the surrounding leaves, trees, and puddles, into the ‘continuum’ of memory. On the other, at the level at which the journals describe that experience, Langley appears concerned about a correlative risk, that language will convert the ‘instance’ of how things in their particularly

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<sup>161</sup> *Journals*, p. 38.

<sup>162</sup> Stewart, p. 18.

<sup>163</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16; Milner, p. 49.

<sup>164</sup> *Journals*, p. 22.

appear, into categories which are reliant, in order to function *as* categories, on blunting that very particularity.

In the August 1979 entry, the most categorical, categorizing parts of language – the nouns ‘trunk’ and ‘puddles’ – are enclosed, and therefore questioned, in quotation marks, while the adjectival phrases which describe their appearances are left alone. Langley’s concern over the potential collapse of the ‘instance’ of his own direct experience is both perceptual and linguistic: a concern that perception inherently collapses the ‘instance’ observed into the ‘continuum’ of memory, and a linguistic concern that language might collapse the particularity of what it describes into the generality of its own concepts. Langley reflects on this journal entry nearly a decade later, in a 1996 interview:

As soon as you move things take on meaning, don’t they? because things become things that you’ve got to step around or walk over or something. They instantly become part of your maps, as it were. Whereas if you stand absolutely still, then they might not be part of any map at all. You ‘see’ a place when you haven’t got any designs on it.<sup>165</sup>

In this passage Langley likens the movement of his body in space to the conversion of ‘things’ into meaning: that in having to ‘step around or walk over something’, those things *become* things to step around or walk over, features on a map to be navigated and negotiated, as opposed to things which are simply ‘seen’.<sup>166</sup> In both the August 1979 entry to which he refers and the previously cited entry from August 1970, a utilitarian mode of perception—whether one in which the act of observation is privileged over the thing observed, or in which the ‘design’ to traverse an area converts the object into an obstacle—is registered as a

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<sup>165</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 254.

<sup>166</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 254.

sensorial loss, a difficulty in speaking (a ‘slurring’) or an inability to ‘see’.<sup>167</sup> Sight is linked to resisting the stabilization of things into conceptual maps, a resistance registered by the language of the August 1979 entry as it ‘questions’ the stabilization of appearances in noun-categories.

It is in the journals, then, that Langley begins to work out ways in which writing might respond to its own reifying processes. Langley’s journals propose an answer of sorts to the dilemma posed by perception, which can at times appear structured to convert direct experience into memory, fiction, meaning, or conceptual map. This ‘answer’ comes in the August 1979 journal entry at a zenith of anxiety, in which the seemingly impenetrable overlays of thinking push Langley to ask whether his thought had conjured the rabbits he sees, ‘Did I make it a rabbit by expecting it?’.<sup>168</sup> He writes, ‘Indeed the release will come when I just let myself out into it again, and, giving up knowing, just do it all again’.<sup>169</sup> The shift is a subtle one: where, at the beginning of the entry, Langley worries that it is perception itself which collapses the ‘instance’ of his own direct experience, here the circumference of the concern is tightened around ‘knowing’: a process within, but not totalizing as a mode of encounter with, experience. To relinquish knowing is to go back ‘out into it again’, an ‘answer’ Langley echoes in a 2009 journal entry thirty years later, quoting the fifth-century Buddhist patriarch Seng-ts’a:

Saunter along. Stop worrying. Don’t reject the world of the senses, for when you don’t reject it, it turns out to be the same as complete Awakening. If you work on your mind with your mind, how can you avoid immense confusion? [...] There is a woodlark on the telephone cable, with its beak full of insects.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 254; ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 8 of 16.

<sup>168</sup> *Journals*, p. 22.

<sup>169</sup> *Journals*, p. 22.

<sup>170</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 10 May 2009’, *PN Review*, 194.36 (2010) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=7835](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=7835)> [accessed 7 June 2022] (para. 1 of 2).



The journals record an injunction to shift from ‘knowing’ back ‘out into’ direct experience, a turn often marked in the journals by a kind of linguistic ‘gesture’ not unlike the ones which Milner developed to shift between modes of perception.<sup>171</sup> This linguistic gesture is a shift from what Langley once described as the ‘ratiocination’ of the journals, to an image-based description of appearances: from, as in the case of the above, reflection on a patriarch’s sayings to ‘a woodlark on the telephone cable, with its beak full of insects’.<sup>172</sup>

As Langley’s writing, and the rhythms of his poetic practice develop, he becomes more secure about the inter-relationship between different kinds of attention. In an August 1981 journal entry, set in Westhall Church and cited in the bibliographic record for the poem ‘The Upshot’, Langley writes about practicing with his own attention. His practice recalls Milner’s distinction between what she calls two ‘ways of perceiving’: the utilitarian *narrow attention*, which ‘sees’ things ‘according to whether they [serve] its purposes [...] as means to its own ends’, and a non-utilitarian *wide attention* in which, ‘since it [wants] nothing’, things are free to appear as they appear.<sup>173</sup>

By sitting still and unfocusing the eyes the whole space somehow speaks out, rises, tautens, opens, accepts the third dimension, stops being a record of bits of things you know, and facts of definition or memory. The ranks of poppy heads [bench ends in the church’s Bohun aisle] move out into stiffness and root there; the two roofs link and spread over, the walls draw up and round.<sup>174</sup>

We might say that Langley practices with a ‘wide attention’ like that, ‘since it [wants] nothing’ from the things within his direct experience, allows the particularity of that

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<sup>171</sup> *Journals*, p.22; Milner, p. 47.

<sup>172</sup> ‘From a Journal: 10 May 2009’, para. 1 of 2. The journals feature many such ‘gestures’, as in Langley’s early 17 October 1970 entry, in which he writes: ‘The surface by the bride is as difficult to make sense of as it always is, so I am content with this: the emerald weed stroked out straight [...] like wrinkled skin shifting along over a rib-cage’, *Journals*, p. 9.

<sup>173</sup> Milner, pp. 78-79.

<sup>174</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘August 1981, Westhall, Bohun Aisle’, *PN Review*, 230.42 (2016) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=9733](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=9733)> [accessed 9 March 2020] (para. 2 of 2).

experience to '[speak] out'.<sup>175</sup> Where Milner offers insight into the modes of perception with which Langley practices, phenomenology offers insight into the perceptual dynamics at play within direct experience. Merleau-Ponty proclaims that depth is one of the central ways that things stand before us as *things*: depth is 'the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves'.<sup>176</sup> In other words, depth is an ever-receding limit not only between what can and cannot be seen, but what can and cannot be known. In a non-utilitarian or 'wide' mode of perception like the one Langley describes, part of the way things 'speak' is through depth that indicates, in its inexhaustibility, that things *cannot* be totally known as 'facts of definition or memory'.<sup>177</sup>

In later journals, Langley writes more explicitly about modes of perception with a practiced capacity to distinguish and move between them that recalls Milner's practices in attention in *A Life of One's Own*, and the Buddhist and Taoist influences, both of which involve attentional-perceptual meditation practices, which begin to appear in the journals in the mid-nineties:<sup>178</sup>

I recall that pretty soon after seeing the seal's head revolving in the water,  
pretty soon after the surprise of realising what it was that I was looking at,  
pretty soon after clearly seeing the close details of the features of seal and fish,  
I was thinking it was time to be moving back to the car...while at the same  
time I was supposing I ought to stay and see the detail out, in case there was  
something else, something more, a development, another angle. The creature in  
the water, swimming close.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>175</sup> Milner, p. 79; 'August 1981, Westhall, Bohun Aisle', para. 2 of 2.

<sup>176</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. by Galen A. Johnson, trans. by Michael B. Smith (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 59-75 (p. 65).

<sup>177</sup> 'August 1981, Westhall, Bohun Aisle', para. 2 of 2.

<sup>178</sup> The earliest mention of Taoism in the journals would appear to be in Langley's July 1989 entry, in which he quotes 4<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Chuang Chu, Langley, 'From a Journal: July 1989', *PN Review*, 250.46 (2019) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=10622](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=10622)> [accessed 30 June 2022] (para. 7 of 7). The journals record that Langley was given a collection of poems by the Taoism-influenced Basho on 27 August 1996 by Prynne, and mentions of Taoism and Buddhism become somewhat more regular after that date, Langley, *Journals*, p. 79. See, for example, Langley's November 1997 entry in which he discusses Ch'an Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (*Journals*, p. 84), or his 10 January 2009 entry in which he discusses aspects of Basho's poetics, Langley, 'From a Journal: 10 January 2009', *PN Review*, 192.36 (2010) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=8215](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=8215)> [accessed 20 August 2022].

<sup>179</sup> *Journals*, p. 109.

The passage is as much a description of the seal as it is a reflection on the tendency of perception to slip between modes. There is the non-utilitarian mode in which the ‘instance’ of the seal, in the particularity of its appearance, is registered, and the utilitarian mode implied in the sense that—after the category to which those appearances was established—disinterest sets in and the seeing stops.<sup>180</sup> In the 3 March 2006 journal entry, Langley takes a somewhat more extreme position, writing:

This is what waxwings have always looked like. Cave artists would have engraved them like this. [...] Cultural history is not making any appreciable contribution to what we are looking at, and, in fact, one of the thrills of birdwatching is precisely that it should not. There is freedom from self, history, background notions, to be achieved in this simple searching and finding and seeing, which gives it its status. In it you can have Husserl’s Natural Attitude and not be, in any important way, wrong.<sup>181</sup>

While Langley’s description itself is structured by the cultural history (of, for instance, the engravings of cave artists) and background notions (like those required to identify waxwings), the passage does demonstrate an ability to distinguish between modes of perception—those overlaid with self and history and those which enjoy ‘freedom’ from self and history—which was less present in the early journals of the 1970s, which are fraught with concern about the *inherent* structuring of perception by prior knowledge. Daniel Eltringham, in his work which takes up birdwatching, bird books, and Langley’s writing, argues that the prior knowledge required to identify birds, like a waxwing, does not necessarily collapse the particular instance of the bird, but instead energises ‘a potent second or two [...] when the bird is wrested from a

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<sup>180</sup> *Journals*, p. 109

<sup>181</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From the Journals: 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2006’, *PN Review*, 227.42 (2016) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=9545](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=9545)> [accessed 17 June 2020] (para 4 of 4). Husserl’s *natural attitude* refers to our ‘everyday’ experience of objects and things as directly perceived actualities, the apprehension of which requires no conceptual thinking. The natural attitude, as Husserl writes, is one in which ‘I am conscious of a world endlessly spread out in space, endlessly becoming and having endlessly become in time. “I am conscious of it” means, above all, that intuitively I find it immediately as factually existing, that I experience it. By my seeing, touching, hearing, and so forth, and in the different modes of sensuous experience’. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. by F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), p. 27.

backdrop of wind or sea or marsh'.<sup>182</sup> But where the birdwatcher 'travel[s] through the world as if they were closing it down' (identifying, naming, and categorizing), the act of naming is not the terminus of seeing for Langley, who describes extending the potent and charged looking past the moment of identification.<sup>183</sup> In the 1 February 2007 journal entry, Langley speaks about the pleasures of non-utilitarian modes of perception in terms of both the 'instance' of the thing and the 'instance' of attention itself:

A compact bird. A wide bird. Wide but compact. Light underneath, with dark wingtips and carpal patches. With a white beak and yellow feet. It wheels round the field, flinching from the rooks, coming directly over my head, and planning, as it curves over, with its wings lifted just above the horizontal. I did not read off and register 'buzzard'. Partly because I've never seen a buzzard here at Sotterley before, or hereabouts. I expect them more to the west. So I saw this one. Seeing a buzzard. Letting it slide smoothly into attention from inattention. Something there to be seen but no need to translate it at once. Fine to let it seep in and multiply [...] Enjoying the interplay of attention and inattention which is filling the place with so much that there are, I guess, no gaps. Something more will be there to catch you.<sup>184</sup>

Langley acknowledges that rarity of seeing a buzzard in Sotterley delayed his registration of the bird as 'buzzard', and that, in part, because of this day he 'saw this one' (my emphasis).<sup>185</sup> But there is also a sense, here, that even after the identification, Langley allowed his 'seeing' of the bird, as it appeared, to continue, without the 'need to translate it at once'.<sup>186</sup> A utilitarian mode of perception, which might treat the 'instance' of a bird as means to confirm a taxonomical category, is recognised and, in that recognition, not automatic, but optional. The early journals worry and probe the interactions between modes of perception, but these later

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<sup>182</sup> Eltringham, p. 51.

<sup>183</sup> Eltringham, p. 51.

<sup>184</sup> Langley, 'From the Journals: 1 February 2007', *PN Review*, 178. 34 (2007) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=3171](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=3171)> [accessed 1 September 2022] (para. 3 of 3).

<sup>185</sup> 'From the Journals: 1 February 2007', para. 3 of 3.

<sup>186</sup> 'From the Journals: 1 February 2007', para. 3 of 3.

journals move with facility and fluency as they consider them *as* modes.<sup>187</sup> Langley continues in the same 1 February 2007 journal entry:

I suspect that one sort of perception in which I take delight begins when there stop being signs, when you pay attention to them as if they were not signs at all. The oak, out in the middle of the ploughed field here shines floodlit with white sun, every groove in its bark shown up, the canopy spread, fully shaped and static, in full illumination, but the whole tree distanced, faded just slightly, in a mist, a suggestion of blue, that I can't quite claim to be able to see. It is more felt than seen.<sup>188</sup>

In a non-utilitarian mode of perception like the one Langley describes, the 'instance' of the thing, here his own visual field, is not overwhelmed by the 'continuum' of what those things might be taken, as signs, to refer to. The assertion of a non-utilitarian mode of perception at the level of the experience to which he refers (noting a 'sort of perception') is enjoined by a descriptive passage which attends the 'instance' of the appearance of things in his visual field. A string of journal entries cited in the bibliographic record for 'Jack's Pigeon' (1996), the second of the *Jack* poems to be published, brings these two modes of perception into focus in the context of encounters with figures, creatures, and built spaces on a set of trips in France. While the journal entries are concerned with what it means to 'see'—a particularly charged example of which is the entry that features the death of a young pigeon and the abbey in which Langley wanders after—the poem both explores its own way of looking and the way in which language, like the abbey, might 'hold' the body of the pigeon.

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<sup>187</sup> This is not to suggest that, in the later journals, that Langley does not still describe struggling with the potential for utilitarian modes of perception, as they were for Milner, to be, or feel, habitual and automatic. In the 17 February 1996 journal entry, Langley writes, 'I can't get hold of a way of caring enough to stop my attention wandering and hurrying on to the next thing, looking for some manifestation strong enough to catch hold of me' (*Journals*, p. 77). Langley's 'fluency' with modes of perception is one that is ongoingly negotiated in the journals.

<sup>188</sup> 'From the Journals: 1 February 2007', para. 3 of 3.

**Re-structuring Looking: A Close Reading of ‘Jack’s Pigeon’  
and its Associated Journal Entries**

In the four journal entries cited in the bibliographic record for ‘Jack’s Pigeon’, ‘the intense looking which is so often the occasion’ of the journals is further intensified for taking place while visiting, and re-visiting, churches and abbeys between Fussy and Tournus, France.<sup>189</sup> The intensity of encounters appear magnified for occurring in the context of brief visits and the realization, on return visits, that those encounters would not happen again. Like the keyhole of a church through which Langley peered twice, in 1980 and 1988, each journal entry is like ‘the window, where [he] looked down into a lamplit hallway [...] somehow so charged with someone else’s life’.<sup>190</sup> Nowhere is this sense of charged encounter more present than in the second of the two August 1988 journal entries cited for ‘Jack’s Pigeon’, in which the death of a fledgling pigeon pulls two ways of looking into focus with the question of what it means to see an-other:

At the corner of a street in Tournus, a fledgling pigeon, I suppose, big as your fist, yellow fur sparse over white flesh, muscular, spiky wings, closed eyes, rather hooked beak, big head—thuds to the gutter. It convulses, opening the beak, heaving itself over with the stubby wings. Silent howl.<sup>191</sup>

Langley distinguishes his own, albeit ‘shocked’ looking, which attends to the ‘gesture’ of the dying pigeon, to its body, and its colours, from the looking of a nearby man who ‘identifies it with a word’ and ‘continues to scratch the surface off a card to see if [...] he has won a prize’.<sup>192</sup> The man’s ‘word’ puts him a world away from Langley’s shock, but also sets Langley’s own looking (and possibility that it might call him to action) anxiously apart from

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<sup>189</sup> Noel-Tod, ‘Dramatic Monologue’, p. 216.

<sup>190</sup> *Journals*, p.47.

<sup>191</sup> *Journals*, p. 48.

