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## **The 'Specific evidentness' of contemporary radical landscape poetry**

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The ‘specific evidentness’ of contemporary radical landscape poetry:  
innovative form and spatial presence in *The Ground Aslant*

*Abstract*

This paper attempts to account for the spatialization of language in a selection of radical landscape poems from Harriet Tarlo’s 2011 anthology, *The Ground Aslant*. Following Merleau-Ponty, I suggest that the poems share a ‘specific evidentness’ with objects and phenomena in the environment, which unsettles ontological hierarchies in which artworks, including poems, ‘represent’ the world. On the other hand, I understand confidence in the ontological reality of that world to relate in important ways to the possibility of artistic representation, as Alva Noë and Martin Seel propose. Radical landscape poems offer a way out of the tension between the artwork as representation of something, and as object with phenomenal presence, in that they are both ‘seen’ and ‘seen through’, according to Lyotard’s formulation in *Discourse, Figure*.

**Keywords:** radical landscape poetry, ecological perception, Merleau-Ponty, Lyotard, spatiality

**Introduction: language, text and the world beyond**

In his 2015 book on art and ‘human nature’, Alva Noë writes:

One way to think about something is to look at it and pay attention to it, to hold it in your hand and inspect it. But how can you think about things that are far away in space and time? How can you think about Julius Caesar, or what you will have for breakfast in seventeen days, or the centre of gravity of the solar system, or the big bang, or the lives of your unborn descendents? We need ways to reach these things in thought. We use language, and writing, to do this.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), p. 27.

Language and writing, Noë argues, are forms of technology. Technologies allow us to solve problems such as the ones he mentions above at the same time as they generate the formulation of, and provide solutions to, increasingly complex problems. Technology allows us in this way to ‘think new thoughts’.<sup>2</sup> He claims, for example,

I can perform complex calculations – find the solution to quadratic equations [...] but only thanks to the fact that I have access to and know how to use arithmetical notation. Arithmetical notation is a tool for thinking thoughts that I (at least) couldn’t think without it.<sup>3</sup>

If language and writing are technologies in this way, some might say that they are part of what makes us cultural beings and differentiates us from other animals; that they distance us from our biological or natural being. Not so for Noë. Technologies, he argues, are ‘natural for us’.<sup>4</sup> They are means by which we organize ourselves, and activities which in turn organize us. As *organisms*, he points out, we are organized at the most fundamental level. ‘Organized’ activities, which according to Noë include dancing, talking, walking and breast-feeding, are both natural, basic and primitive, *and* cultural, learned and cognitively sophisticated.<sup>5</sup> From this point of view, language and writing do two important things: they reinforce our connection with the biologically organized (or natural) world, and at the same time, they metaphorically bring distant things close to us. The second is particularly relevant to innovative poetic form, as two-dimensional textual space is understood to implicate the three-dimensional space of the world.

In this paper I argue that Noë’s claim can help us understand the significance of the spatial and visual aspects of the contemporary ‘radical’ landscape poetry, or what Terry Gifford has called ‘UK avant-garde ecopoetry’,<sup>6</sup> collected in Harriet Tarlo’s 2011 anthology, *The Ground Aslant*.<sup>7</sup> Of course,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Terry Gifford, *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*, 2nd edn (Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011).

Noë's theory that language 'reaches' towards distant objects includes *all* language use, even the abstract or internal kind involved in thoughts about the big bang and Julius Caesar. Whilst I do not contest the idea that all poetry would, by its very nature, have this capacity, I make specific claims for a selection of radical landscape poems, suggesting that they engage explicitly and reflexively with language's ability to 'travel' space in the way Noë proposes. They not only bring distant objects to our attention, but also position us as readers in the world by reflecting on the ways in which we make contact with and draw significance from our environments. Implicit in the graphic presentation of these poems is a negotiation of the space of the page as real or phenomenal space, and a challenge to the idea of the incommensurability of 'reading' and 'seeing' posited by Jean-François Lyotard in *Discourse, Figure*. According to him, only encounters with visual or figural artworks elicit a bodily response to the plasticity of the object, where linguistic or discursive works demand a response purely from intellectual faculties. But radical landscape poetry foregrounds 'the ambiguity of writing, object of reading and of sight'.<sup>8</sup> As graphic text, arranged very particularly by the hand of a poet, it retains 'the trace of a gesture that creates a space',<sup>9</sup> without relinquishing its discursive and reflective significance – indeed, in the context of recent theories of ecological perception, it is radical landscape poetry's emphasis on its own spatial and material presence which reinforces its discursive content. By establishing an interdependent relationship between their semantic and graphic aspects, I argue that radical landscape poems complicate Lyotard's notion that 'the read-heard text is without depth, even without perceptible space', where, in contrast, 'the seen text dwells over there', *in* the world.<sup>10</sup>