<sup>192</sup> *Journals*, p. 48.

the people nearby. 'To pick it up... touch it [...] Take it... where? What would they think?', Langley asks, before deciding the pigeon is 'damaged beyond help'.<sup>193</sup>

On the one hand, the journal entry posits the 'word' used to identify and explain as a means, in the case of the nearby man, of dismissing, if not outright avoiding, a variety of looking which might register the actively dying pigeon: the 'word', in this instance, functions to allow the man to maintain the circumference of his own concerns. On the other hand, there is the looking which sees the death of the pigeon and in which words are able to describe the 'gesture' of death which the pigeon's 'silent howl' only mouths.<sup>194</sup> One way of looking is utilitarian insofar as it serves to distance from experience, and the other non-utilitarian in that it is 'open' to the other, to the 'instance' of what is occurring in direct experience. Langley carries these ways of looking, so to speak, into nearby St Philibert's Abbey, where he notices that people move through the space either 'looking up. With a spring' or else 'heads down, thinking or reading. Instantly many are dominated by the word':<sup>195</sup>

To read the notices. Because they speak of the self, the familiar codifications, not of the other, as do the pillars and walls and vaults and apertures. These are body talk, not explanations of the sort the inscriptions articulate. Gesture. The open beak of the dying fledgling, wide and silent. The body screwed up at the moment of its being given up, or taken away. The head stretched up at the last active point. St Philibert's takes the opening and reaching and holds it permanently, and without the agony and self-reference, and pain. The gesture of the fledgling, and that of anything else like that, in here, contained and assimilated, lifted and opened and held.<sup>196</sup>

There is a quiet sense of self-comfort or soothing about the notices and inscriptions within the abbey, as there was about the 'word' the man used to identify the pigeon and the scratchcard

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<sup>193</sup> *Journals*, p. 48.

<sup>194</sup> *Journals*, p. 48.

<sup>195</sup> *Journals*, p. 49.

<sup>196</sup> *Journals*, pp. 49-50.

he returned to after using it. They are *familiar* and keep one comfortably within the realm of the 'self': they do not require a witnessing of, or attending to, what the 'body talk' of another might be saying.<sup>197</sup> In the case of the structure and form of the abbey around him, its 'body talk', Langley sees an architecture which holds the 'opening and reaching' of the dying pigeon's body in its own final moment, without collapsing that moment around a point of 'self-reference' or 'losing the blow, the impact in the gutter'.<sup>198</sup> The abbey, not unlike Langley's own writing, does not posit a self as its own 'primary organising feature' but, instead, the final 'instance' of a dying creature, 'contained, assimilated, lifted and opened and held', like that of the fledgling pigeon.<sup>199</sup>

'Jack's Pigeon' is a poem similarly interested in what houses and what can hold, not only a space in which to mourn, and perhaps even mend, the pigeon, but also to register the ways of looking which its death brought into focus, and with which the people seemed to move with around the abbey. The most conspicuous of these ' housings' is the poem's formal features: five block or pillar-like stanzas of twenty almost entirely decasyllabic lines, in which both iambs and rhyme flirt with, but just avoid, a regular patterning. Inspired by Wollheim's notion that 'painting metaphorizes the body', Langley described in his 1996 interview with Walker how he hoped that in his later work, 'the poem might become much more of a body too': 'the things that would make the poem body would obviously be the small formal elements, wouldn't they?'.<sup>200</sup> Noel-Tod, in the context of this later work, writes that 'the "body-like" effect of formal coherence reflects Langley's new framing of his lyric speech within a naturalistic space expressed by a focalising figure [...] a proxy consciousness'.<sup>201</sup> Belloli notes that the 'bodies' of the later poems are united not by 'the common rules that

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<sup>197</sup> *Journals*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>198</sup> *Journals*, p. 50.

<sup>199</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 245; *Journals*, p. 50.

<sup>200</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 242.

<sup>201</sup> Noel-Tod, 'Dramatic Monologue', pp. 229-230.



they follow', but by 'family resemblances between a set of distinct verse bodies'.<sup>202</sup> As he observes in the case of 'Jack's Pigeon', the 'unusually determined formal features here correspond with the architectural features of the abbey', and we might say that in the case of the 'distinct verse [body]' of 'Jack's Pigeon', Langley's speech is expressed in part by the focalising figure of Jack within an architectural space.<sup>203</sup> The formal body of the poem, like the abbey, holds or houses the death it mourns.

In the 'architectural' space in which it unfolds, the poem takes up the ways of looking which the journal explores. Jack himself is something like that keyhole in the Fussy church, a 'window [...] charged with someone else's life', in that in him Langley gathers together some of the perspectives of the onlookers in the journal entry, and the ways of looking which he recognises in them.<sup>204</sup> 'Jack leans on the wall' in the poem, as Langley describes seeing a 'young figure [...] leaning against the bottom of [a] huge pillar' in the journal entry; Jack mistakes 'a tired cyclist in a vermillion / anorak' for 'a scarlet cardinal', as Langley wonders in the journal entry whether a young man 'wearing scarlet' might be 'ecclesiastical'.<sup>205</sup> Jack builds 'himself a house [...] in France' as he, in turn, houses the perspectives of the figures who populate the journal entry and with whom the reader moves, 'looking' through the architectural space of the poem. Alone, Jack is 'just another one who saw', like the bystander in the journal entry, he is 'the man / who stopped outside the door, then shrugged, and checked / his scratchcard, and moved on', but together, in the fifth stanza, the speaker and Jack 'move as one':<sup>206</sup>

There's no more to be done. No more to be done.  
And what there was, was what we didn't do.

<sup>202</sup> Belloli, 'Bruno Latour and R.F. Langley', p. 273.

<sup>203</sup> Belloli, 'Bruno Latour and R.F. Langley', p. 273.

<sup>204</sup> *Journals*, p. 47.

<sup>205</sup> *Complete Poems*, pp. 55, 58; *Journals*, p. 49.

<sup>206</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 59.

It needed two of us to move as one,  
 to shake hands with a hand that's shaking, if  
 tint were to be tant, and breaking making.  
 Now, on the terrace, huddled in my chair,  
 we start to mend a bird that isn't there,  
 fanning out feathers that had never grown  
 with clever fingers that are not our own;  
 stroking the lilac into the dove grey,  
 hearing the croodle that she couldn't say.  
 Night wind gives a cool hoot in the neck of  
 Jack's beer bottle, open on the table.<sup>207</sup>

As Jack and the speaker sit together 'to mend the bird that isn't there', the rhyme which had up to this point been mostly internal begins to fall at the end of the line.<sup>208</sup> The poem acknowledges its own recuperative desires in the brief re-patterning of its formal elements, while simultaneously acknowledging, as Jack's beer bottle gives an *approximate* 'cool hoot', and the end rhyme again disappears, the limitations of its own making. The perspective of the poem, bifurcated between the speaker and Jack, also allows the poem to register what might inform the desire to make 'breaking making' in the recuperative act of making a new 'body' as it mourns the death of the pigeon: that where Jack 'couldn't bring / himself to touch', as Langley himself could not hold, the dying pigeon, the poem itself offers a way of 'holding' the pigeon where Langley and Jack could not.<sup>209</sup>

The poem mourns, but does not, like the 'inscriptions' in the abbey, offer 'explanations' for the pigeon's death and, in this sense, enacts the second non-utilitarian way of looking which the journal recognises: one in which the death of the pigeon is not 'dominated' by exegesis. The poem, as Belloli writes, includes material not only from the journals, but also from *Hamlet* ('the pigeon squab is named "Ophelia" on its first appearance in the poem and,

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<sup>207</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 59.

<sup>208</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 59.

<sup>209</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 56. *Journals*, p. 56.

among many allusions to the whole play, lines from her burial scene hold particular prominence’).<sup>210</sup> These are not points of reference to which the poem can be reduced, but become part of the way the poem has of looking. The poem does not offer up its own autobiographical referents but rehouses them in new formal structures, as it rehouses the perspectives of Langley and onlookers in the journals in Jack, and the mourning of the pigeon through burial scenes from *Hamlet*. The poem thereby becomes its own ‘instance’ by being un-collapsible back to its own constituent materials, and in turn asks the reader to ‘walk’ through it, as if through an abbey, ‘looking up [with] a spring’ and not ‘heads down’ in details which suggest they might be read as references.<sup>211</sup>

Yet ‘Jack’s Pigeon’ is also aware that words are no more feathers than inscriptions are abbeys, and that while the poem that mourns it is present, the ‘bird isn’t there’.<sup>212</sup> The materials with which the poem might ‘mend’ the pigeon are linguistic and not physical, and Langley’s journals are similarly aware that their own materials are *potentially* apart from the world of which they would be a part. The next section of this chapter looks in greater detail at the apparent contradiction in using language to address perceptual concerns, in the related practices of ‘seeing’ and ‘saying’, and how the journals might make something of a new ‘instance’ out of language and memory.

### **The Practices of Looking and Saying**

The journals raise the question of how Langley might address a basic contradiction: that the language he uses, in part to negotiate perceptual concerns to do with the collapse of his direct

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<sup>210</sup> Belloli, ‘Bruno Latour and R.F. Langley’, p. 274.

<sup>211</sup> *Journals*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>212</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 59.

experience, is inherently a collapse or conversion of that experience. Byers notes ‘the irony which attends any cerebral effort to jettison the intellect, or the paradox of reason holding itself to account’, and points out, with reference to Sara Danius, that in the case of modernist forebears of Langley like Ezra Pound and Adrian Stokes, notions of ‘optical innocence and immediacy were as much rhetorical ploy – militating against “habits of artistic perception” – as strategies achieved in fact’.<sup>213</sup> I agree with Byers’ interrogation of how Langley might have negotiated his concern that propositional knowledge obfuscates direct experience in the context of language which is, to an extent, built on shared linguistic propositions. However, in the context of the attentional practice of the journals, there is little sense of attention being employed for rhetorical or ironizing purposes. In this section of the chapter, I discuss how Langley’s practices of looking and saying support, and reinforce, one another.

One answer to the apparent contradiction in Langley’s use of language to address perceptual concerns is to suggest that *as a practice*, ‘looking’ can be developed with the support of ‘saying’: in other words the attentional practice to which the journals refer, and the practice of journalling itself, are to an important degree part of a continuous practice of looking and saying. This was certainly the case for Milner, who writes, ‘the effort of recording my experience was having an influence upon their nature. I was beginning to take notice of and seek ways of expressing occurrences which had before been lost in vagueness’, a ‘sense that the more I wrote the more I should see’.<sup>214</sup> There is a sense here, as there is throughout Langley’s journals, that the act of journalling is a *continuation* of the ‘looking’ which sets its entries in motion, that the journal enacts perception and thereby enables further seeing and insight.

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<sup>213</sup> Byers, pp. 333-334, 343.

<sup>214</sup> Milner, pp. 17, 32.

David-Antoine Williams writes of ‘the re-enactment that Langley assumes in all his actions’, which allows ‘the same plants and insects and birds [to] be re-experienced differently, with different wonder’.<sup>215</sup> Williams’ comment recalls Langley’s own about the presence of wonder in his writing—‘Oh yes. It’s the chief thing, isn’t it?’—and we might say that the journals allow the ‘kestrel outside the window hovering’ to hover not once, but twice.<sup>216</sup> The continuation of looking and doubling of wonder is captured in the 2 March 2005 entry, in which Langley writes of how a small flock of woodlarks, each time they drop into some low growth, ‘have to be rediscovered, with some difficulty’.<sup>217</sup> He reflects that, with each rediscovery, ‘you find yourself taking an open look’; ‘then, after that, finally, the words come’, and ‘you see newly what is new’.<sup>218</sup> But what it is the second ‘looking’ which the journals allow? The ‘looking’ takes place in language, but at a remove from the original site, or sight, to which the journals refer. The primary material of Langley’s journals is not only language, but memory. In the introduction to this dissertation, I noted that Langley defined ‘contact’ as to ‘make available for full recall’, which suggests that while his attentional practice might be one of intense focus on the particulars of his experience, one measure of the quality of that original contact is the strength of the recollected memory:<sup>219</sup>

Anyway, to look back on it lets it fill the field from that direction, whereas at the present at most it is one of the many things which press [...] and flicker into movement claiming attention... extensive not intensive. Real is registered. Not really a subjective position to adopt, only a question of being open.<sup>220</sup>

Langley is surely alluding to Milner here, who wrote ‘I began to want intensity, not extensity’.<sup>221</sup> But where Milner referred to her direct experience of the world, for Langley it

<sup>215</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 149.

<sup>216</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 246.

<sup>217</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 2 March 2005’, *PN Review*, 176.33 (2007)

<[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item\\_id=3038](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/subscribe?item_id=3038)> [accessed 10 June 2022] (para. 4 of 4).

<sup>218</sup> ‘From a Journal: 2 March 2005’, para. 4 of 4.

<sup>219</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 4 of 16.

<sup>220</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 6 of 16.

<sup>221</sup> Milner, p. 66.

is the memory of the world, in testament to the strength of the original ‘contact’, which possesses the intensity that the flickering things of the present might not at the time possess: ‘what you have in recall you have, what you have when you are there you might be about to lose’, writes Langley, asking ‘is the answer then to forget about possession... “never dream of possession”?’.<sup>222</sup> Langley quotes a journal entry by the painter Ford Madox Brown in which Brown calls ‘possession’ a dream on accounts of clouds altering the scene he intends to paint.<sup>223</sup> Langley determines that ‘this ought not to be a question of possession but of being possessed [...] one can easily assume that being self-conscious about it might keep things out, hold them off there on the margins of the skin’.<sup>224</sup> Like Murdoch’s ‘falsifying veil’ of the thinking mind, Langley posits self-conscious thought as a barrier to contact with the world, and by extension, to the ability to remember the world: ‘Woodlark. Fine’, writes Langley, ‘Without thinking of woodlark. Finer still’.<sup>225</sup>

Langley’s correlation between the quality, and perhaps duration, of the original ‘contact’, and the strength of the memory is captured in his 17 and 20 April 2005 journal entry, in which he spends two full afternoons looking at Bellini’s ‘Saints Christopher, Jerome and Louis of Toulouse’ in the church of San Giovanni Crisostomo, Venice. On his first visit, Langley uses the coin-operated box that works the lights to better see the painting where it hangs above the altarpiece—noting that Wollheim, who wrote about the painting, ‘must have had hundreds of 50 pieces’—but on the second visit relies only on natural light, making a careful study of the painting and its colours.<sup>226</sup> The strength of this original ‘contact’ was sufficient, it appears, that a week later Langley describes how ‘cutting the lawn in the sunshine, I can still see them

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<sup>222</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 4 of 16.

<sup>223</sup> See, specifically, Brown’s entries for September 1854, 21 July 1855, and 21 August 1855, which give the full account of his frustrations with, and reflections on, the ‘dream of possession’. Ford Madox Brown, *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 90-91, 149, 153.

<sup>224</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 7 of 16.

<sup>225</sup> Murdoch, p. 84; ‘From a Journal: 2 March 2005’, para. 4 of 4.

<sup>226</sup> *Journals*, pp. 127-128.

clearly without shutting my eyes. The painting moves towards me across the grass, its colours in the air [...] the rose and the brown and the green'.<sup>227</sup>

Langley's comment that his poetry 'keep[s] reworking the same territory' also holds true for the journals.<sup>228</sup> Langley refers to the same quotation from Brown in the prefatory note to the *Complete Poems*, writing that 'entertaining the dream [of possession] is trying for more than a "mock-up of consciousness". It calls for testing all available strategies' and that this 'could involve for instance finding out [...] what would happen if rhyme came back in to do a lot of the running'.<sup>229</sup> While Langley's mention of Brown in this prefatory note reflects back on poems written in the mid-1980s, like 'Mariana' (1985), there is a similar and early awareness in the journals that what the journals produce is not simply a 'mock-up' of the experience to which they refer, but something newly created: a new event in language, a saying of experience recollected from the vessel of one's own attention.

The journals sometimes reflect directly on the ways in which memory, evoked by sensory description, or by a line from another writer, fetches another world into being, enacting processes whose elusiveness the journals otherwise record. Langley's 23 January 2007 entry, retroactively titled 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', stages the act of journalling and recollection. Langley writes:

There is crushed ice on some puddles. In Edwards' Lane, on the bank which catches the warmth, small red nettles have flowers, as do a speedwell and a white nettle. There are leaves of arum and buttercup. Earlier, in the church, I was stepping up the chancel looking at the back of Mr Coke's head up on the wall, when a dog barked from across the road [...] A marble statue, sunshine in the church, a dog barking...for some reason I received a momentary sense of a

<sup>227</sup> *Journals*, p. 130; Returning to the scene of the journal entry a year later, re-tooled versions of the final lines of the journal entry find a home in another medium, Langley's poem, 'The Bellini in San Giovanni Crisostomo' (2006), where the speaker is described suddenly standing, like Langley on his lawn, 'here in / line fifty-seven, arrested / by green and rose. By rose and brown', *Complete Poems*, p. 121.

<sup>228</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 244.

<sup>229</sup> *Complete Poems*, xvii.

summer years ago [...] distinctly, a mental taste as it were. Marble in the sun.  
Dog bark. I can fetch it back now, a touch of discovery [...] Mostly of the  
sunlight inside the building.<sup>230</sup>

It is as if Langley were feeling his way back from the present through a corridor of his own recollected seeing, from the crushed ice on a puddle and warm bank of nettles back to a church visited earlier that day, where a marble statue and the sunshine in the church's interior gave him 'a mental taste' of another memory from years ago. The entry appears to begin with a glance out the window and to end at a terminus of memory and imagery—'the sunlight in a building'—which he 'fetches back' in language.<sup>231</sup> But what is recollected *in* language emerges *from both* language and memory; Langley writes: 'the presencing of the bright particulars, which begin to awaken, brown weeds, pallid or dull green, the nettles with striped stems [...] by the road, under the surge of blue'.<sup>232</sup> This is a patchwork of his earlier observation of the nettles outside the window, made up of phrases taken from poems by Stevens and William Carlos Williams, and activated by the verb 'presencing', which is drawn from Martin Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971).<sup>233</sup> As Langley recollects the 'presencing of the bright particulars' in the natural world, his language takes on the 'bright particulars' of other writing, which emerge together in imagery of weeds, nettles, and leaves 'awaken[ing]'.<sup>234</sup>

<sup>230</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 1 of 10.