Merleau-Ponty's description of the poem, which, 'even if it is independent of our living gestures, [...] is not independent of all material support',<sup>11</sup> comes closer to explaining the discursive materiality of radical landscape poetry. The poem, he writes,

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 264.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 152.

would be irredeemably lost if its text was not perfectly preserved. Its signification is not free and does not reside in the heaven of ideas; it is locked up between the words on some fragile piece of paper. In this sense, like every other work of art, the poem exists too in the manner of a thing and does not eternally subsist in the manner of a truth.<sup>12</sup>

In his rather casual evocation of ‘some fragile piece of paper’ he articulates a fundamental complexity of radical landscape poetry: paper is *almost* not an object – it is primarily surface, thin enough to become nearly invisible from certain angles and relatively ephemeral in its amenability to tearing and discarding. And yet, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, poems, like all artworks, ‘are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression cannot be distinguished from the expressed, whose sense is only accessible through direct contact, and who send forth their signification without ever leaving their temporal and spatial place’.<sup>13</sup> Sending forth signification, reaching towards things, yet inhabiting a particular temporal and spatial place as text-object, radical landscape poetry is seen to interact with space in a more substantial way than just the integration of the ‘gaps’ or spaces between words on a page into its meanings, becoming, in N. Katherine Hayles’ sense, a ‘material metaphor’ for the environment.<sup>14</sup> Implicit here is an understanding of environment, not as a visual field in (or on) which objects are dispersed, but, in line with Noë and James Gibson,<sup>15</sup> as a site brought into being when an organism engages, in a process of continual exchange and interaction, with the objects or surfaces in its perceptual field.

I cannot address all of the many relevant examples of poems in *The Ground Aslant* which make use of or engage with spatiality. I have chosen to discuss works by Mark Dickinson, Peter Larkin, Zoë Skoulding, Mark Goodwin, Elisabeth Bletsoe, and Tarlo herself, whose graphic presentations to my mind most consciously reach outward into the spaces of the ‘real’ world, or which address most explicitly the ways in which we construct and understand those spaces. In other words, I focus on what I see to be the most ‘existential’ engagements with the relationship between poetry and space,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), and James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986).

looking in particular at examples ‘in which naming things and thoughts makes demands of the reader to complete a rich trail of connections and dissonances that are concerned with the way place is experienced as much as fixing the nature of that experience’.<sup>16</sup> The poems discussed are all by writers included in *The Ground Aslant*, although I make reference to one or two poems which do not feature in the anthology itself and have been published in collections by individual poets. When quoting from the poems I have not indicated line numbers, as they do not appear in the anthology, and because to do so would misrepresent many of the poems as lineated or sequential in a way which they are not.

### Reading visual form in radical landscape poetry

I begin with ‘high cloud base’, from Mark Dickinson’s *The Speed of Clouds*,<sup>17</sup> which is perhaps the most unusual in terms of presentation, and the most explicit example from *The Ground Aslant* of the interplay between the graphic and the semantic (Figure 1). The poem is presented as a table, comprised of four columns, which appears to provide information about cloud base height. The table, with its visual parameters and divisions, is instantly recognizable as a tool for empirical categorization. In the scientific context in which such a table might usually be found, it is a way of representing natural forms as data. But Dickinson’s version does not provide useful information for the identification of different types of cloud.

High clouds base > 20,000 feet	Medium clouds Base > 7,000, < 20,000 feet	low clouds Base < 7,000 feet	Clouds of great vertical extent. Base frequently > 2000 feet. Summits may exceed 25,000 feet
Ripples take mackerel from con- trail imbues dew.  Dew jewels more obviously ground.  no shadow but wisp- ers the arc amongst crystals of ice.	Multifarious layers between earth & sky each to each its own like one to an- other.  she wisps he rolls  like fleets of strata our ship that shelters the stars	Hood to flood imbues dew-point saturates meaning with desert & van- i(s(h)ing.  Parts / point fogs ground  long bars stretched a- cross the sky.	To rain Rain: green at intervals of word. to light light: stretched summit; thickening cloud- bursts & entrails amongst origins of wor- ship.