<sup>231</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 1 of 10.

<sup>232</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 2 of 10. Langley also mentions 'bright particulars' in an earlier, 6-8 March 2001 journal entry, cited in the bibliographic record for the late poem 'Still Life With Wineglass' (2001), in which painter Cornelis van Poelenburch's 'Mercury and Herse' (1625), on display in the Royal Academy, reminds Langley of 'the wineglass of water I have been placing in the sun on the windowsill in Dovecote bedroom in order to write a sequence of poems about it. [...] The tiny bright silvering of bubbles in the glass, the images of small goldfinches on thistles [...] bright particulars again'. R.F. Langley, 'From the Journals: 6-8 March 2001', *PN Review*, 228.42 (2016) <[https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item\\_id=9589](https://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=9589)> [accessed 26 April 2020] (para. 3 of 4).

<sup>233</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 1 of 10. Where 'presencing', as noted, is a term from Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 141-160, the phrase 'the bright particulars' is taken from the Wallace Stevens' poem 'Description Without Place' (1945), *The Sewanee Review*, 53 (1945), 559-565, while several phrases in the January 2007 journal entry, perhaps most notably, 'By the road, under the surge of blue', are taken from Williams' 'Spring and All' (1923), William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2011), pp. 11-13. Heidegger's book appears in Langley's bibliographic record for 'Juan Fernandez' (1979), 'Man Jack' (1993), 'Achilles' (2007), and 'Videlicet' (2008), by which we can ascertain that he was reading Heidegger in roughly the same period as he wrote the journal entry.

<sup>234</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 2 of 10.



Heidegger writes about the ‘presencing’ (bringing into being) of both nature and art as a form of *poiesis* (bringing-forth): he writes that nature presences by *physis*, out of itself (as ‘the bursting of a blossom into bloom’), where art presences *en alloi*, out of another (as the ‘bringing-forth’ of an artwork from the artist).<sup>235</sup> For Heidegger, it is when a given thing is not ‘set upon’ to reveal itself as a ‘standing reserve’—of, for example, a source of meaning or value—that it is free to ‘presence’ as it is. From this perspective, Langley is ‘presencing’ forth in language his recollection of the ‘presencing’ of particulars in his own direct experience. Midway through the January 2007 journal entry, Langley ‘swings round’ again to memory of the ‘stone in the sun’ and ‘the dog’s bark’ that set the entry in motion.<sup>236</sup> He again likens the field of his attention to the ‘field’ of language:

Maybe it just swings round and back to the stone in the sun again, in the sun and the sound of the dog’s bark, so that it is present. Yes. Not being traded off or mastered. Just found in its place with my having enough knowledge and experience to place it, help it to presence in the advantage of the moment. As in the poem. To see it in there.<sup>237</sup>

The knowledge which elsewhere might mediate or collapse the ‘instance’ of direct experience is here re-tasked or re-imagined as a steward of that instance: that knowledge need not collapse the ‘instance’ of a given thing into an object to be ‘mastered’ or ‘traded off’ for what, like the ‘weeds on the verge’, it might signify, but might instead ‘help it to presence’ within, Langley seems to suggest, the field of one’s own attention, or the field of language, like a journal entry or poem.<sup>238</sup> Langley continues, with further reference to Heidegger, to draw the presencing of nature and the presencing of language, leaves and words, close:

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<sup>235</sup> Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>236</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 4 of 10.

<sup>237</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 4 of 10.

<sup>238</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 4 of 10.

The flint axe becomes a work when its knapping, its knapped shape, does not disappear into the practicality of being an axe. Then it presences. [...] As do the weeds on the verge when they are more than the registration of the season, their forward spring, the content of chat, but, uncrafted, as they are they seem, I suppose, craft and their leafiness is glimpsed, as leaves. These leaves. Words as words when they are found in a poem. These words.<sup>239</sup>

The flint axe might be crafted, but it does not lose its status as a thing in its own right in ‘the practicality of being an axe’: in its work it *becomes a work*, it is knapped [hit or chipped] in the process of knapping.<sup>240</sup> Not only does the flint axe not lose its status as a thing in the work that it does, but that work, or so Langley suggests, *shapes* the axe. Langley likens the flint axe to the ‘weeds on the verge’, recalling again the modes of perception that I discussed earlier in this chapter: when the ‘instance’ of the weeds is not collapsed in a utilitarian mode of perception into a ‘registration of the season’—when they are not means to an end, but ends in themselves—‘their leafiness is glimpsed, as leaves’.<sup>241</sup> Words, or so the implicit analogy suggests, in the ‘field’ of the poem or the journal (as ‘these words’ indicates), do not disappear into the ‘practicality’ of reference or signification; words, too, might be ‘glimpsed’, not as *for* something else, but to *be* something themselves. Langley seems to be suggesting that language is, itself, something that is grown.

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The chapter outlines the formative role the journals play in developing a poetics of perception which locates its ‘knowledge’ as different in kind, and whose attentional practice the journals describe. Langley’s attentional and journalling practices, in terms of how their *saying* supports the *looking* which they record, can be understood as a single attentional-linguistic

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<sup>239</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 5 of 10.

<sup>240</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 5 of 10.

<sup>241</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 5 of 10.

practice: that is, the journals re-enact Langley's 'careful observations on exact perceptions' and thereby enable further seeing and insight into perception itself as a practice.<sup>242</sup> But the journals also demonstrate that Langley is keenly aware of the materials in which this saying of seeing takes place: that the journal entry, while referring to the world, is also a 'presencing' forth of language, memory, and reflection, into a new 'world'. Said another way, while the journals, in that they *do* refer to the world, are to a degree vessels for the world, when taken as new creations in their own right, they do not succumb to the very dilemma they so often explore: they are not collapsed into the 'practicality' of their own reference and signification, but like the flint axe, are *works* in their own right. The second chapter of this thesis will look closely at the features of the 'instance' of direct experience which Langley describes and at the way in which his language, itself, might be read as 'growing' from that instance.

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<sup>242</sup> 'The Long Question of Poetry', para. 11 of 15.

## Chapter 2

# The Phenomenology of Appearances in the Journals of R.F. Langley

### Introduction

R.F. Langley's fascination with perception, and with description as a kind of knowledge, is clarified by thinking about the journals in relation to phenomenology. This chapter looks at the phenomenological dimensions of the 'instance' of direct experience which so preoccupies and captivates the journals. I explore the ways aspects of perceptual experience, like colour, are structured in such a way as to themselves resist collapse into the 'continuum' of knowledge which might be drawn from experience, or into the taxonomic nomenclatures which might classify and order it. The phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Edmund Husserl appears in the bibliographic record to the poems, and Merleau-Ponty, specifically, in Langley's list of 'a few books I read often'.<sup>243</sup> Marion Milner, meanwhile, insofar as her *A Life of One's Own* is also a record of a hybrid attentional-linguistic practice, can be read as also, as Langley does in the journals, engaging in a kind of applied phenomenology. I propose that the 'instance' which Langley describes is one that is particularly well-suited to a phenomenological reading because of the way it attends to what Merleau-Ponty terms the 'behaviour' of appearances—the particular modulation of qualities, or expression of those qualities, of a given thing at a given moment of time—as an expression of what a given thing is.<sup>244</sup> Where the first chapter outlined the central perceptual dilemma

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<sup>243</sup> 'The Long Question of Poetry', para. 14 of 15.

<sup>244</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 95.

negotiated by Langley's journals, this second chapter builds on this by providing a phenomenological reading of the 'instance' as it appears in the journals.

In order to focus this discussion, I often concentrate on what I argue is one of the distinct and distinguishing aspects of the journals, their description of colour. I argue that just as Langley develops a poetics of perception which attends to the modulatory and mutable expression of appearances in the world described—a way of looking—his journals also develop a particular way of saying or naming: one in which language itself is particularised in the act of describing the particular. Toward the end of this chapter, I attend to moments in the journals when Langley takes language as the focus of his attention, and explore the 'behaviour' and 'instance' of words themselves.

The phenomenological reading in this chapter draws primarily on the late aesthetics and art writing of Merleau-Ponty. Though these works were published between 1948 and 1964—*The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), *The World of Perception* (1948), 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945), and 'Eye and Mind' (1964)—they continue to serve as touchstones for contemporary literary phenomenology, neuroscience, and biosemiotics.<sup>245</sup> These writings sit alongside other seminal phenomenological works on art, notably Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958) and Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971). I have chosen Merleau-Ponty because of the centrality of colour to his own phenomenological theory, and because it was, in part, developed through his attention to the arts (specifically that of Paul Cézanne).<sup>246</sup> Not

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<sup>245</sup> For scholarship on the links between contemporary neuroscience and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Ralph D. Ellis, 'Phenomenology-Friendly Neuroscience: The Return to Merleau-Ponty As Psychologist', *Human Studies*, 29 (2006), 33-55, and Vittorio Gallese, 'Embodied Simulation. Its Bearings on Aesthetic Experience and the Dialogue Between Neuroscience and the Humanities', *Gestalt Theory*, 41.2 (2019), 113-128; for scholarship on the links between contemporary biosemiotics and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Moten Tonnessen, Timo Maran and Alexei Sharov, 'Phenomenology and Biosemiotics', *Biosemiotics*, 11 (2018), 323-330, and Louise Westling, 'Merleau-Ponty and the Eco-Literary Imaginary', in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. by Hubert Zapf (Boston: De Gruyter, 2016) pp. 65-83.

<sup>246</sup> That is not, however, to suggest Merleau-Ponty developed his phenomenology of appearance and colour to only address painting, but instead that painting like Cézanne's seemed to capture, and thereby provide an opportunity, aspects of our direct experience of colour. This also means that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of appearances and colour is open to a wide range of applications, which includes painting, but can also be extended to literature.

only does Merleau-Ponty offer a phenomenology of colour, but his work is also particularly well-suited to a study which illuminates Langley's journals as one site of his poetics.

Merleau-Ponty's methodology proceeds in step with an artist's work and, in this sense, offers not only a theory of colour, but also a model for the application of phenomenology to the works of a specific artist.

Contemporary phenomenological literary studies continue to engage with Merleau-Ponty's writings on art and aesthetics.<sup>247</sup> Companioning poet and philosopher, poetry and text, these works and studies tend to consider single poems in relation to particular phenomenological concepts, or use excerpts from poems to support their discussions of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. My own lines of interpretation diverge from this scholarship not only because I am looking at representations of colour in both poetry and prose, but also because I employ phenomenology to illuminate aspects of an artist's poetics, as opposed to using poetry to elucidate or develop aspects of phenomenology. I will draw on recent works by contemporary phenomenologists and Merleau-Ponty scholars in order to bring Merleau-Ponty's writings on art and aesthetics, particularly those related to colour, into conversation with the 'landscape' or, as M. Ayca Vurmay puts it, the 'text-scape' of Langley's journals.<sup>248</sup>

There is little critical precedent for a *phenomenological* reading of Langley's journals.

Nevertheless, such a reading can be positioned in relation to critics drawing on biosemiotic and ecocritical theory to discuss Langley's writing, notably Peter Larkin's 'Being Seen for

<sup>247</sup> This includes James B. Steeves' 'The Virtual Body: Merleau-Ponty's Early Philosophy of Imagination', *Philosophy Today*, 45 (2001), 370-378, Todd Balazic, 'Embodied Consciousness: Toward a Poetic Sense of the World', *SubStance*, 31.1 (2003), 110-127, Peter Larkin, 'Frost at Midnight: Some Coleridgean Intertwinings', *The Journal of the Friends of Coleridge*, 26 (2005), 21-36, and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<sup>248</sup> Vurmay introduces the term 'text-scapes' with reference to Cézanne's quote, included in Langley's *Note* (1994) in *Complete Poems*, that 'Every brushstroke changes the picture' (*Complete Poems*, xvii). Just as every brushstroke changes the picture, Vurmay writes, in Langley's writing 'every expression changes and defers meaning, opening out onto multiple landscapes or *text-scapes*', Ayca Vurmay, 'Radical Landscapes of R.F. Langley's Poetry: A Stylistic Analysis of "To A Nightingale"', *Dil Dergisi*, 170.2 (2019), 53-70 (p. 54).

Seeing: a tribute to R F Langley's *Journals*' (2011) and Vurmay's 'Radical Landscapes of R.F. Langley's poetry' (2019). Larkin considers the 'implicit biosemiosis' of Langley's attention to 'insects and spiders' in the journals insofar as that attention can be understood as part of the biosemiotic renaturalisation of human cultures via a shared participation with all 'living things' in the constitution of the world through recognition and interpretation.<sup>249</sup> Vurmay, meanwhile, argues that Langley's writing 'accentuates the biologic semiotics or dialogic relationships among landscape/environment, humanity, reality and language/text', maintaining that the 'permeability of the borders' between such binaries in Langley's writing is demonstrative of their 'interdependence and interconnectedness as well as the challenges, games and failure of meaning and of language'.<sup>250</sup> My own arguments in this chapter are conversant with both Larkin and Vurmay insofar as I look to 're-naturalise' Langley's treatment of colour in terms of its embeddedness in the phenomenological 'lived perspective'.<sup>251</sup> But where Larkin and Vurmay seek primarily to locate Langley's writing in terms of the philosophic and critical traditions that his writing draws on, I attend directly to the prose of the journals themselves.

The style and aesthetic of the prose of the journals has been most closely explored thus far by Stephen Benson. As mentioned in the introduction, Benson reads the journals in the context of what he describes as a post-critical resurgence of descriptive writing that has been 'reclaimed and re-valued' across 'a wide spectrum of contemporary writing'.<sup>252</sup> Benson notes that the 'field of perception' which Langley attends to in the journals—'the micro-

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<sup>249</sup> Larkin, 'Being Seen for Seeing', para. 4 of 10.

<sup>250</sup> Vurmay, p. 58.

<sup>251</sup> 'The lived perspective, that which we actually perceive', Merleau-Ponty writes, 'is not a geometric or photographic one'. For Merleau-Ponty, the fixed univocal perspectives of the photograph or, for example, the 'geometric perspective' of Renaissance painting, disguise the world as we perceive it in everyday life (where, for example, borders and outlines are emergent properties of the 'infinite' modulation of colours) and the role of the senses in constituting how the world appears (where, for example, the movement of the eyes gives 'the impression of an emerging order' and a world 'organising itself before our eyes'). So by 'lived perspective', Merleau-Ponty refers to 'the world which is revealed to us by our senses in everyday life'. Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', p. 64.

<sup>252</sup> Benson cites, specifically, the art criticism of T.J. Clark, essays of Wayne Koestenbaum, the poetry of Lisa Robertson, Kathleen Stewart's experiments with improvised forms of descriptive ethnography and Timothy Morton's 'suggestion of a speculative-realist ekphrasis', Benson, p. 45.

eventfulness of insect and flower’—is ‘conceived after phenomenology’ insofar as it ‘aspires’, quoting Merleau-Ponty, to a ‘direct description of our experience as it is’.<sup>253</sup> But Benson’s reading is itself primarily taxonomic, examining ‘a series of small-scale inflections of description’s discursive repertoire’ in order to map and explore the features of Langley’s prose’.<sup>254</sup> Benson does briefly discuss how features of the prose might correlate with ways of looking or interacting with the world(s) the prose describes, by reference to the ‘Apollonian disposition’ suggested by the journals’ engagement with counting, or when a sort of ‘sentience’ emerges from the prose itself when it departs from a world described and, in brief etymological explorations, engages with its own linguistic material.<sup>255</sup> Vidyan Ravinthiran, similarly, describes a sort of life in the prose of the journals, in its ‘energized minute descriptions’ that are like ‘molecular wonders’.<sup>256</sup> Adam Piette, albeit briefly, also suggests that the ‘warmth of a strange and unsettling kind’ in Langley’s writing is ‘created by the attention lavished on tiny phenomena’.<sup>257</sup>

My work here similarly acknowledges the energized particularity of Langley’s prose in the journals, but discusses and explores it from a more phenomenological perspective. I look at qualities of Langley’s prose—its particularity, its fusions of nomenclature and image-driven description, and its etymological explorations—in terms of how they can be related to, and correlate with, the poetics of perception which the journals explore and develop in language. In this chapter I explore the ‘way of looking’ of the journals in greater detail, as one which attends to the ‘instance’ of direct experience in its phenomenological dimensions and from a ‘lived-perspective’: in terms of how things appear in our own primary perception, and which

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<sup>253</sup> Benson, p. 55.

<sup>254</sup> Those ‘inflections’ are: ‘frame, counting, measure, fancy, seething and leaking, and praise’, Benson, p. 45.

<sup>255</sup> Benson, p. 52.

<sup>256</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 418.

<sup>257</sup> Adam Piette, ‘Review of R.F. Langley, *Complete Poems*’, *Blackbox Manifold*, 16 (2016) <<http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/issue16/AdamPietteBM16.html>> [accessed 26 June 2022] (para. 2 of 11).



attends to the way in which qualities like colour are part of the ‘behaviour’ and ‘expression’ of the perceptible world. I argue that a defining feature of the journal’s poetics of perception is how this way of looking is, in the prose of the journals itself, also a way of *saying and naming*. Langley, I propose, realizes a description that not only honours the integrity of the ‘instance’ as it is seen, but of the ‘instance’ of the language used to say.

### The Behaviour of Colour

My ring, silver with its square carnelian, comes into action whenever there is preciousness or colour, so that I am glad of it. It is a utility. I hold it up and engage it with the colours of the world.<sup>258</sup>

—R.F. Langley, *Journals*

Wet yellow wax, a chancel window’s green glass, the plum-like hue of a spotted flycatcher: seemingly small noticings mark the presence of colour in the wider field of a given Langley journal entry. But colour is not a secondary adjectival inflection of more primary (so-called) descriptive materials, like nouns, or descriptive modes like naming. Myriad and expressive, colour is a way that the ‘instance’ of direct experience resists collapse into static categorizations, as it is, I argue, central to the way Langley describes the ‘instance’ of his own direct experience. ‘The bright white drops’ on an umbrella ‘ignite when the rim dips below the horizon’, a bonfire with ‘flips of lime and cobalt at the roots of orange-white’, a friend leaves a door open and ‘all the greens in wallpaper and bedspread shine more yellow’.<sup>259</sup> Colour is, in the journals, a dynamic part of what Merleau-Ponty refers to as the *behaviour*, ‘the way of being’, of things, and of the objects, landscapes, creatures, and

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<sup>258</sup> *Journals*, p. 132.

<sup>259</sup> *Journals*, pp. 15, 16, 46.

artworks to which Langley attends.<sup>260</sup> Langley's use of colour exemplifies his ways of thinking about language, perception, and the world laid out in the journals.

What does it mean to say that Langley's journals attend to the way that objects behave, and how might colour be a part of that behaviour? The objects in Langley's journals are, from the perspective of the 'classical tradition' Merleau-Ponty describes in Western philosophy, art, and science, (and from historical discourses around description, as Benson notes, that read departures from descriptive modes like naming as embellishment), strangely alive with colours.<sup>261</sup> Langley's interest in the way that seemingly static things 'behave' can be traced variously: to the early 1960s when he was, as Noel-Tod notes, 'an active draughtsman and painter, who made painstaking studies of the natural world', to an early engagement with the writings of Adrian Stokes who, as Piette writes, 'afforded him a base for the kind of attention he pays to the objects in the world', and, as Langley put it, to 'a string of people that I've found interesting [...] who have been, you might say preoccupied with object-relations'.<sup>262</sup> Merleau-Ponty wrote that 'one of the great achievements of modern art [...] has been to allow us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget'.<sup>263</sup> I argue that one of the central achievements, and defining features, of the journals is the fidelity with which they reveal a world in which the 'instance' of objects, built and natural spaces, and works of art, 'speaks' in appearances that disclose their own mutable,

<sup>260</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 95.

<sup>261</sup> Merleau-Ponty uses the term 'classical tradition' to refer to a loosely constituted tradition in modern Western philosophy, science, and art which distinguishes between 'primary qualities' like 'point, line, plane, and ration', based on their 'epistemic repeatability', and so-called 'secondary qualities', like colour, taste, touch, and sound, based on their 'alleged subjectivity and privacy'. This 'classical tradition' maintains that qualities of appearances like colour, are separable from, and secondary to, the essential objects to which they belong and, further, that scientific/philosophic interventions are required to 'gain access to things as they really are', Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 40. Specifically, the motif 'in the historical discourse attendant on descriptive writing' that, as Benson writes, views descriptions as a mode that is attendant to 'accidentals', i.e. the visible surface of things, as opposed to essentials, Benson, 47. This 'strange' aliveness has been described, in the poems, as an 'eerie volition' by Ravinthiran and, as previously noted in this chapter, 'a warmth of a strange and unsettling kind' by Piette, created by 'attention lavished on tiny phenomena', Ravinthiran, p. 410; Piette, para. 2 of 11.

<sup>262</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. x; Piette, para. 3 of 11; 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 241. Three primary veins of 'object relations' appear in Noel-Tod's bibliography to the *Complete Poems*: the British object-relations psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion, and Donald Winnicott, the object-oriented phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, and the art-object aesthetics and history of Stokes, Richard Wollheim, and E.M. Gombrich. There is overlap between these categorisations: Milner, as I proposed in the introduction to this chapter, sits between the psychoanalytic and phenomenological, where Stokes and Wollheim, as Belloli notes, were influenced by British object-relations psychoanalysis, 'So smart and tight', para. 5 of 20.

<sup>263</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39.

colourful ways of being in the world. Langley writes of his garden, for example, in the 5 July 1984 journal entry:

Lilac curls up its tips, suavely. Hawthorn is hung down, tired and filled with a spatter of dead brown blossoms. Forsythia spurts. Leylandii tower shaggy columns. Elecampane leaves crinkle. Rue is whiter, with slight yellow flowers and bluer foliage. The red-brown apple tree is nearest the house, dark in its hollows [...] There are foxgloves under a birch and their colour is saturated. All colours are saturated because this is all in the afterglow. Hawthorn blossom has fallen on the grass, like crumbled bread. Fallen lilac leaves are lemon.<sup>264</sup>

The passage describes things as if mid-performance: a weave of adjectival attention to the nameable shot through with colours and verbs so detailed as to capture things as if held, momentarily, in the flux of their own ongoing change. ‘Everything’ in the scene, as Langley writes elsewhere, ‘behaving itself’.<sup>265</sup> This performance, the way a given thing has of appearing at a given moment of time, is what Merleau-Ponty refers to as its ‘present mode of being’.<sup>266</sup> The particulars or details of that present mode of being—the way it ‘performs’ its own particulars—constitutes a given thing’s behaviour: how the lilacs *curl suavely*, leylandii *tower shaggy columns*, or a *red-brown* apple tree appears *dark in its hollows*.<sup>267</sup> From the phenomenological perspective, these are descriptions of the behaviour of the plants and trees in Langley’s garden as they perform the particulars of their own present modes of being. Colour is an integral part of this performance and, I argue, of Langley’s attention to the ‘instance’ of things. Westhall Church, 16 August 1985, is an indicative entry in the journals

<sup>264</sup> *Journals*, p. 34. My choice of excerpts from the journals like this one, which feature plants or, as in the excerpt which follows, built spaces, are meant to foreground the relationship between ‘behaviour’ and ‘appearances’ in the absence of agency. Langley’s attention to inanimate objects, built spaces, and to ‘things’ to which agency is not usually ascribed (but which are described in terms of the ‘behaviour’ of their appearances) is sustained throughout the journals. In the 1970s journal entries, see the description of Keeper’s Cottage garden, 17 October 1970 journal entry (*Journals*, p. 9); in the 1980s journal entries see the description of the woods in the July 1987 journal entry (*Journals*, p. 44); in the 1990s journal entries, see the 4 August 1990 journal entry, see the description of the corn fields (*Journals*, p. 53); in the 2000s journals, see the opening of the 22 April 2003 journal entry’s description of orchids (*Journals*, p. 102).

<sup>265</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 20 August 1978’, *PN Review*, 189.36 (2009) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=5348](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=5348)> [accessed 11 June 2022] (para. 4 of 4).

<sup>266</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 95. The terms ‘behaviour’ and ‘performance’ are not, as Tim Ingold writes, meant to suggest ‘that things have agency; rather they are actively present in their doing’, even if that ‘doing’ is the manner of ‘their carrying on or perdurance’, Ingold, p. 13.

<sup>267</sup> *Journals*, p. 34.

of Langley's way of 'tun[ing] into his surroundings', and its status as a source for his poem, 'The Upshot', emphasizes the distinctive timbre of Langley's phenomenological poetics as one grounded in careful attention to the shifts of light and colour in built spaces:<sup>268</sup>

There are no mats on the ledger stones, most of which are tilted, chipped or cracked, and set into pale bricks. The green glass in the chancel tinges everything up there, and, in front of that green, the pale bricks, the whole nave and the arcade react and flush pink. The Victorian pine benches are stained dark brown, but spottled white where their varnish has been taken off by whatever has fallen on them from the roof. The low light catches their rims, which shine along their backs and arms.<sup>269</sup>

It is not *only* that the glass in the chancel is green, a discrete quality among qualities, but that the green of the glass tinges the chancel's upper spaces, which, by way of its interaction with the colour of the pale bricks in the foreground, '*react and flush pink*' (my emphasis).<sup>270</sup>

Green is part of the way that particular glass, at that particular time of day, roves, transforms, and interacts with the place and 'instance' of which it is a part: a dynamism and interconnectedness Langley evokes with the verbs 'tinges', 'react', and 'flush', each one a linguistic thread in his description of a visual experience 'threaded' with colour.<sup>271</sup> The benches are spottled white because of the place they sit, the condition of the roof above them, and the quality of the paint: the colour 'speaks' of such things. The moon 'burning all clear against black, like a worn ball of pumice [...] fully defined in silence' is seen '*in the scent of honeysuckle*' (my emphasis).<sup>272</sup> Colour is not a separable element of the 'instance' of the things to which it belongs, but a part, as Merleau-Ponty writes, of a visually cohesive experience of the 'radiation of the visible', which he writes about in terms, not of colour and poet, but water and painter:

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<sup>268</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. xiii.

<sup>269</sup> *Journals*, p. 37.

<sup>270</sup> *Journals*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>271</sup> *Journals*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>272</sup> *Journals*, p. 80.

When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were there without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is.<sup>273</sup>

The tingeing-green of the chancel window and responsive flush of pink in the arcade are not, from this phenomenological perspective, distortions in the field of vision of the windows or nave. It is not that Langley sees the arcade *despite* the wash of colours, but 'through and because of them', they are not 'hidden behind a veil of appearances', but present as an expression of appearances out of, as Langley writes, their own 'reservoirs of infinitely varied possibility'.<sup>274</sup> Langley attends the expression which things 'hold' at a given moment, an expression, like that of a face, in which some features are pronounced and others diminished, but which cannot be resolved to an essential expression. One moment the arcade is flushed pink, but when the sun reaches the chancel window, the 'expression' of the window changes: 'its gothic arches and tracery in them, over the painted saints, show their gold'.<sup>275</sup>

The bench ends in Westhall, recurring across the journals, are particularly demonstrative of Langley's attention to, and fascination with, the shifting 'face' which things present out of the 'reservoirs' of their own potential appearances. In one entry, the bench ends cast 'double shadow[s]' on the wall behind them (which J.H. Prynne, visiting with Langley that day, calls 'trinities'); in another, the 'sun splashes on the wood are a mixture of lime green and rose' where a bench end, standing in a 'gold puddle', is 'gilded pinkly and greenly, with a glittering headscarf of web'.<sup>276</sup> The following excerpt is from an August 1981 entry:

<sup>273</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), pp. 121-149 (p. 142).

<sup>274</sup> Thomas Baldwin, 'Introduction', in *The World of Perception*, p. 29; *Journals*, p. 80.

<sup>275</sup> *Journals*, p. 38.

<sup>276</sup> *Journals*, pp. 39, 70-71. See also the entry for August 1994 where Langley explores the potential for the 'humanisation' of the bench ends by placing his Panama hat on one of them. The entry is interesting, in part, because Langley seems to test, by 'playing games' with his hat, the borderlands between the behaviour of the bench ends *as* objects—in terms of how their appearances bear expressive capacities—and how that behaviour can become exaggerated and humanised by the addition of a hat, *Journals*, pp. 62-64. Carville describes this succinctly

I watch one poppy head with sun on its ear and shoulder. It rules the aisle,  
 touched with a quality. Over a minute the light on its head goes smoothly out,  
 young gold to old silver, wet to dry, shine to dust... then that on its shoulder, so  
 that now it joins the others and space unifies in even clarity of secondary  
 luminousness.<sup>277</sup>

Phenomenologically speaking, the excerpt describes the behaviour of one of the bench ends in Westhall as it performs the particulars of its present mode of being. The ‘expression’ of those particulars—the *particular* arrangement of emphasized features—is mutable in the sunlight of the interior: at first the bench ‘rules the aisle’, seeming to age as the sun sets from ‘young gold’ to ‘old silver’, before joining the others in ‘secondary luminousness’.<sup>278</sup> This excerpt also offers an example not only of how the journals provide material for the poems, but also how the poems can be read, like the journals, as sites in which the expressive capacity of appearances is explored and, I argue, heightened. This journal entry would become the source of his poem ‘The Upshot’, published four years later in 1984:

The captains have not moved though  
 earlier the peep of day had staked  
 everything on the ear and shoulder  
 of just one of them. But soon he was  
 smoothly snubbed like the other seven.  
 Now the individual is unimportant but  
 eight determined men stand penniless,  
 never a glance, in the silver evening.<sup>279</sup>

On the one hand, the excerpt from the journal offers interpretative possibilities for this stanza of the poem: the ‘poppy head’ bench ends are described, in the stanza, as ‘eight determined men [who] stand penniless’.<sup>280</sup> The journal suggests that they are ‘penniless’ because, when

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as Langley testing the ‘extent to which an object [...] can be attended to in all its sensuous specificity without having a human subjectivity foisted upon it’, Carville, p. 287.

<sup>277</sup> ‘From a Journal: August 1981’, para. 2 of 2.

<sup>278</sup> ‘From a Journal: August 1981’, para. 2 of 2.

<sup>279</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

<sup>280</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

the sun set, they lost their ‘gold’ and turned from ‘young gold to old silver’ in what becomes ‘the silver evening’.<sup>281</sup> On the other, the poem heightens the way in which objects ‘behave’ by placing those objects in the position of subjects: where it is the ‘peep of day’ that stakes itself, it is the bench end, ‘he’, who is ‘smoothly snubbed’ and which, with the others, stands ‘penniless’.<sup>282</sup> The verb ‘staked’ in the poem gathers together the behaviour of light in the journals as that which touches (‘with a quality’), transforms (from ‘young gold’ to ‘old silver’), and metaphorizes it as the currency which the peep of day ‘stakes’ on a bench end.<sup>283</sup> The ability of light to touch and to transform colours is already present in the entry, and the verb ‘staked’ heightens and concentrates the agency implied in these actions. The transformations of the bench ends in the poem call attention to a tension between the title and the body of the poem. Where an ‘upshot’ connotes finality, final results and, etymologically speaking, the final shot in an archery match, the shifting appearances of the ‘instance’ of things themselves call attention to the ‘difficulty’, as Byers writes, of ‘arriving at one’s object’.<sup>284</sup> Because the ‘instance’ of the attentional ‘target’ is one, like the bench end ‘captains’, that is mutable and shifting, attention itself, and by extension description, must keep ‘flying’ (or describing), in order to ‘hit’ its target. The ‘behaviour’ of objects, like ‘The Upshot’ itself, can be read as underwritten and informed by a phenomenological way of seeing the world, detailed and developed in the journals, in which objects ‘speak’ in the shifting ‘instance’ of their own appearances. In the next section of this chapter I discuss how the journals engage in a phenomenological exploration of the ‘instance’ of words themselves.

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<sup>281</sup> ‘From a Journal: August 1981’, para. 2 of 2.

<sup>282</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

<sup>283</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

<sup>284</sup> Byers, 336.

### The 'Instance' and Habitat of the Word

Critical discussion of the poems, like that by Benson, Mark Byers, and, most extensively, David-Antoine Williams, often considers the etymological dimension of Langley's poetry: a part, as Williams writes, of the 'surface rendering' of a given poem, and part of the poetry's invitation to explore the source materials which support and subtend it.<sup>285</sup> If the presence of the etymological in the poems is in part sedimentary, at once showing on the 'surface' of the poem but also located in layers of 'etymological web(s)' that are '[hidden] from view', etymology, and etymological exploration, sits in plainer view in the journals: in, as Benson describes them, 'little heap[s] of etymology'.<sup>286</sup> In the first section of this chapter, I explored how phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty attend to the 'instance' of sensory objects as they 'perform' the particulars of their own appearances. In this section of the chapter, I discuss how Langley's etymological explorations in the journals attend to the 'instance' of the word itself, beginning with a phenomenological reading of etymology itself.

From the phenomenological perspective, to 'know' objects requires, among other things, methods that allow us to encounter them outside of our habitual and utilitarian, or what contemporary phenomenologist Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei refers to as our *quotidian*, ways of perceiving them.<sup>287</sup> The aspects of the object 'hidden' under our quotidian interactions with them require perceptual shifts for us to 'see' them, shifts that works of art can facilitate. Phenomenologists consider the object as a nesting of hidden worlds that, with the right attention or methods, can disclose more of itself. Langley's journals can be read in

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<sup>285</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 128.

<sup>286</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 128; Benson, p. 53.

<sup>287</sup> Gosetti-Ferencei, p. 96.



terms of how they treat the word, like an object, as a nesting of hidden words/worlds that, with the right attention or method (like etymology) can disclose more of itself.