Figure 1: ‘high cloud base’, copyright © Mark Dickinson, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Gifford, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Dickinson, ‘high cloud base’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), p. 170.

For instance, it is hard to make sense of, ‘Ripples take / mackerel from / con- / trail / imbues dew’, as a way of identifying clouds with a base at ‘<20,000 feet’, say. And yet in a poetic sense this does seem to suggest iridescent mackerel-coloured streaks of cloud, perhaps at sunrise when the ground is still damp with dew. Similarly, ‘she wisps / he rolls // like fleets of / strata / our ship / that shelters the / stars’, seems especially incongruous in a table – which should not normally accommodate personal perspectives (represented here by the pronouns). But again, this image of a cloud of ‘medium’ base height as a kind of galleon is poetically familiar and meaningful.

Dickinson’s table is visually incongruous in a poetry anthology. The language of the poem is boxed in by the table’s outer border, and subdivided by the inner grid, in a gesture which is almost aggressive when compared to the sparseness of the third of Dickinson’s poems in *The Ground Aslant*, ‘Patched’<sup>18</sup> – perhaps the most sparsely laid out of all the poems in the anthology. But by presenting the poem as a table, Dickinson in fact shows how the sensory experiences he describes fail to be contained within their categorical spaces. The ‘imbues due’ of the first column is echoed in the ‘imbues dew-point’ of the third; ‘wisp- / errs’ in the first column transfers to the second in ‘she wisps’, and the ‘entrails’ of the fourth column are perhaps those of the mackerel in the first. By spatializing the images in a table the reader is invited to make connections in a context which normally separates; to leap across the table’s lines, and in so doing to transgress its boundaries. The cloud categories become entangled in the poem, just as clouds at different altitudes might be visible simultaneously in the sky. Referring to the Müller-Lyer illusion employed by psychologists, Merleau-Ponty contends that ‘Science requires that two perceived lines, like two real lines, be either equal or unequal, and that a perceived crystal have a determinate number of sides, without noticing that the nature of the perceived is to tolerate ambiguity, a certain “shifting” or “haziness”, and to allow itself to be shaped by the context’.<sup>19</sup> Dickinson undermines the authority of the poem’s form, challenging the precedence of ‘empirical’ knowledge over the personal responses of the ‘he’ and ‘she’ to which he alludes, and inviting shiftiness and ambiguity into the representation of perceptual experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Dickinson, ‘Patched’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), p. 171.

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 11.

In Peter Larkin's 'Turf Hill',<sup>20</sup> we are confronted with a sequence of dense, justified blocks of text, of varying length, which Larkin has called 'text Enclosures' (Figure 2).<sup>21</sup> Larkin's term of course echoes the long history of agricultural 'improvement', and the development of modern field systems since the numerous Enclosure Acts, but in 'Turf Hill' each block could equally be the 'great limb' of a tree, or perhaps the 'power-line' of an 'iron mast'.<sup>22</sup>

Some livery to simplify a real shank through the wards, power-lines at a slope  
of conduction with rapid incomplete owing of ground. To blow with spreading  
on the grid some green flutter of smaller rigid body.

Not covert and long not to be covered in links of shadow, a joined way lifts itself  
into fringe. The pylon avenue isn't corridor pulse interceding with plantation,  
but ventilation as if by air-arc of the horizons within clump. To displenish  
beside refreshed ground, what is healed and hugs shaft but never swings anew  
upon line-break. Grit at the big branch, anti-tentacular of hung community,  
but generously ferned.

How the boles thin to the widener of tracking turf, pylon by terrace of heeded  
instrument! If the tree-standing for wire is the pull of cantileaf, what can  
indent its continuous ornament looping on power-line? The trees are resident  
by unavailing advantage, full technical sorrow lattices their derivative store of  
staying beside-hand a cloaked way below. Each wafer strut as actuator, soft  
spring between wing and store. Field follower across overhead pitch, into the  
straits which fertilise a neb of impasse, but where wire cups to its beak a lift of  
towers inciting local spine, so spike your green along. Forked untransformable  
at heel of branch, trees topped for their sail-at-root, they bare these iron masts  
whenever nothing can have happened to the great limb.