Etymological study, in its relocation of words from their contemporary to historical usage, can be thought of in terms similar to the way in which Merleau-Ponty regarded painting. Both painting and etymology can offer a defamiliarizing, ‘gaze-arresting’, moment of contact with ‘ordinary’ objects: in Merleau-Ponty’s example, ‘lemons, mandolins, bunches of grapes’, and in the case of etymology, words, so that neither pass ‘quickly before our eyes in the guise of objects [or words] we know well’.<sup>288</sup> Words taken as objects, like those in paintings, ‘hold our gaze, ask questions of it, convey to it in a bizarre fashion the very secret of their substance, the very mode of their material existence and which, so to speak, stand “bleeding” before us’.<sup>289</sup> Just as we can no longer see Turner’s crimsons (due to the decay rate of beetle shells), we no longer ‘see’, for example, the black powder applied around the eyes present in the etymologies of the word *alcohol* (*al-kohl*). Part of phenomenology’s ‘project’ is the restoration of the hidden dimensions, the hidden life, of objects. I argue that Langley’s journals engage in a kind of phenomenological exploration of the ‘instance’ of words themselves, which can be seen in the 22 April 2003 entry, for example:

And the starry primrose, with the strong ‘swell’ given by the ‘deeper yellow in the middle’ as Hopkins saw, in 1871, the same year when he wrote about the bluebells, whose stalks, rubbed together in a bunch, click, making a sound like ‘a hurdled strained by leaning against’ as they jostle in your hand. A never-to-be-forgotten passage, to recall you to the quality of life whenever you feel there is not much to it. The bluebell stems, bunched in your fist, and clicking. To get it true and at the same time find it astonishing. Bluebells and orchids share names, Grigson notes. Both are Snake’s Flower, Cuckoo-Flower, Crowtoes, Granfer Griggles. [...] And what of ‘grig’? A ‘small, lively eel’, Skeat says. Or, not connected with this, a ‘cricket’, probably because of the sharp noise, ‘crick’. Bluebell stems crick as they wriggle.<sup>290</sup>

<sup>288</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 93.

<sup>289</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 93.

<sup>290</sup> *Journals*, p. 103.

Langley draws heavily in the above excerpt on Geoffrey Grigson's *The Englishman's Flora* (1958) and Skeat's etymological dictionary, locating the bluebells and orchids he describes in the entries for 'bluebell' and 'orchid' in the latter, and the 'legends, references, [and] lexicons' of the former.<sup>291</sup> Moments like this in the journals, in which the etymology of words not only comes to the surface of a journal entry but becomes the focus of a given entry, have been examined variously in critical discussions of the journals.<sup>292</sup> For Benson, passages such as this one possess a 'sentience' that can be sourced back to how they 'play' within their own artifice, how they 'rifle pleasurably through [their] own matter'.<sup>293</sup> Williams, meanwhile, proposes that the 'life' of such passages can be likened to the 'electricity', as he puts it, that results from a circuit formed by the etymological 'recirculation' of experience into ideas and vice versa: where experience initiates etymological exploration which, in turn, becomes a part of new writing.<sup>294</sup>

Looked at slightly differently, we might say that when a word itself is taken as the 'thing', as the focus of attention, that the 'continuum' of etymologies and ideas, which Williams proposes is recirculated back into experience, becomes a part of the 'instance' of the word. Said another way, when etymological exploration does not serve the utilitarian function of explaining the history of a word, that exploration can also be a way of looking at the word as a 'thing': it which its usages and histories constitute the expressions and semantic 'behaviours' of a word, an object, that resides in a linguistic 'place'. 'Found in the woods

<sup>291</sup> Geoffrey Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora* (Norwich: Jarrold & Sons, 1958).

<sup>292</sup> See also, for journal entries which similarly engage in etymological exploration, or which explicitly take words as the focus of descriptive attention, the journal entry for 17 October 1970, which I discuss in detail in this chapter (*Journals*, p. 9), the journal entry for 16 October 2002 (*Journals*, p. 98), the journal entry for 13 July 2004 (*Journals*, p. 118), and a more recently published entry from *PN Review*, 'From the Journals: 23 November 2001', *PN Review*, 247.45 (2019) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=10484](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=10484)> [accessed 15 August 2022] (para. 8 of 9).

<sup>293</sup> Benson, pp. 53-54.

<sup>294</sup> Benson, pp. 53-54; David-Antoine Williams, p. 130.

were the flowers’, as Williams writes of the 22 April 2003 entry, but the word ‘bluebell’ was found in the ‘text-scape’ of its own history.<sup>295</sup>

Earlier in this chapter I argued that what a thing ‘is’ cannot be separated from how it appears. In the way of looking which the journals record, and in which they descriptively engage, the appearance of Westhall Church does not disappear into the practicality of its being a church. In the case of Langley’s etymological explorations in the journals, I argue that Langley also ‘places’ his words within their own linguistic terrains. Regarded *as* a thing, the ‘continuum’ of history and usage can be seen as a part of the particularity of the ‘instance’ of the word—the historical ‘depth’ through which we can, in part, register the word *as* thing. But this attention to words, in terms of exploring their shifting phonic and semantic dimensions, also suggests that, when regarded as the ‘things’ of attention, Langley is learning the way words ‘behave’—not in appearances—but in phonic and semantic potentials which his sustained looking, as he might at a bench end in Westhall, reveal, not in the shifting light of the interior, but the shifting terrains of language.

Langley’s etymological explorations in the journals also offer further insight into his 23 January 2007 journal entry, in which he writes about the ‘stone in the sun [...] just found in its place with my having enough knowledge and experience to place it [...] as in the poem’.<sup>296</sup> Words explored etymologically in the journals, are similarly ‘found in [their] place’, with Langley ‘having enough knowledge and experience’ to place them within the ‘legends, references, lexicons, and etymologies’ in which, over time, they are ‘grown’.<sup>297</sup> In the same journal entry, Langley likens words to leaves: ‘when they are more than the

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<sup>295</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 117.

<sup>296</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 4 of 10.

<sup>297</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 117.

registration of the season [...] their leafiness is glimpsed, as leaves. These leaves. Words as words when they are found in a poem. These words'.<sup>298</sup> In the next section of this chapter I look closely at the way in which words in the journals might be 'grown' from the world they are also used to describe: how the 'instance' of the world described shapes the 'instance' of description.

### **Between 'Instances': Bridges Between World and Word**

I have argued, in this chapter, that Langley's journals are phenomenological in their attention to colour as a part of the behaviour of things, a part of their mode of being. I previously likened Langley's attention to the 'instance' of a given thing—the way it performs its particulars—to attention to the expression of a 'face' out of the 'reservoir' of its own possible appearances.<sup>299</sup> The things which Langley describes, like apple tree in his garden, or bench ends in Westhall Church, are modulatory in their appearance and, so too, I argue, is Langley's mode of naming: each modulation, each performance of the bench ends, for example, requiring a fresh naming, a new performance in language. The performances of world and word, in this sense, correspond. Langley's prose can be thought of, as Matthew Sperling writes, as a 'sojourn and investigation into the unexploited phonic potentials of the English language's deep structure' which open up, to quote Williams, 'vast inventories of connotative potential'.<sup>300</sup> The depth of Langley's attention reaches, we might say, into the material of its own language, as it does into the experience that language records.

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<sup>298</sup> 'Presencing the Bright Particulars', para. 5 of 10.

<sup>299</sup> *Journals*, p. 80.

<sup>300</sup> Matthew Sperling, 'Lexicography and Modern Poetry', in *Poetry & the Dictionary*, ed. by Andrew Blades and Piers Pennington (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 81-102 (p. 93); David-Antoine Williams, p. 113.

The journals are also marked by moments when the ‘territory’ of Langley’s attention shifts from the describable world to the material of description itself, to the ‘world’ of the word. Colour sometimes acts as a bridge between these territories, linking world and word. To take the 17 October 1970 entry as an example:

Ivy this morning, in sunlight, at Footherley, umbels of pale green clubs. Slow wasps crawl there with folded wings. One falls backward and drops onto a lower leaf, climbing up again, tired.<sup>301</sup>

The entry opens with ivy and wasps: the particular performance of pale green umbels and a tired wasp making its way back up the plant from where it had fallen. The entry passes on to other concerns, but Langley circles back, at the end, to these beginnings when he imagines language itself as the landscape where insects might move: ‘Your words ought to be pale green, unmelting, and tough, like the colours insects crawl amongst’.<sup>302</sup> The interests of the entry—colour (pale green) and insects (tired wasps)—are consistent, but the territory begins to shift from a physical (world-oriented) to a linguistic (word-oriented) one.<sup>303</sup> The rest of the entry takes place, so to speak, in the latter:

Wan green, wan wasps, ‘worn out with toil’. Gwan, feeble, faint. Win. Gain by labour or contest. Now there is little more to win. Suffer. Strive. Pale, pallid, fallow, pale brownish. ‘His hewe was falwe’. Fealu. Pale red. Yellowish red.<sup>304</sup>

This passage is comprised entirely of Langley’s selection of words and phrases from entries in Skeat’s etymological dictionary for ‘wan’, ‘win’, ‘pale’, and ‘fallow’, specifically those

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<sup>301</sup> *Journals*, p. 9.

<sup>302</sup> *Journals*, p. 20.

<sup>303</sup> This is not to say that these territories are ever strictly separated or, indeed, separable, considering that the journals themselves always ‘take place’ in the ‘world’ of language. The distinction I make between territories is meant, instead, to call attention to a shift in focus within the journals from one that is *primarily* oriented toward describing the world of perception to one that has *foregrounded* the materials, the matter, so to speak, of description itself.

<sup>304</sup> *Journals*, p. 10.

portions of the entries which relate to *tiredness* and *colour*: words like ‘gwan’ (as in *faint* or *feeble*, a Welsh cognate of the Anglo-Saxon ‘wann’), and ‘fallow’ (denoting colour, a derivation of the Anglo-Saxon ‘fealu’ for *pale* or *yellowish red*), and phrases like ‘his hewe was falwe’, a line from *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1392) cited in the entry for ‘fallow’ (in reference to a character’s *falwe/fallow/pale red* cheeks).<sup>305</sup> The territory of Langley’s description shifts from world to word, but not only does his attention to qualities like colour and tiredness remain steady, it is also, I argue, shaped by the world he attends: the entry opens with the colour of petals and closes with the references to colour, like ‘petals’, within etymologies, with wan and tired wasps in the ivy and an ‘ivy’ of words related to paleness and tiredness.

Part of what is compelling about these correspondences between world and word, qualities and etymologies, is that their presence suggests that the ‘face’ of language in the journals is modulated by the ‘face’ of the world, not only at the level of description, in the sense of the former referring to the latter, but at a sort of sub-strata, a connective tissue of correspondence discovered or created when the particular qualities of things (like *pale green* ivy and *tired* wasps) are linked with those qualities in the etymologies and usages of the words used to describe them (like the etymologies of *pale* and *wan*).<sup>306</sup> Langley’s assertion, in reference to his poetry, that ‘the words need suffusing with the event of the image’, might profitably be extended to the journals, in that there, too, we find images (like green ivy and tired wasps) suffusing (through veins of related etymologies and usages) words.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Skeat, pp. 208, 424, 700, 716.

<sup>306</sup> Benson writes about the above excerpt in his discussion of moments in the journals which, as he writes, foreground ‘description’s material text’, but reads the correspondence between the world and word at the level of form, where it is the density of the scene described earlier in the entry that generates, ‘as if unconsciously’, ‘an analogously clogged mesh of word stuff’, Benson, pp. 52-53. I argue that the correspondences between world and word are, as in the above example, not only layered but demonstrate deliberateness on Langley’s part.

<sup>307</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 159.

I have argued that colour can sometimes, in the journals, act as a bridge between world and word, an example of how the ‘face’ of the world, the expression of qualities, shapes the ‘worlds’ that Langley discovers in language through etymological exploration – as when he followed, so to speak, a tired wasp in pale green ivy through etymologies and usages related to tiredness and colour. A single word explored in terms of its etymologies and uses can reveal related words which, in their historical and semantic relation to one another, can be thought of as ‘hues’ of the primary word. The coping bricks of a railway bridge in the journals offer up, for example, ‘hues’ of the word ‘cope’—‘Cope. Cape. Cap. Hood. Cloak’—a ‘tumbling around’, Langley writes, of ‘what might cover the situation’.<sup>308</sup> Each word, like the hues of green and red in Westhall’s interior, is potentially transformative of the ‘face’ or ‘expression’ of the thing described: a wall coped with red bricks, a wall caped in red bricks, and so on.

Returning to ‘The Upshot’, Langley tells us that it was the word ‘unachieved’ in the line of Marcel Proust’s which opens the poem—‘We leave unachieved in the / summer dusk’—which he explored etymologically.<sup>309</sup> The etymology of ‘achieve’ offered Langley the word ‘chief’, which, in turn, offered the word ‘captain’ that, in the poem, became the new name for the Westhall bench ends, the ‘eight absurd captains’ at the core of the poem.<sup>310</sup> The word ‘captain’, one of the phonic (and semantic) potentials of Sperling’s ‘deep structure’, can be likened to a hue or shade of the word ‘unachieved’ from which it was derived. Not only can the word ‘captain’ be thought of as a hue of the word from which it stemmed, but the word behaves like a colour in the sense that it phonically and semantically ‘shades’ the bench ends (or ‘poppy heads’) of the journals. Thus the ‘face’ of what is described in the poem, like the

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<sup>308</sup> *Journals*, p. 98. See Skeat, p. 134, under the first entry for ‘Cope’.

<sup>309</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

<sup>310</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12. See, for reference, the entries for ‘achieve’, ‘chief’, and ‘captain’ in Skeat’s, pp. 5, 106, 91.

bench ends themselves in the varying light of Westhall, is transformed. The borrowed first line of the first stanza offers an opportunity to see how Langley's careful registration of the 'behaviour' of words in turn 'shaded' the language of the poem. Langley describes how he 'played the line' from Proust into 'the autobiographical situation' of 'The Upshot' because of the qualities of the line itself:<sup>311</sup>

And that sentence in itself appeared to me so excellent—because it's so unassertive and yet it's got such fine syllabic things going quietly on it and it's also sad: to leave without any sense of achievement and at a time when you wouldn't ordinarily expect to leave, like a nice relaxed time, like a summer dusk. The absurdity and horror of life is so deep in that.<sup>312</sup>

Like those 'objects and situations which spoke very very quietly' that filled Langley and Milner's journals, Langley attends and 'listens' to Proust's sentence and registers its particulars: its qualities, character, and sound.<sup>313</sup> A closer look at 'The Upshot' itself demonstrates this careful listening and Langley's responsiveness to it:

We leave unachieved in the  
summer dusk. There was no  
need for you rather than me.  
Here is the unalterable truth.  
Outside the open door peculiar  
bugbears adopt the dark, then Kate  
passes across. Next to nothing  
depends on her coming in.<sup>314</sup>

The poem opens with Proust's line, subtly and sonically braided into the first stanza, rhyming 'leave' and the third syllable 'unachieved' with the third line's opening 'need' and closing

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<sup>311</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 249. According to Noel-Tod, this translation of Proust is given in Elliott Coleman's translation of Georges Poulet's *Studies in Human Time*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 305, from which Langley drew 'the specific English cadence of the quotation', *Complete Poems*, p. 159.

<sup>312</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 249.

<sup>313</sup> 'R.F. Langley Interviewed', p. 245.

<sup>314</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12



‘me’.<sup>315</sup> Proust’s line acts like something of a railroad switch, in that it appears to channel material from the two journal entries (both dated 1981) along its own temporal lines: material from the chronologically second journal entry, set at dusk, appears, like Proust’s line, in the present tense, while material from the first midday-set entry appears in the poem in the past tense.<sup>316</sup> Like the clapper of a bell, Langley ‘rings’ the word ‘nothing’ in the penultimate line, aurally, via the rhyme, and semantically, in the sense of an absence, off the ‘un’ of Proust’s ‘unachieved’.<sup>317</sup> Proust’s line sets the summer season of the poem and acts *like a season* in the first stanza of ‘The Upshot’: transformative of its time of day, its soundscape, and mood. The poem opens in Proust’s dusk, but the moonlight at its close shines, as it were, from elsewhere:

We leave unachieved in the  
summer dusk. There are no  
maps of moonlight. We find  
peace in the room and don’t  
ask what won’t be answered.  
We don’t know what we see, so  
there is more here. More. Here.<sup>318</sup>

There is ‘moonlight’ but no moon in ‘The Upshot’, which is, in a way, appropriate, as the sentence ‘There are no / maps of moonlight’ is taken, as Langley notes, from E.M.

Gombrich’s ‘Mirror and Map: Theories of Pictorial Representation’ (1975).<sup>319</sup> The line in the poem is from the ‘elsewhere’ of another text, but is itself a fitting image for the way in which the language of Proust’s line, like a moon, casts its own transformative ‘light’ in the poem.

Light from elsewhere is also a fitting way of thinking about another aspect of colour in the

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<sup>315</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 12

<sup>316</sup> Kate, for example, who only appears in the second, dusk-set journal entry—‘The dusk increases [...] Kate suddenly framed in it, passing beyond’—also appears in the dusk/present-moment of the poem’s first stanza, ‘Westhall Church, August 1981’, para. 1 of 1; *Complete Poems*, p. 12. The sun on the bench ends, meanwhile, that appears only in the earlier, midday-set entry—‘I watch one poppy head with sun on its ear and shoulder’—appears in the poem’s second stanza in the past tense, ‘earlier the peep of day had staked / everything on the ear and shoulder / of just one of them’, ‘August 1981, Westhall, Bohun Aisle’, para. 2 of 2; *Complete Poems*, p. 12.

<sup>317</sup> The ‘nothing’ of Langley’s ‘next to nothing / depends on her coming in’ is all the more ‘resonant’ for the way in which the emptiness implicit in the word contrasts with the comparative fullness of the William Carlos Williams’ line which it recalls, ‘So much depends / upon’, William Carlos Williams, p. 74.

<sup>318</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 14.

<sup>319</sup> ‘R.F. Langley Interviewed’, p. 50.

journals: as a place where the ‘continuum’ can be read as texturing the ‘instance’, where history and colour intersect and saturate one another.

### Subjective Textures of Colour

‘The sky is by Poussin’, writes Langley in the 30 November 1970 journal entry, ‘in his most austere colours, pink cloud, slate blue in its crevices, on a duck-egg background’.<sup>320</sup> This characterization of colour, and others like it in the journals, points to a so-far missing in this discussion, but important element of the presence of colour in Langley’s journals: the way in which the ‘continuum’ of prior knowledge can be read as texturing his description of the ‘instance’ of colour. Todd Balazic argues, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, that when our subjectivity is itself recognised as a ‘historical site’, the historical dimensions of our subjectivity, like prior knowledge, can be apprehended as a ‘texture’ within, but not totalizing of, our experience: a *part* of the specificity of the ‘instance’.<sup>321</sup> History and prior knowledge *as texture* offers a way of reading the overlapping of those elements in Langley’s journals, as in this fuller excerpt of his 30 November 1970 journal entry:<sup>322</sup>

The sky is by Poussin in his most austere colours, pink cloud, slate blue in its crevices, on a duck-egg background. It is set over a light green field that looks as if it were spring. An old sort of fresh green. The soaking things have had sopped them with one more richness. The verges are viridian, chrome yellow, though the roads between them are dry. That sort of balance. Pools are everywhere in the fields over the disused excavations that used to be brick-kilns, and big trees are toppling inside the swamped wood. A young man is walking slowly past the

<sup>320</sup> *Journals*, p. 11.

<sup>321</sup> Balazic, p. 115. Mark M. Smith points out that ‘how a lemon tastes is contingent on the tongue doing the licking, its specific history and culture [...] *how* it tastes, its meaning, its salivating sharpness or margarita [...] is dependant on many factors, the not least of which is history’. The phenomenological account of the object is not, as Smith writes, an attempt to offer a ‘historically or culturally constant’ view of the senses, but instead to elucidate a perceptual relationship with objects which *includes* and makes room for a wide variety of culturally and historically specific responses. Mark M. Smith, ‘History of the Senses’, *Journal of Social History*, 40.4 (2007), 841-858 (p. 847).

<sup>322</sup> Knowledge as ‘texture’ of the ‘instance’ of direct experience also aligns with the phenomenological position, as Thomas Baldwin writes in the introduction to *The World of Perception*, that takes the ‘relationship between perception and all other modes of thought [to be] one of “Fundierung” (foundation), which involves a kind of rootedness that does not restrict the capacity for more sophisticated articulations of experience in the light of deeper understandings of the world’, Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 8. From this phenomenological perspective, it is not a matter of *reducing* knowledge to experience, but of *recognising* it in relation to the experiential ground from which it originated.

end of Hook Lane, wearing some blue coarse-cloth jacket. He is thoughtful. You could believe that he was still a countryman, despite the sulphur lights of the main road in the pearl grey bed of distance behind the near fields.<sup>323</sup>

In the first instance, colour is registered as an associative-aesthetic force, its particulars (and perhaps combination)—pink, slate blue, duck-egg—recollective of Poussin’s ‘austere’ palette.<sup>324</sup> As the passage continues, the description attends colour in terms of a correspondence between the senses, the visual and tactile overlapping in a description of how ‘the soaking things have had’ has ‘sopped’ the ‘green field’ and ‘viridian’ and ‘chrome yellow’ of the verge in ‘richness’.<sup>325</sup> Toward the end of the passage, colour is a historical force, the ‘blue coarse-cloth jacket’ part of what seems to transpose the thoughtful young man into the past, just as the ‘sulphur’ coloured lights of the main road provide contrast to the young man and anchor the scene in the present.<sup>326</sup> Colours behave like threads in a scene like this one, aspects of the seen by which the person and landscape are associatively, sensorially, and historically ‘threaded’ to the visible.

Langley’s 14 January 2005 journal entry provides another frame through which to interpret the historical dimension of colour, as it appears in description of direct experience. Langley writes, of the ‘events’ and ‘experience’ he records in the journals, that there is, ‘first the shock of the happening, the chance of it coming about, of events coming off that way’ and, ‘secondly the sense of something going, slipping away, getting loose, falling off’.<sup>327</sup> ‘The arrival and the loss feel bound to happen together’, the temporal doors, so to speak, between

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<sup>323</sup> *Journals*, p. 11.

<sup>324</sup> *Journals*, p. 11.

<sup>325</sup> *Journals*, p. 11.

<sup>326</sup> *Journals*, p. 11.

<sup>327</sup> *Journals*, p. 123.

which the ‘instance’ of experience appears and appears charged.<sup>328</sup> But the direct experience which Langley describes ‘coming off’ is one in which colour itself is charged with history:

What ‘came off’ this time were the regimental banners suspended at the back of the nave. Like so many such banners, they had gone thin. The flesh had dropped off them. The fibre, the elaboration, the surface of coloured stuff, had dusted away, without, one imagined, their having moved at all while it happened. Not a ripple. Hung out there until large pieces of them had become spectral chiffon, tea-coloured gauze, though in other places they were still plumper, scarlet and gold and blue, though dirty. They were of a Scottish regiment, presented to an officer from hereabouts. [...] ‘The Peninsula’ is said amongst its folds. And ‘Waterloo’.<sup>329</sup>

The interval between arrival and loss is suspended in the slow-to-fade ‘spectral chiffon [and] tea-coloured gauze’, and the ‘instance’ of the regimental banners is extended by the historical dimensions which its colour anchor.<sup>330</sup> The ‘continuum’ of history and time, the slow-dusting away of colours and ‘Waterloo’, are ‘amongst [the] folds’ of the banners, in that we might say they are *enfolded* within the ‘instance’ of Langley description of them. This entry, and others like it, with its intersection of colour and history, demonstrate how the ‘continuum’ might texture the ‘instance’. In the next section of this chapter I argue that Langley works out other features of his poetics of perception in his descriptions of works of art in which purposeful applications of colour are used to develop visual correspondences between seemingly disparate elements.

### **Colour and Correspondence: Colour as Visual Rhyme**

The journals demonstrate that Langley is self-aware about the techniques and traditional modes for representing the complex behaviours of appearances and colour which he

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<sup>328</sup> *Journals*, p. 123.

<sup>329</sup> *Journals*, p. 124.

<sup>330</sup> *Journals*, p. 124.

describes. The journals draw painting into their thinking about perception and poetics: particular painterly techniques emerge as exemplary. In the August 1985 entry discussed earlier in this chapter, Langley wrote about the interactions of red and green in Westhall Church. The features of the interior—of the chancel, the nave, and the saints under the tracery—changed in a field of colours responsive to one another and transformative of the ‘expression’ of the church’s interior. The 17 April 2005 journal entry develops another of Langley’s ways of reading colour, not in terms of responsiveness, but in terms of correspondence, a means, in the purposeful applications of painting, of binding disparate elements in a sort of visual rhyme. The journal entry describes Veronese’s 1583 ‘Lucretia’ (spelled ‘Lucrezia’ in the entry). At first, the entry is a careful ekphrasis of the colours in the painting:

The crackly old-gold cloth through which she pushes the bladed. Then the main dress, thick cloth, viridian, Hunter’s green, dark... Underneath this is lined pink, but you see only a slender thread of that at the hem, where it is caught up over the furniture, over the frame of the bed on which she sits. And there is a scarf-width of another cloth draped on this, next to the green, just a twist of it at the right edge of the picture. It is thinly striped silver and what looks like light blue. Glittering silver. A blue which, when you look at it, has a core of cobalt green, and there is a double, thick stripe, down near its fringe, of olive, shadowed to umber. Veronese choosing colours, colours so evidently chosen that they certainly are mannerist. You acknowledge his demonstration. Place this scarf. You see him do it.<sup>331</sup>

Langley proceeds through each of the features of the painting in terms of their colours and acknowledges the artistic deliberateness of their choosing, and, *in* the foregrounding of that deliberateness, the painting’s mannerist style.<sup>332</sup> Richard Wollheim, in *Painting as an Art*,

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<sup>331</sup> *Journals*, p. 126.

<sup>332</sup> As E.M. Gombrich notes, the largely sixteenth century style of painting, sometimes known as the ‘stylish style’, emphasized self-conscious artifice over realistic depictions ‘by making their work less natural, less obvious, less simple [...] that the great masters’. E.M. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon, 2007), pp. 273-274. In his 12 May 1991 journal entry, Langley describes Mannerism, in the context of his own teaching of art, ‘in terms of [...] its adoption of multiple styles in a self-conscious way, its commentary on itself, its fracturing of gesture and state of mind so that they don’t simply correlate, its observation of the body as an actor, set apart from a psyche with which the audience might seek to empathise’, *Journals*, pp. 54-55.

writes about how ‘the simplification of colour [in a painting], and in particular the use of near-complementaries’ has, like the golds and reds Langley describes in Veronese’s ‘Lucretia’, ‘a special binding effect’.<sup>333</sup> Langley describes the painting as a field of correspondences between colour, which binds its elements: ‘precious’ blood on Lucrezia’s blade to the precious stone in her hair, blood in the vein to the vein of blood on the hem of the dress, the gold ornament of the blade and the gold ornament of her dress and bracelets, a subject chained in gold, and so on. Langley describes this field of correspondence, and also the painting as a whole: ‘She kills herself in his colours. A full mix of very subdued, rich sadness, and the scarf’.<sup>334</sup> Within that field of correspondence, and against the backdrop it provides, the scarf is a ‘dissonant [...] rag of bright silver and blue’ that ‘provokes [the sadness]. Gives it a twinge. Twists it to taste’.<sup>335</sup> In this entry we find Langley making another of his shifts in territory: from colour as it *occurs* in the lived experience of the world of perception, to colour *applied* in painting, not from world to word, but from world to paint.

Colour in the ‘world’, like that of Westhall Church, is described as a part of the ‘expression’ of the place. Colour in the painting is a part of how the objects within it might ‘behave’ and a part of a communicative field of correspondences in the body of the painting. In the final section of this chapter I turn to another, central set of correspondences in the journals: how a ‘mode of naming’ is developed out of the poetics of perception which Langley’s journals explore, in which the ‘instance’ of description is prevented from collapse into concept and category through the act of describing the ‘instance’ of direct experience.

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<sup>333</sup> Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 312.

<sup>334</sup> *Journals*, p. 127.

<sup>335</sup> *Journals*, p. 127.

### Defying Description: Appearances as Names, Description as Naming

Phenomenology's mid-century critique of the dangers attendant upon the reifying work of scientific taxonomy illuminates what is most distinctive about Langley's mode of naming in the journals. 'No detail', writes Merleau-Ponty, 'is insignificant', because what a thing *is* 'arises out of all the "details" which embody its present mode of being'; what a thing is cannot be separated from the way it appears.<sup>336</sup> The notion that what a thing is cannot be separated from its details, its particulars, suggests that to describe those details is, itself, an act of naming. From this perspective, when Langley makes one of his returns in the journals to describe again, for example, the interior of Westhall Church, he is learning to say another of its names. This notion also problematises taxonomical accuracy as a self-contained act of category affirmation (i.e. to affix a name is to know a category, but not a particular thing) in which the thing itself holds only utilitarian value as that which satisfies the category to which it belongs.<sup>337</sup> 'The world of perception', Merleau-Ponty writes, remains 'unknown territory so long as we remain in the practical or utilitarian attitude'.<sup>338</sup> Language, from this perspective, is also relationship, as language which attends the way things appear is also a way of learning and saying the 'names' of things. Taxonomical notation in isolation is, Merleau-Ponty writes, 'not perceiving but rather defining'.<sup>339</sup>

Langley's journals pay sustained, careful, particular, and particularising attention to the world of perception. Yet I would go further, to argue that Langley's attention to appearances as

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<sup>336</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>337</sup> A point that Nietzsche humorously makes when he writes that 'If I create the definition of a mammal and then, having inspected a camel, declare, "Behold, a mammal", then a truth has certainly been brought to light, but it is of limited value', Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense', in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writing*, ed. by Raymond Guess and Ronald Speirs, trans. by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 139-153 (p. 147).

<sup>338</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 39.

<sup>339</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 94.

expressive of being, to the ‘expression’ which things present out of the reservoirs of their own potential appearances, constitutes *a mode of naming*. One might rightly point out that because no performance in language, however masterful, could capture all the details of a given thing, then description taken as a mode of naming is, as Langley writes in the introduction to *Journals*, ‘a futile enterprise’.<sup>340</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, however, the impossibility of a ‘total’ description is commensurate with our own direct experience, a perceptual experience in which the things of the world only disclose, at a given time, a modulation—an ‘expression’—of their appearances. The things of the world are, perceptually speaking, composites of the hidden and the visible, mystery and clarity, a state of affairs which Langley acknowledges in the journals when he writes, ‘What is definite can still be hard to identify. Bright precision works as if it were confusion’.<sup>341</sup>

The journals resemble the things which they describe in that they, too, are possessed of a singular and ‘bright’ particularity, a ‘behaviour’ of language, in which *what* is said cannot be separated from the *way* in which it said. One might even say that the prose comes to resemble the things it describes, because a description of a given thing’s particular expression of appearances requires a particularised expression of language, which generalising concepts and categories struggle to produce. The journal entries in which Langley describes his garden or the interior of Westhall Church, discussed earlier in this chapter, are emblematic of this particularised description which is sustained throughout the journals: a description in which the ‘instance’ of the thing is prevented from collapse into a utilitarian value by a description of its particulars, as the ‘instance’ of language, in turn, is prevented from collapse into the

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<sup>340</sup> *Journals*, p. 7.

<sup>341</sup> *Journals*, pp. 72-73. This statement appears to build on an earlier entry, in which Langley writes, ‘The frizz of black bristles on the back of the palps of *Drapetisca*. These things emerge, definite, from the confusions’, *Journals*, p. 41.



‘continua’ of concept and category. The language of the journals is, as Merleau-Ponty suggested of painting, ‘a spectacle sufficient unto itself’.<sup>342</sup>

None of this is to suggest that taxonomy and taxonomical accuracy are of no value or hold no place in Langley’s journals. On the contrary, the journals draw on the scientific nomenclature of botany, entomology, and ornithology, which are used to carefully identify and categorise the natural phenomena he observes, as architectural and artistic terminology populate the passages which describe built spaces and artworks. I argue that the journals bear out Langley’s negotiation of *the potential* for knowledge to instrumentalise experience: in which experience provides the means to satisfy or substantiate conceptual ‘maps’, or where the thing itself simply becomes a means to observational ends. The linguistic correlative to this perceptual dilemma is that taxonomical precision, employed in isolation, is potentially generalising of the particularity of the ‘instance’ of the thing described.

I argue that throughout the journals Langley negotiates the potential for taxonomical precision to collapse the particular ‘instance’ of a given thing by engaging in two related modes of naming: taxonomic- and appearance-based. Taken together, they could rightly be considered the particular binomial nomenclature of the journals: the act of naming one of fusing category and appearance, the historical ‘continuum’ of knowledge implicit in the former, with the ‘instance’ of the latter, in order ‘to get it true and at the same time to find it astonishing’.<sup>343</sup> Langley is keenly aware of these as *modes* of naming. A description of lichen, for example:

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<sup>342</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 95.

<sup>343</sup> *Journals*, p. 103.

And lichen, whitish, crusty, thin patches with lobed edges. Also powdery white patches shaped like lichen, which could be vegetative propagation structures. Could be. Names.<sup>344</sup>

The ‘powdery white patches shaped like lichen’ could *be* ‘vegetative propagation structures’, but the full stop between the repeated ‘Could be’ and ‘Names’ highlights that the space between appearance and taxonomic naming is a labile and creative one.<sup>345</sup> Langley’s mode of naming in the journals is one that uses taxonomical precision as a way of *beginning* a phenomenologically fuller naming. Ravinthiran calls attention to how, in Langley’s poems, ‘a duration is lifted out of the tingling instant and allowed to expand’.<sup>346</sup> In the journals we find a mode of naming which describes the ‘expression’—taken as the present-moment perceptible modulation of appearances—which things, like objects, built spaces, and artworks ‘hold’ in a duration of perception.<sup>347</sup> From this point of view, it is Langley, and not the world, who must sit or stand still for a given thing’s ‘portrait’ to be taken (or name to be said), because it is a mode of naming which takes change—the changing face of things—to be a revelation of what a thing *is*. Langley’s many descriptions of spiders in the journals offer consistent opportunities to see this mode of naming at work because of the way they make obvious the taxonomical, in this case entomological, nomenclature which he has at his disposal. In his 11 August 1991 journal entry, Langley writes:

Evarcha arcuata [...] I have not seen such thickened, powerful femora and tibia before. They are deep black, with the thinner parts of the legs brown with black articulations. He has a bronze head and a face-mask, ear to ear, as it were, which consists of two or three lines of white hairs, the top line pulled up to

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<sup>344</sup> *Journals*, p. 98.

<sup>345</sup> *Journals*, p. 98.

<sup>346</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 411.