Figure 2: excerpt from 'Turf Hill', *Slights Agreeing Trees* (Kenilworth: Prest Roots Press), copyright © Peter Larkin, 2003. N.B. Prest Roots edition includes photographic topographical images but reprinted versions in *Lessways Least Scarce Among* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2012) and *The Ground Aslant* appear without accompanying images.

The forest of the poem is 'Swathed', or 'ornament[ed]' at 'interval[s]' with the 'superstrings' of a 'pylon avenue'.<sup>23</sup> The 'Rising margin' of human intervention 'cocoons a planted oblivion', and 'Seedling pine [is] caught gridded'.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the poem is not itself a grid, which would make it visually similar to Dickinson's 'high cloud base', the horizontally oriented blocks of text provide a 'Horizon', or an 'anchored tree-bed',<sup>25</sup> from which the imagined forms of the pylons and the trees

<sup>20</sup> Peter Larkin, 'Turf Hill', in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 63-65.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Larkin, *Less than, more at: an interview with Peter Larkin* (interviewed by Edmund Hardy for *Intercapillary Space*) (conducted via email July-October 2007) <<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/less-than-more-at-interview-with-peter.html>> [accessed 21 July 2016].

<sup>22</sup> Larkin, 'Turf Hill', *The Ground Aslant*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64, p. 63, p. 64, p. 64, p. 63.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64, p. 64, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.



rise, forming a kind of virtual grid in which the vertical axis must be supplied imaginatively. But where pylons are themselves grid-like, trees are far tenderer ‘cradle[s] of wire’, whose intricacies the ‘plantation’, ‘cut commonly to infinite row’, attempts to contain.<sup>26</sup> This poem suggests that written language, which in English is presented horizontally, can only hint at the unrepresentable nexus of horizontality and verticality that structures trees. As such, the poem suggests or enacts verticality specifically by its absence from the poem’s form. This ability is related to Noë’s claim that language allows us to think about absent things. Larkin’s linguistic emphasis on verticality invokes its opposite, especially given that the oppositional quality of horizontality is embodied in the visual presentation of the ‘text Enclosures’. A pessimistic reader might claim that such a plantation must be only ‘a leaf away from mutilated ground’, but the poem arguably provides a space in which the trees can thrive in their complexity, by purposefully falling short of a visual representation of their ‘elevation’.<sup>27</sup>

Where Larkin resists the representation of verticality, it is precisely the uprightness of trees that Skoulding evokes in her series, ‘Through Trees’.<sup>28</sup> Each numbered ‘tree’ poem is a slim column of justified text. Skoulding does not attempt to capture the total effect of the networks of branches, but rather the solidity of the trunks from the point of view of a walker at ground level (Figure 3).

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 64, p. 63, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 65, p. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Zoë Skoulding, four poems from ‘Through Trees’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 134-37.

**Through Trees 1**

circled by gull  
 shrieks slicks of  
 mud sucking at  
 feet banded sky  
 black trees this  
 shaking palm of  
 ruffled grey-blue  
 water jolts foot  
 steps closer you  
 have to go with  
 what's coming in  
 a flutter of oyster  
 catchers over  
 water and blood  
 flowering under  
 skin tuned to  
 concert pitch  
 then wavering  
 slowly off-key in  
 frequencies your  
 ears will never  
 catch as bones pile  
 up problems for  
 the future muscles  
 waste chances &  
 fat builds up for  
 nothing but to  
 bulk this column  
 raised in honour  
 of human futility

Figure 3: 'Through Trees 1', from *The Mirror Trade* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 2004), copyright © Zoë Skoulding, 2004.

In a forest, for example, as one navigates through trees, one might hear 'gull / shrieks', or the 'flutter of oyster / catchers', but be unable to see them above the canopy.<sup>29</sup> 'Mud' might '[suck] at / feet', and one might glimpse a 'shaking palm of / ruffled grey-blue / water'.<sup>30</sup> But as 'Through Trees 6' reminds us, this experience has been 'bleached white' (and black) in its textual rendering.<sup>31</sup> We are not navigating through a forest but through text. 'Through Trees 1' ends with: 'this column / raised in honour / of human futility', suggesting perhaps a memorial or a newspaper column, in which stories of 'ethical trouble'<sup>32</sup> and 'problems for / the future'<sup>33</sup> abound. By referring to its own presentation as a 'column' of text on a 'bleached white' page, the poem 'interrogates the inscription technology that produce[d] it', and in so doing, 'mobilizes reflexive loops between its imaginative world and the

<sup>29</sup> Skoulding, 'Through Trees 1', *The Ground Aslant*, p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Skoulding, 'Through Trees 6', *The Ground Aslant*, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> Skoulding, 'Through Trees 2', *The Ground Aslant*, p. 135.