<sup>347</sup> This holds true, I argue, generally, in the sense that the journals are marked by a fusion of taxonomical precision and description of appearances as naming, and more specifically, in passages in which taxonomy leads directly into such description, as, for example, toward the end of his 23 August 1986 entry: ‘Oonops domesticus. His legs keep working gently, as if he had been wound up. The eyes flicker as the head turns. The abdomen is darker than the cephalothorax, the opposite of what the book says [...]. Bristow says this spider makes smooth, groping progress without pausing or changing direction, so that you can tell it across a room by its movement. It would move up to a fly with the same, unexcited, soothing motion. Words come true.’ *Journals*, pp. 41–42.

below his huge round anterior eyes. Above this the eyes themselves have white spectacles around them.<sup>348</sup>

Despite the taxonomical nomenclature and anatomically precise terminology employed, and Langley's obvious interest ('I won't know who he is until [...] I look him up') in identifying the spider, there is little sense in the journal entry that identification or classification drives either the encounter or the description.<sup>349</sup> Langley writes that the spider 'seemed to establish some inter-connection with me, in this ocean of random wood and field', and that 'thus located, we meet, Evarcha and I, I in my straw hat, he in his dance mask, interested in each other, and parting as equals'.<sup>350</sup> Langley captures a sense here that pervades the description of the journals, that its fusion(s) of taxonomical precision and appearances are employed to honour the integrity of the 'instance' he describes, and of those things, or creatures, like the spider, whom he encounters. Here, and throughout the journals, the 'continuum' of prior knowledge is not only described as texturing direct experience, but of helping to draw out of the 'ocean of random wood and field', the bright particularity of a particular 'instance'.<sup>351</sup>

As I discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, Langley sympathised with, and distinguished himself from, the painter Ford Madox Brown in both the opening 'Note (1994)' of *Complete Poems* and his 19 August 1970 journal entry. In his own journals, Brown describes himself as Sisyphean in his attempt to paint a field of corn whose colours are always changing (going so far, at one point, to construct a mobile easel which he could wear around his neck) and laments, when the light shifted under a stray cloud, that 'the magic is gone'.<sup>352</sup> Langley writes:

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<sup>348</sup> *Journals*, p. 59. For further examples of journal entries that describe spiders and which employ the mode of naming which I propose for Langley, see the journal entries for: 23 August 1986 (*Journals*, pp. 39-42), 27 August 1996 (*Journals*, p. 77-79), and 8 June 2002 (*Journals*, p. 91-94), cited in the bibliographic record for 'Depending on the Weather' (2003), which also includes descriptions of tiger beetles and digger wasps.

<sup>349</sup> *Journals*, p. 59.

<sup>350</sup> *Journals*, p. 59.

<sup>351</sup> *Journals*, p. 59.

<sup>352</sup> See, for Brown's brief explanation of his mobile painting 'apparatus', his journal entry for 2 September 1854. Brown, p. 125.

What you have when you are there you might be about to lose – a rather desperate blankness ensues from this thought, and your eyes hurry on to more, more. Is the answer then to forget possession... ‘never dream of possession’? Certainly, for this ought not to be a question of possession but of being possessed.<sup>353</sup>

Langley’s determination in this early journal not to ‘dream of possession’ but of ‘being possessed’, bears itself out, I argue, as a defining feature of journals in which the modulatory nature of appearances is taken as expression of what a thing is and, by extension, what it means to name. This, I argue, is a central *correspondence* in the journals between world (taken as the thing described) and word (taken as the material of description): the things of the world are modulatory in their appearances and so too is Langley’s mode of naming.

Such particularity applies not just to the things of the world but also to its human perceivers. Noel-Tod, writing about historical personae in Langley’s early poems, argues that ‘Langley’s poetics of perception is [...] concerned [...] with sympathetically knowing the irreducible particularity of an individual life’, while, in other poems, like ‘The Ecstasy Inventories’ (1978), Langley ‘confronts the impossibility of knowing another existence through its material records’.<sup>354</sup> This succinct definition of Langley’s poetics can, I argue, be extended to the journals, in that they are concerned with sympathetically knowing the irreducible particularity of the material life of things in the ongoing modulation of their own appearances. This sympathetic knowing, Langley writes, is grounded in a ‘non-egocentric attention to the particular’.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> ‘The Self is Gone’, para. 12 of 16.

<sup>354</sup> Noel-Tod, ‘Dramatic Monologue’, p. 224.

<sup>355</sup> *Journals*, p. 117; Langley expands on this notion of ‘non-egocentric attention to the particular’ in his 8 March 2008 entry, writing ‘human beings in subordinate positions, making little interventions, not obtruding or taking a central position, being a part of what is happening rather than taking a hold on it, companionship with each other and the scene’. R.F. Langley, ‘From the Journals: 8 March 2008’, *PN Review*, 245.45 (2019) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=10396](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=10396)> [accessed 3 June 2022] (para. 6 of 6).

In his 24 January 2007 journal entry, Langley takes a long way home ‘because the sun is out again’, noting how ‘everything is wet after the quick melting’ and the ‘grass loaded with sparks’.<sup>356</sup> He sees a half rainbow first and then, in the rain ‘flickering silver’, a second rainbow and how together they ‘feed off the rain and intensify’.<sup>357</sup> Langley reflects on Newton, Heidegger, colour, and, again, on two ways of looking:

It would be a pleasure to remember Newton and his measuring of the colours thrown by his prism, but I don’t until after I get home and happen to be reading, not Newton at all, but Heidegger. He states that if colour is to shine, which is what it wants to do, it will succeed only if we let it be ‘undisclosed and unexplained’. If we analyse it in rational terms by measuring wave-lengths and so on, it is gone [...]. Heidegger says we have the choice of really seeing the colour or explaining it.<sup>358</sup>

Here are the ways of looking which this dissertation has taken as one of its primary foci: a non-utilitarian looking which attends to the ‘instance’ of the appearances of things, as they appear, and a utilitarian one which in some way collapses that instance into the ‘continuum’ of knowledge, here via measurement, analysis, and rational terms. I proposed, earlier in this chapter, that Langley engages in a kind of binomial nomenclature, one in which category and appearance, knowledge and experience, are fused in an ‘instance’ of particularised language. This way of saying, we might say, is aligned with the phenomenological project generally, in that it does not seek to reduce knowledge to sensation, or the possible contents of thought to direct experience, but to bring knowledge back to its own experiential foundation. Langley is clear in this entry that it would be a loss, as Heidegger suggests, to choose between ‘really seeing’ and ‘explaining’.<sup>359</sup> He continues:

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<sup>356</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 24 January 2007’, *PN Review*, 183.35 (2008) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=3925](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=3925)> [accessed 20 August 2022] (para. 1 of 3).

<sup>357</sup> ‘From a Journal: 24 January 2007’, para. 1 of 3.

<sup>358</sup> ‘From a Journal: 24 January 2007’, para. 2 of 3.

<sup>359</sup> ‘From a Journal: 24 January 2007’, para. 2 of 3.

I imagine walking with a companion discussing the spectrum and noticing this rainbow over this field. The discussion would not prevent me seeing the rainbow putting its foot down into the field, over the trees, stepping our way. I can imagine my grandfather as the companion, as when I was a pre-school boy and he would take me out into the lanes and talk about what we could find [...]. Maybe, pushed to the very second of perception, you would have to choose between thinking of the explanation or simply seeing the rainbow [...]. You can't see both at once. A rapid exchange between the two might be the best at unification that could be done. But [...] surely, [they] would both be splendid aspects of the situation, showing each other off. Showing each other off. Away I go. Holding the door open.<sup>360</sup>

The journals, I argue, demonstrate that Langley did not make a choice between these two ways of looking, but instead developed a way of saying, a 'rapid exchange' that allows both ways of looking to, in the act of description itself, undergo a sort of 'unification'.<sup>361</sup> The journals, we might say, are a way of 'holding the door open' so that this unification, if only after the fact, can occur.<sup>362</sup> In a late journal entry, from 21 March 2010, Langley describes another encounter with a spider that flies out of his hand, and into the wind, on its own thin strand of thread. Langley writes of the sight as:

A flicker of time [...] to see exactly what happens, the thread stretching in the bright light, the behaviour stretching back through hundreds of years [...]. I see how it mattered then, and so how it matters now [...] it is part of my business and the sorts of truths there are about, felt and noted.<sup>363</sup>

The poetics of the journals is one in which the potential for the collapse of the 'instance' of direct experience by the various 'continua' of self, knowledge, and history, is, to a significant degree, negotiated by the 'instance' of the journals themselves: journal entries as fields in which direct experience and knowledge, the 'instance' described and the 'continuum', are

<sup>360</sup> 'From a Journal: 24 January 2007', para. 2 of 3.

<sup>361</sup> 'From a Journal: 24 January 2007', para. 2 of 3.

<sup>362</sup> 'From a Journal: 24 January 2007', para. 2 of 3.

<sup>363</sup> R.F. Langley, 'From a Journal: 21 March 2010', *PN Review*, 197.37 (2011) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=8215](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=8215)> [accessed 20 August 2022] (para. 3 of 3).

merged in a way of saying in which both occupy, and preoccupy, those fields—the ‘bright particularity’ of the spider the ‘bright light’ of its history ‘stretching back through hundreds of years.’<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 21 March 2010’, *PN Review*, 197.37 (2011) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=8215](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=8215)> [accessed 20 August 2022] (para. 3 of 3).

## Conclusion

### Between World and Word

This thesis, in part, emerged out of my feeling while reading R.F. Langley's poetry that, to quote 'The Upshot', 'we don't know what we see, so / there is more here. More. Here'.<sup>365</sup>

This sense of 'more here', of surface textured by source, created two impulses which at first seemed to be at odds with one another: the impulse, on the one hand, to explain and map the 'continua' of context, reference, and allusion suggested by the poems and outlined in Jeremy Noel-Tod's bibliography, and, on the other, to honour the 'instance' of the poems as self-contained works and, as Peter Riley and others suggest, understand that the poems' tension between saying and withholding is one of design.<sup>366</sup> To 'move' in Langley's poems is not unlike how Langley describes his own movement through the world in the journals: they are 'places' where appearance and knowledge, 'instance' and 'continuum', intertwine: where the orchids Langley describes by the path in the wood generate the path in language which links them to the 'click' of bluebells in Gerard Manley Hopkin's hand.<sup>367</sup> In this sense, the poems invite the two ways of looking which the journals explore: one, as their own 'instances', and two, in the light of the 'continua' of source materials that inform them.

I did not find in the journals an 'explanatory apparatus' for the poems, so much as a site at once its own and also a border town between the frontiers of the world described, and the world created in the poems, where Langley can be read working out a poetics grounded in

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<sup>365</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 14.

<sup>366</sup> Riley, n. pag.

<sup>367</sup> The specific 'path in language', in this instance, is the one that Langley takes, in the 22 April 2003 entry to which I refer, through the entry for 'bluebell' in Geoffrey Grigson's *The Englishman's Flora* and the entry for 'grig' in William W. Skeat's *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*. See *Journals*, p. 103; Grigson, p. 91; Skeat, p. 230.



perceptual concerns which his attentional practice discovers, and which extend into and inform linguistic ones.<sup>368</sup> J.H. Prynne described Langley's attentional practice as one of 'open[ing] his gaze and thoughts over an extended period' in order to 'tune into his surroundings'.<sup>369</sup> This is a central part of what the journals do: they re-enact, and thereby extend, Langley's looking, and facilitate further seeing and insight. But the 'surroundings' which Langley tunes into in the journals are both experiential and linguistic and it is in this hybrid terrain that Langley's poetics of perception *in language* can be read: one which develops a way of saying that realizes a correspondence with the world it describes, and thereby enacts a belief that language can 'make contact'. The journals reach into those 'deep structures' and 'vast inventories of connotative potential' in language, to develop, or 'grow', a language particular enough to at once refer to the world which sets it in motion and be its own 'instance'.<sup>370</sup> There is a sense of double vision about Langley's journals: he moves between modes of perception, one of which might see a rainbow in its Newtonian dimensions and one which attends to how the rainbow 'shines'.<sup>371</sup> I argued that out of the concern in the early journals that perception itself might be structured to collapse the 'instance' of direct experience, Langley develops his ability to negotiate modes of perception, and of description, in which the 'instance' of the thing can be textured by prior knowledge without being obscured by it.

Langley's journals do not operate in a conception of language which maintains, happily or not, a distance from the world, like the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets with whom he was a contemporary, or like his Cambridge school fellows, such as Prynne, who, as Mark Byers neatly describes, often works to 'expose the linguistic and epistemic structures through which

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<sup>368</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 157. Noel-Tod writes, of the bibliography of 'source texts for individual poems', that 'they are intended as signposts to further reading rather than *explanatory apparatus*' (my emphasis), *Complete Poems*, p. 157.

<sup>369</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. xiii.

<sup>370</sup> David-Antoine Williams, p. 113; Sperling, p. 93.

<sup>371</sup> 'From a Journal: 24 January 2007', para. 2 of 3.

knowledge is controlled and instrumentalized'.<sup>372</sup> Langley describes his own affinities, as Noel-Tod notes, in a letter to critic Ian Brinton in 2010, writing: 'I guess my deepest feelings have always been for Coleridge's Conversation poems, the Lime Tree Bower, the shock which begins where the particular strikes, beyond any general concepts, geographical, historical or whatever'.<sup>373</sup> Langley privileges 'what is really here', the 'flycatcher' and 'nest in the hammerbeams', his poems tether his work to the 'shocks of fear and joy that specific moments seem to carry' and which are, for him, 'often what matters most'.<sup>374</sup> The journals, we might say, are the long-form to the poem's short-form shocks: the fulgurite, tracing veins inside sand, to the original 'lightning' of the experiences to which they refer.<sup>375</sup>

The approach that I have taken to the journals and to the exploration of Langley's poetics opens up possibilities for future exploration of the shared 'territory' of the journals and the poems. This thesis has offered close readings of journals and poems to demonstrate not only their shared poetics, but how perceptual dilemmas discovered in the former are taken up and restructured by the latter. Further work might look across the timelines of the journals and poems in order to map concerns specific to individual entries and poems, the changing relation of journals to poems, and the way in which the journals both reflect back on, and look forward to, poems. My work contributes to recent scholarly applications of phenomenology to contemporary art and literature, and implicates and establishes Langley's work as meriting further phenomenological study. Other aspects of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of art and aesthetics, like his work on perspective, might further illuminate

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<sup>372</sup> Riley, p. 349.

<sup>373</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. xii; Ian Brinton, 'Charles Olson and Poetry in England', *Tears in the Fence*, 53 (2011), 108-117 (p. 108).

<sup>374</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. xvii.

<sup>375</sup> Fulgurite, commonly known as 'fossil lightning', is a vitreous material formed of sand or other sediment fused by lightning.

Langley's journals, just as the journals themselves, like those of Milner, could be explored further as works of applied phenomenology.

By focusing on Langley's complex negotiation of perceptual dilemmas in language, this dissertation clarifies what is most distinctive about his poetics: how the space between word and world becomes the crucible in which Langley develops ways of saying in which the world is not collapsed by the word, but in which the two are brought together in networks of correspondence. If the journals make a 'crucible' of that creative point, the poems are differently forged. In the reading that follows I look at a poem which, typically, structures and further amplifies a set of concerns that Langley develops throughout the journals: with the nature of correspondence, and how language might hold something of the world to which it refers. The poem 'After the Funeral' (2002) is itself a 'concentration' of the journals' concerns, as it builds a space that 'rings' with the correspondences that the death of Langley's friend Pauline initially set 'ringing' in the world the journals describe.

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The late 2002 poem 'After the Funeral' has one of the slighter entries in Noel-Tod's bibliographic record to the poems, including a single November 1997 journal entry, a review of James Schuyler's poetry by Michael Hofmann, a guide to the now defunct Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art in London, and Elizabeth Sewell's *The Field of Nonsense* (1952). The poem engages directly with the above journal entry, but draws on concerns which stretch across various entries in the journals. 'After the Funeral' takes ceramic bowls as a central subject and, in a sense, the poem itself is a 'kiln' in which is fired the fascination of other journal entries with how a vessel's interior space makes absence present, and concern that the vessel does not 'collapse' the 'instance' of the thing which it serves to hold. Colour 'speaks'

across journal entries and Langley also uses colour within entries to describe and develop correspondences between seemingly disparate elements. In ‘After the Funeral’, Langley’s concern that his language communicates, but does not collapse the ‘instance’ of what he describes, and interest in the way that colour both forges and ‘speaks’ in correspondences, intersect in a poem which engages in a most careful kind of holding and correspondence: an elegy for his friend Pauline. The ‘instance’ which the poem holds is an ‘absence’ left by Pauline’s death.

Langley’s November 1997 journal entry opens at mid-day, after the funeral for Pauline, and shifts between three locations: Golders Green Crematorium in London, Pauline’s room in Kentish Town, and the Percival David Institute. The journal entry is an exploratory piece which allows Langley to describe, and develop, how what remains after a death is patterned, and how to pattern what remains. The question *what can speak an absence* is, I argue, at the heart of this entry, and Langley explores this question by engaging with things which hold an absence which they somehow repeat, and allow to speak. In the journal entry, as he confronts the occasion of his friend’s funeral, he pays attention to how colour, rooms, mouths, and bowls enable him to arrive at an image which, itself, might be capable of ‘saying’ or ‘holding’ what is absent. The exploration is also a compression of associations between things which seem to ‘ring’ with correspondences, coalescing in the image of the bowl, as Langley seeks to produce correlations in language in the form of repetitions and rhymes.<sup>376</sup>

In the journal entry, the first focus is on limit and loss. A clergyman’s summary ‘narrows’, photos go only as far as ‘Kentish Town’, her ‘few glass brooches’ suggest her missing

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<sup>376</sup> Langley writes, in his 10 January 2009 journal entry, of a sort of visual ‘chiming’ in which seemingly disparate things in his visual field seem to ‘reverberate’ with one another. He calls this visual chiming ‘a rather risky and refreshing sort of spontaneity’, in which ‘[the] new green leaves of the heliotrope [...] reverberate quietly with the clean take-off of a wood pigeon from amongst the branches of a poplar’. R.F. Langley, ‘From a Journal: 10 January 2009’, *PN Review*, 192.36 (2010) <[http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item\\_id=8166](http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/dscribe?item_id=8166)> [accessed 25 August 2022] (para. 2 of 2).

possessions, ‘a screw of bedclothes’ the shape of her body: what remains after Pauline’s death ‘speaks’, but inadequately, the details of a life that do not settle, will not square, with the absent person. These things are described, as Pauline is remembered, with ‘pursed lips’.<sup>377</sup> Langley looks to windows as things which hold, in the spaces they frame, absences. He recalls the windows in Pauline’s room, ‘the air [...] not coming up easily through their down-tilted mouths’, ‘the yellow leaves on the plane trees [and] blue sky’ outside them.<sup>378</sup> The mouth-like windows ‘speak’, but speak in appearances: in yellow and blue, leaves and sky. Of the ceramic gallery where he and Barbara waited for a train after the funeral, Langley writes, ‘more yellow plane tree leaves through barred windows, with sun pouring in’.<sup>379</sup> The ‘mouths’ in the entry begin to open and speak, as so often in the journals and poems, in correspondences of colour: visual rhymes of yellow and blue that bind place to place, past to present, and presence to absence.

The ceramic bowls in the upstairs gallery, in ‘clouds of yellow leaves’, are described with ‘orange rim[s]’, ‘copper-bound rims’, and ‘glinting mouth-rims’, as if painted with the yellow and ‘speaking’ in correspondences from the windows. One bowl ‘speaks’ a poem by the Emperor Quianlung, ‘Amid accumulated pollen and massed flowers two phoenixes droop their wings’, as if the phoenixes might drink from the flowers painted on bowls ‘the colours of ashes after burning’.<sup>380</sup> The bowls—‘Round. Round. Round. Round. Untrammelled.’—are the most open and expressive of the ‘mouths’ which Langley describes, but their speech, like the windows, is composed of appearances: ‘Gold lipped. Peace and calm, rounded and smoothed’ they speak as ‘sheer appearance’.<sup>381</sup> Langley describes the view outside the

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<sup>377</sup> *Journals*, p. 82.

<sup>378</sup> *Journals*, p. 83.

<sup>379</sup> *Journals*, p. 83.

<sup>380</sup> *Journals*, p. 83.

<sup>381</sup> *Journals*, pp. 83-84.

window in ceramic terms, ‘Lemon burning plane tree leaves. Unglazed blue sky’, and at this sort of peak of correspondences, Pauline appears:

Somewhere [...] in a royal-blue dress with her hands folded in her lap, at a party, looking straight at the camera, eyes quite wide, mouth still pursed, just about to make a dry joke about being dead [...] about green tea in celadon bowls and white foam, whisked, in black bowls. Highest quality. Guan celadon.<sup>382</sup>

Pauline almost appears to speak—‘mouth still pursed’ but ‘about to make a dry joke’—but what is described as most expressive about her is how she appears: her royal-blue dress and her look, ‘straight at the camera’.<sup>383</sup> It is here that the correspondences that Pauline’s death set ‘ringing’ in the journal entry—colour, mouths, objects which hold absences—coalesce in the image of a bowl. The language of the entry rings with its own correspondences in rhymes, repetitions, and parallel syntactical structures:

Golden brown crackle deriving from within the iron in the body. The sparse cackle derived from the closed mouth and revealing the iron in her mind.<sup>384</sup>

In the image of a bowl with a golden crackle in its glaze, Langley finds the visual correspondence which seems to hold (as it does the emptiness at its centre) and speak Pauline most carefully: the golden brown crackle of the bowl reveals the iron in its body, as Pauline’s cackle the iron in her mind. Having found what holds Pauline’s absence most carefully, as if learning and saying another of her names, Langley seems able to say a goodbye still ‘ringing’

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<sup>382</sup> *Journals*, p. 84.

<sup>383</sup> *Journals*, p. 84.

<sup>384</sup> *Journals*, p. 84. I have set this quotation off from the main body of the text so that the ‘correspondences’ I call attention to—the rhymes on ‘crackle’ and ‘cackle’, ‘brown’ and ‘mouth’, repetitions, like ‘iron’, and parallel syntactical constructions, like ‘deriving from’ and ‘in the body/in her mind’—can be more easily appreciated, *Journals*, p. 84.

with correspondences: 'Few visitors this afternoon in Gordon Square, where, I dare swear, Pauline never came. Golden brown crackle in quiet celadon. Good luck Pauline'.<sup>385</sup>

Langley's interest in how the 'instance' of a given thing can be held in language without collapsing the particularity of that 'instance' is focused, in this 1997 journal entry, into a concern with what not only holds an absence but allows that absence to abide, like a bowl does its emptiness. The interest in *what speaks an absence* that is central to this journal entry becomes, I argue, in the poem 'After the Funeral', an interest in *how to hold an absence*. The poem itself contains the patterns of presence and absence discovered in the entry, and hones them, foregrounding patterns in language and how formal patterns themselves might hold, like a bowl or urn, the absence at the centre of the elegy. 'After the Funeral', published five years after the November 1997 journal entry in 2002, returns to the scene.

*After the Funeral*

In the Ceramic Gallery. No train  
till half past five. Yellow.

No amber. A hornet  
would be something from another poem,  
eager for nectar. We

flee with yellow leaves. A  
row of white bowls that make  
mouths at it, months of it,  
moon after moon. Colder  
and rimmed with copper. In

the Ceramic Gallery, the yellow  
October plane tree leaves in Gordon Square.  
Nothing slabbered about Pauline's death. Some  
details will rustle about or hump it  
and call it a sixpenny jug. Think it  
as leaves. Think it as bowls. It's a question

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<sup>385</sup> *Journals*, p. 84.

of leaves at the top of  
 their swell, which speak out in  
 a screed round the scope of  
 themselves, to die down in  
 the bowl. Stop. So that they  
 settle. Or stump up at  
 once. A hornet could bring  
 a formidable hum  
 to the poem. It's the  
 right time of year. There were  
 none at the Hampstead Free  
 Hospital. Nor here. Give

some mind to an empty dish. How, in the  
 Ceramic Gallery, metal lips fit.  
 Her passport photo looks like the moon  
 in a tight woollen hat. She had given

her money away. Her  
 stare will say nothing of  
 that. I forget what is  
 left of the leaves. But it's  
 a knuckle keeps rapping  
 the bowl, so that it rings.  
 So that it rings and rings.<sup>386</sup>

The poem presses forward with an object-like aspiration to itself become a thing which carefully holds. The poem is a shaped container, its syllabic 'body' narrows and expands in stanzas of six or ten syllable lines. The stanzas, with the exception of the first framing stanza, run via their own last lines one into the next: the 'rooms' of the poem speak, like a window might the colour of leaves into a room, into one another. But the poem is not only interested in its own formal container, its body, but in the way that container, that body, shapes, like a bowl, the absence it holds. The precipitously enjambed lines give each stanza a continuous syntactic and semantic 'rim' (formed by the phrases continuing from line-to-line) like the bowls with 'copper-bound rims with no joins in them, cut from one sheet, a thin, glinting

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<sup>386</sup> *Complete Poems*, pp. 93-94.



mouth-rim', where single words and partial phrases, suspended between a full-stop and a line's end, create lines 'glinting' with their own suspended meanings.<sup>387</sup> These enjambments also create another seamlessness in the way lines often fuse two phrases in a single unit of meaning so that, for example, it is not only the hornet, but the 'we' who can be read as 'eager for nectar'.<sup>388</sup> Like the bowls, 'Round. Round. Round. Round. Untrammelled', Langley has shaped stanzas which are 'round' in their saying, and lines rimmed with 'glinting' meaning. The poem embodies not only the body of the bowl in its form, but the way the bowl 'holds' (with a continuous glinting rim) the absence it 'speaks'. These 'mouth-' and 'bowl-like' lines can be thought of, as Wollheim suggests, as part of the way the poem has of 'securing corporeality'.<sup>389</sup>

The form of the poem holds the absence at its centre with an awareness, initially forged in the entry, that to overdetermine is also to narrow and, perhaps, to disperse or collapse an absence. Just as the form is a carefully shaped container, as a bowl 'mouths' its emptiness, the poem is careful in the way it holds and 'mouths' the absence at its centre. The third stanza, for example:

flee with yellow leaves. A  
row of white bowls that make  
mouths at it, months of it,  
moon after moon. Colder  
and rimmed with copper. In<sup>390</sup>

With the repetition of 'm' sounds on 'make', 'mouth', 'months', 'moon', the three variations of 'o' sounds, the modulation of 'at it'/'of it', consonances of 'colour' and 'copper', and

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<sup>387</sup> *Journals*, p. 83.

<sup>388</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>389</sup> Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 312.

<sup>390</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

chimes on ‘rimmed’ and ‘in’, the lines simultaneously describe the absent ‘it’ *and* ‘mouth’ and ‘sound out’ their own attempt to say ‘it’.<sup>391</sup> The poem, like the journal entry, is concerned both with mouths that cannot utter, or which, like Pauline’s pursed-lipped possessions, fail in their utterance, and with a sense that speaking itself, like those possessions, might miss the more essential person, might call ‘it’ the wrong thing: not a fine ceramic bowl, but a ‘sixpenny jug’.<sup>392</sup> The stanza ‘speaks’ the absence to which it refers without bringing ‘it’ into a determined or narrowed form, just as a bowl ‘mouths’, but does not fill, the emptiness it holds. The absence the poem mourns is what the other elements form *around*—the syllabic ‘vessel’ of the poem, its ‘rimmed’ stanzas, and its ‘glinting’ line ends—and what the description, too, forms around: ‘it’ is what the ‘white bowls [...] make / mouths at’ and ‘months of’, ‘moon after moon’; ‘it’ is tinged yellow with leaves, as the moon is tinged yellow with sun, and the rims of the bowls with copper.<sup>393</sup> The careful ‘mouthing’ of the absence offers a sense of something being negotiated into a shaped space and foregrounds the process of making: an absence held by a careful patterning of form and language, as a bowl’s emptiness is held by its body.

The poem never explicitly names the ‘it’ which the bowls ‘make / mouths at’.<sup>394</sup> We are told to ‘Think it / as leaves. Think it as bowls’, to ‘Give // some mind to an empty dish’.<sup>395</sup> The journal entry discovers and develops the correspondences which ‘After the Funeral’ asks the reader to discover between its elements: between the ‘yellow’ of the opening stanza, the yellow implicit in the ‘hornet’, and the ‘yellow leaves’; between the ‘yellow leaves’ which the speaker laughs with, is ‘flee’ with, and the leaves which ‘speak out in / a screed’.<sup>396</sup> As it

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<sup>391</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>392</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>393</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>394</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>395</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>396</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

is possible to ‘see’ the wind in leaves ‘at the top of / their swell’, the poem asks us to ‘see’ the person in the things of the poem. Pauline’s death *is* referred to in the poem, but the ‘it’ is not named; the missing referent to which the various elements of the poem seem to refer, and which the poem asks us to try and imagine, creates an oscillation between what is present and what is absent. In this sense, the absence which the poem mourns is what sets the correspondences in the poem ‘ringing’.<sup>397</sup>

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In the July 1997 journal entry which directly precedes the November 1997 one in *Journals*, Langley again returns to Westhall Church: the branches of a trees outside the window, in a ‘considerable wind’, ‘send in [...] half melted notices of themselves’.<sup>398</sup> The light inside the church is ‘pulled up in an unstoppable inhalation’ and the shadows ‘thin out, like ripples on water that smooth into the clarity of [...] an empty, yellow sky’.<sup>399</sup> The scene is familiar to Langley’s journals in that it carefully attends to the way in which the light- and colour- dynamic interiors of built spaces seem to ‘speak’ and are ‘alive’ with worlds that are not strictly present in them. The space of an elegy like ‘After the Funeral’, however, is one that must, in a sense, build itself to *invite*, and hope, that the material of the poem itself is sufficient to the task of providing some after-life to the person it mourns.

The image of the hornet, ‘something from another poem, / eager for nectar’, seems to capture this sense in the poem. The November 1997 journal entry carefully develops links between windows and mouths—windows as what ‘speak’ colours into built spaces—and ‘After the

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<sup>397</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93.

<sup>398</sup> *Journals*, p. 81.

<sup>399</sup> *Journals*, p. 81.

Funeral’ is, itself, something of a ‘window’ for the journal entry which informs it. In his review of Schuyler’s *Last Poems* (1999), cited in the bibliographic record for Langley’s poem, Hofmann describes Schuyler’s elegy to Frank O’Hara, ‘Buried at Springs’ (1967), as an exemplary ‘poem of the window’.<sup>400</sup> The elegy opens, ‘there is a hornet in the room / and one of us will have to go / out the window’, and so it would appear that Langley’s hornet is ‘something from another poem’: from another ‘poem of the window’ and another poet’s mouth, eager, in his own poem, for ‘nectar’.<sup>401</sup>

Yet, as was the case with the other poems which I have read in this dissertation, and which early criticism of Langley’s poetry like Riley’s picks up, the ‘instances’ of which Langley’s poem are comprised are not resolvable back to the ‘continua’ of source materials which inform them. In the lines, ‘A hornet could bring / a formidable hum / to the poem’, the hornet’s ‘hum’ is ‘formidable’ in the poem simply for being named so, but does not itself allow the reader to know that part of the formidableness of that hum is that this particular hornet has ‘flown’ between poets and poems.<sup>402</sup> Nonetheless, it is the very ‘instance’ of the hornet in the poem which invites us to look, or at least wonder, about the material which might support its presence in the poem. In this sense, the hornet of the poem is neither resolvable back into the ‘continuum’ of references which support it, but neither is that ‘continuum’ entirely subsumed. In their fusion of ‘instance’ and ‘continuum’, the poems realize the ‘rapid exchange’ between ways of looking which Langley describes in the journals; the journals, by slowing down, and exploring this rapid exchange, inform and prepare us for poems that are not unlike Westhall’s interior in the July 1997 entry:

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<sup>400</sup> Michael Hofmann, ‘Slowly/Swiftly’, *London Review of Books*, 24.3 (2002) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n03/michael-hofmann/slowly-swiftly>> [accessed 18 September 2022] (para. 13 of 17).

<sup>401</sup> Hofmann, para. 13 of 17.

<sup>402</sup> *Complete Poems*, p. 93. Another hidden allusion here is to O’Hara’s own elegiac poem, ‘A Step Away from Them’, which opens with the lines ‘It’s my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-coloured / cabs’. Frank O’Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 110.

So the surface and the depth co-exist, the across and the near and far, taking place on the one surface in a complex eventfulness [...]. All sorts of possible comings and goings, approachings, recessions and journeyings, high and low, simultaneously. The whole river, and the particularities of which it is made up.<sup>403</sup>

The journals and the poems might not feature the ‘self as the primary organising feature of [their] writing’, but are nonetheless shaped by and, in turn, describe Langley’s fascinations: his attention is what ‘holds’ the world in the journal entries and poems he made. In his writing, Langley is like the wren he describes later in the same July 1997 entry, not so much an explicit presence in the scene, but one who is nonetheless illuminated by it: ‘illuminated by the reflected light [...] he gleams up in the dark’.<sup>404</sup>

As this contextual reading of journal and poem shows, Langley’s poetics of perception can be read as connecting his attentional practice with the practice of journalling, and the journals with the poems. At each juncture, at each site, Langley is concerned with how writing may hold the ‘instance’ of something else. Langley returns in the journals to images of growth and growing in language: to words ‘as leaves’, to language forged in a ‘cloud’ of experience, or like a ‘bird’ carrying the ‘seed’ from experience to germinate in its own linguistic terrain.<sup>405</sup> Like the leaves to which he compares words, the language of the journals carries the ‘genetic material’ of the world it carefully describes, but is also a ‘molecular wonder’, something freshly ‘grown’: rooted in experience, but brought across from memory to language.<sup>406</sup> Langley’s writing, in the journals and in the poems, is unusually and fruitfully pre-occupied by the mutable ‘behaviour’ and ‘instance’ of words themselves, and by the correspondences

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<sup>403</sup> *Journals*, p. 81.

<sup>404</sup> *Journals*, p. 82.

<sup>405</sup> ‘Presencing the Bright Particulars’, para. 5 of 10; Unpublished 13 May 2001 entry, quoted in David-Antoine Williams, p. 118.

<sup>406</sup> Ravinthiran, p. 413.

between world and word: we are asked to notice how language in part becomes, for us, his readers, its own 'instance' in the process of being used to 'carry' that to which it refers.

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