<sup>33</sup> 'Through Trees 1'.

material apparatus embodying that creation as a physical presence'.<sup>34</sup> How, the poem asks, does the text reflect or relate to the experience described in the poem, and the actual experience of wading through a muddy forest floor, hearing the call of invisible birds? Without such activity, Skoulding worries, 'fat builds up' and 'muscles / waste'.<sup>35</sup> Yet the poem is more than an incitement to get among trees. Even if, in cynical moments, 'Through Trees' expresses concern that 'fat builds up for / nothing but to / bulk this column / raised in honour / of human futility',<sup>36</sup> it also suggests that 'build[ing] / paper tower[s]' might be part of the process whereby 'everyone [could] / agree quickly on / the best method' of dealing with 'ethical trouble'<sup>37</sup> – in other words, that the poem is a movement *through* the forest of competing discourses, political apathy, and so on.

These poems interact with real space through their emphasis on flat space: Dickinson emphasizes the two-dimensionality of the page through the use of the table, Skoulding through her poem's self-identification as text (as in '*this* column'), in both cases as ways of reflecting on the nature of our experiences of landscape. Larkin uses flat and horizontal textual space to implicate the three-dimensional space in which trees and, for that matter, the poem occur. This joining of the spaces of poetic text with those of the environment is a particular concern of the poems in the anthology, and one which echoes Edward Soja's claim that the concept of 'spatiality' incorporates both 'the physical space of material nature and the mental space of cognition and representation'.<sup>38</sup> The poems connect these two domains by positioning poetic representations on a continuum with the spaces of the environment, positing that poetry is one of the cognitive tools available for analyzing our aesthetic and political constructions of space.

### **Cultural significance and 'specific evidentness'**

So far, the space to which I have argued the poems reach has been something like phenomenal space generally. But bearing in mind the fact that Larkin's poem is addressed to a specific site called 'Turf

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<sup>34</sup> Hayles, p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> 'Through Trees 1'.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> 'Through Trees 2'.

<sup>38</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 120.

Hill’, the relationship between poem space and environmental space becomes more concrete. In Larkin’s words, his evocation of horizons is intended as ‘[l]ess relational than visitational’, implying a particular situated and dedicational relationship to the site, which ‘converts [it] to place’.<sup>39</sup> As such, the poem not only interrogates the relationship between artistic (or poetic) representation and world, but adopts an appreciative, and perhaps also critical stance towards a particular place that clearly resonates with the poet.

The same applies to Mark Goodwin’s ‘Borrowdale Details’,<sup>40</sup> in which a Cumbrian landscape already loaded with Romantic associations takes on personal significance, ‘digesting’ the poet’s ‘soul’ as he digests his meal of local ‘Herdwick meat’ (Figure 4).

### **Borrowdale Details**

soft larch needles I sniff wish thin dangling larch twigs hold  
raindrops christ & pagan wrapped to tinsel autumn light  
has projected Borrowdale’s matter a work crafts growth I

peer at a twig’s knuckles a needle’s green edge a tiny globe  
dissolving landscape Borrowdale is a mass of details full  
a vastness of minuscule high resolution beauty immense

numbers of bits of leaf-frames pebbles daddylongleg claws  
for an instant I spread let a moment explode as I climb  
through woods by crags every detail of me follicle bone-cell

grease shatters or slicks amongst Borrowdale’s infinite  
tiny details one of my gasps stretches wetly with the beck  
others entwine with white fibres of gills unravelling gravity

the calcium atoms of my teeth jumble along drystone walls  
moss green-gleaming my meal of Herdwick meat passes  
through my gut whilst Borrowdale’s details digest my soul

Figure 4: ‘Borrowdale Details’, from *Back of A Vast* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2010), copyright © Mark Goodwin, 2010. Also published in Goodwin, *Distance a Sudden* (Sheffield: Longbarrow, 2010).

Amongst the most lyrical in the anthology, the poem describes the experience of an ‘I’, who ‘sniffs’, ‘peers’, ‘climbs’, ‘gasps’, and eats his way round this landscape. Merleau-Ponty suggests that each human being gives off to observers and acquaintances ‘a certain style or a certain sense’, manifested

<sup>39</sup> Larkin, *Less than, more at: an interview with Peter Larkin* <<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.co.uk/2006/04/part-1.html>> [accessed 21 July 2016].

<sup>40</sup> Mark Goodwin, ‘Borrowdale Details’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), p. 148.

in gestures and personal traits such as gait and voice, which combine in what is experienced by others as ‘the same affective essence’.<sup>41</sup> He compares this to the essential quality manifested by specific locations, recalling how his arrival in Paris revealed to him this aspect of perceptual experience. Stepping off the train he finds that ‘the cafés, the faces, the poplars along the quays, the bends of the Seine’ combine in an ‘ambiguous, though already incomparable essence’ – a ‘specific evidentness’ which, though it evades definition, belongs exclusively to the particular place.<sup>42</sup> Goodwin’s poem incorporates both these ideas, the speaker contemplating at the same time ‘Borrowdale’s infinite / tiny details’ and ‘every detail of me’. Indeed, it shows, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, that ‘[e]very perception presupposes a certain past of the subject’, or in other words, that the ‘specific evidentness’ which is ‘diffused throughout the landscape’ is the result of both ‘the abstract function of perception – as the encounter with objects’, and ‘a more secret act by which we elaborate our milieu’.<sup>43</sup> In fact, poems themselves submit to the kind of perception Merleau-Ponty describes here: readers respond in his more abstract sense to textual form whilst their ‘secret’ act of elaboration freights the words with various personal, cultural and contextual meanings.

If it is not only people and landscapes, but poems too, which manifest ‘specific evidentness’, then it is possible to speak of a kind of shared phenomenality, or phenomenal continuity between poems and the landscape, with the result that the ontological hierarchies which would separate the world from its representation in art become untenable. Neither the idea that the poems point to a *prior* reality, nor that they position themselves as our only window on to a reality we cannot truly experience, account for their ‘specific evidentness’. The physical encounter with a poem-object or poem surface is not, according to this reasoning, different from encounters with the landscape (even if it is different to the extent that for normal perceivers one is identified as art object and the other is not), especially given that the poet ‘cannot avoid showing his surface *in the midst of other surfaces of an environment*’.<sup>44</sup> Poems, in other words, must be taken seriously as objects with ‘specific

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<sup>41</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 294.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, p. 272, Gibson’s emphasis.

evidentness', or as material parts of the environment, even whilst their words enter into the 'secret' and discursive realm of signification.

Goodwin's evocation of 'mass' and his punning on 'matter' connote a simultaneous sensitivity to the shared materiality of poem and landscape, and to the 'secret act' of elaboration which transforms landscapes into texts. In the line, 'Borrowdale is a mass of details full', the word 'mass' is separated from the preceding and following words by a larger space than usual in printed text. By playing with the rules of formatting – a form of compositional play which is characteristic of his work – Goodwin draws attention to the fact of the printed words on the surface of the page. Isolating the word 'mass' in this way highlights its spatial relation to the other words in the line, but also lends it semantic significance. Its mass holds the adjacent words at a suspended distance, exerting a tiny 'gravitational' force. The arrangement of this line makes the word 'mass' work as a concrete-poem-in-miniature, referring to its own material existence and its semantic meaning simultaneously, so that it is both 'seen' and 'seen through'. Similarly, the word 'matter' doubly implies the atomic or particular sense of a thing's being, and also its importance or significance beyond its physical constitution – in the sense that *it matters*. Honing in on the significance of single words is important in the context of a poem which advocates attention to the 'tiny detail' of both the Borrowdale landscape and the poem-scape.

It should be said here, however, that the idea of a mass of details, or a fullness of perceptual stimuli, would seem to differ from the 'black and white' field so far evoked by my discussion of poetic space. Surely the visible environment is more complex than the experience of a flat printed page, even if the words on that page are positioned in complex relation to one another. What Merleau-Ponty calls the 'thickness of the world', into which perceivers 'plunge' via perceptual experience, is in an obvious way different from the flatness of a 'fragile piece of paper'.<sup>45</sup> But as Goodwin's use of 'mass' and 'matter' shows, even 'visual' poems do not only function at the level of printed surface. When the poem-scape is considered in all its referential complexity, it becomes a 'knot of living significations' as densely detailed as the Cumbrian landscape.<sup>46</sup> It is, in Merleau-Ponty's sense of

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<sup>45</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

‘specific evidentness’, ‘incomparable’ in its formal arrangement and in its layers of semantic significance. Goodwin reminds us that the ‘vastness’ of the Lake District is underwritten by tiny ‘fibres of gills’ and ‘follicle bone-cell[s]’ once belonging to creatures who lived in, and now physically constitute the landscape. We should pay attention, he implies, to the mass and matter (in both senses) of the poem too.

### **Situating radical landscape poems in the ‘flow’ of perceptual experience**

In ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’,<sup>47</sup> from the sequence *Particles – Cumbrian Coast, 2008*, Tarlo’s emphasis on poetic space similarly opens up real space relations with the objects referred to in the poem (Figure 5). It also stages particularly neatly what Lyotard identifies as the tension or ‘ambiguity’ between reading and seeing,<sup>48</sup> by using textual arrangement to create the illusion of painterly perspective. In contrast to my suggestion that Goodwin asks us to ‘see through’ the mass of the poem to the matter of our complex emotional, associative, and even nutritional relationship to particular places, for example, Lyotard characterizes reading and seeing as completely different ways in which the body relates to artworks. Not only, he argues, is the relationship ‘between the purported linguistic sign and the thing it is meant to indicate’, arbitrary, but so is that ‘between scriptural space and the reader’s own body’.<sup>49</sup> When a text is read, ‘the trace’s function consists exclusively in distinguishing, and hence in rendering recognizable, units that obtain their signification from their relationships in a system entirely independent from bodily synergy’.<sup>50</sup> Whereas, when a plastic form is seen or experienced, ‘[t]he body is led to adopt certain dispositions depending on whether it encounters an angle or a circle, a vertical or an oblique’.<sup>51</sup> In other words, visual artworks elicit a bodily response which is not elicited in the response to linguistic or discursive works. A word, which, Lyotard grants,

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<sup>47</sup> Harriet Tarlo, ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 144-45. The sequence from which ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’ is taken has several iterations, each differing slightly according to presentational medium. In 2008, the poems were mounted on wood and displayed on the wall to accompany Jem Southam’s *Clouds Descending* exhibition at The Lowry, Salford Quays (Manchester: Lowry Press, 2008). ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’ also appears, with the poem sequence, in Tarlo’s latest collection: Harriet Tarlo, *Particles – Cumbrian Coast, 2008*, in *Poems 2004-2014* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2015), pp. 61-76, (p. 64).

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard, p.264.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

can be experienced as a plastic mark, cannot *at the same time* be read or ‘seen through’. Although both reading and seeing might be available as experiences to be had in encounters with visual poems, according to Lyotard’s reasoning, they cannot be achieved simultaneously, and must instead be switched between.

‘Outcrops at Haverrig’ poses a challenge to Lyotard, narrowing the gap between visual and linguistic signification. In the opening, the ‘crest’ of Black Combe sits above the ‘dunes’ on which the imagined beholder stands, and is, in *The Ground Aslant* version, printed in smaller text. It thus conforms to traditional perspective in that the distant hills appear above, but smaller than objects in the foreground, and objects in the very near foreground – the ‘trefoils and succulents’ – appear in the lowest position:

Black Combe crest			
over ridges	shale spit lines		
	pale marram dunes		
		(their small sea-bright trefoils and succulents)	

Figure 5: excerpt from ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’, *Particles – Cumbrian Coast*, 2008 (Manchester: Lowry Press, 2008), copyright © Harriet Tarlo, 2008. Also published in Tarlo, *Poems 2004-2014* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2015).

But despite its initial compositional resemblance to landscape painting, the emphasis on formatting in this poem has the effect of reinforcing the fact that we are not looking at an image but at a written text. This means we cannot treat the poem as visible in a simply metaphorical sense (i.e. that we see ‘through’ it to a mental image of the fell), but must treat it as visible in the sense that it is spatially present. It claims or occupies real space as a painting does, at the same time as it emphasizes its difference from painting in its explicit textuality and two-dimensionality. At one level, then, a difference is asserted between the flat space of the text and the three-dimensional space of a landscape painting (on canvas, say). At another, the reader’s awareness of the poem as text creates a sense of real spatial presence, and the poem claims an existence in three-dimensional space, even though its plane of representation is two-dimensional.

What is more, the evocation of painterly depth, as well as imitating the conventions of perspective, in a sense performs the distance between reader and mountain. Whilst of course the poem may be read



at vast distances from Black Combe itself, preventing the mountain from actually being seen, the use of perspective or distance points outward, towards the mountain as potentially visible. Merleau-Ponty makes the claim that '[e]very cultural object certainly refers back to a natural background against which it appears [...]. Our perception senses the near presence of the canvas beneath the painting, the crumbling cement beneath the monument, or the tiring actor beneath the character'.<sup>52</sup> With its particular 'painterly' feel, and its surface resonance, 'Outcrops at Haverrig' draws attention to the paper on which it appears, and by extension, the mountain it names. In doing so it makes its status as an object of perception explicit, situating itself *in* the material world to which it refers. The sensing of the natural object behind the cultural becomes, in this instance, not just a corollary of the encounter with all artworks, but part of the content of the poem. The paper on which 'Outcrops at Haverrig' is printed *becomes* the site of the shifts and ripples in the sand dunes which the poem presents (Figure 6).

wind-run sand  
settles tiny sandscapes, crumbling angles

some small shift in  
water or particle, some  
colour stops it  
into structure

yet still rushes – dry sea –  
wind-run on  
lying in reach

settling on letters, making texture  
ridging paper

Figure 6: excerpt from 'Outcrops at Haverrig', *Particles – Cumbrian Coast*, 2008 (Manchester: Lowry Press, 2008), copyright © Harriet Tarlo, 2008. Also published in Tarlo, *Poems 2004-2014* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2015).

Where 'wind-run sand / settles tiny sandscapes', the poet 'settles on letters, making texture / ridging paper'. At the scale of a grain of sand, the poet's ink or graphite creates a 'dune' on the page, a ridge only atoms thick, but there nonetheless, and which points in turn to the minutiae of the landscape to which the poem's language refers.

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<sup>52</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 26.

The idea that language ‘reaches’ toward non-present objects here meets with the specific ability of formally innovative poetry to connect, through a reflexive emphasis on materiality, with the rest of the objects that meet visual perception. Poems such as ‘Outcrops at Haverrig’ are able to achieve this because of the way in which we experience objects as connected in relational space. If Black Combe is not present on reading the poem, the presence of the mountain is implied because, according to Merleau-Ponty, perception is ‘a flow of experiences that implicate and explicate each other just as much in simultaneity as they do in succession’.<sup>53</sup> Not only does the poem both implicate and explicate the relationship between itself and the mountain, but reading the poem also becomes part of the flow of experiences that determine our (spatial) relationship with the world.

Elisabeth Bletsoe’s ‘random sightings’, in ‘Here Hare      Here’,<sup>54</sup> feel very much like Merleau-Ponty’s flow of experiences (Figure 7). In the poem, temporal flow is evoked, in typically Merleau-Pontian terms, as non-linear – in the sense that perception is not the sequential ‘posit[ing of] this object next to that other one’<sup>55</sup> – and as fundamentally linked to the possibility of movement in space. A fairly extreme dispersal of syntactic elements increases the randomness with which each idea or image is encountered, and a very irregular form means that this poem is likely to require the kind of dance-like saccades recorded in eye-tracking experiments carried out as part of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council projects, ‘The Effects of Form and Technique on Cognition, Aesthetic Response and Evaluation in Reading Poetry’ (2002-3), and ‘Poetry Beyond Text: Vision, Text and Cognition’ (2009-11).<sup>56</sup> We are compelled, in Joseph Frank’s words, to ‘perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time’, because a sequential reading doesn’t

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<sup>53</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 293.

<sup>54</sup> Elisabeth Bletsoe, ‘Here Hare      Here’, in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 108-10, (p. 109).

<sup>55</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 293.

<sup>56</sup> Andrew Michael Roberts, Jane Stabler, Martin H. Fischer and Lisa Otty, ‘Space and pattern in linear and postlinear poetry’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 17 (2013), 23–40. These experiments studied responses to Susan Howe’s *Pythagorean Silence* and Geoffrey Hill’s ‘To the Nieuport Scout’, in order to try and understand the type of encounter we have with visual poetry. Their findings suggest that we do in fact encounter formally innovative poetry differently from ‘linear’ poetry, and provide ‘evidence of a shift from reading to “scanning”, where scanning can be defined as the relative predominance of vertical and/or diagonal eye movements, compared to the standard horizontal saccades’ (Roberts et al, p.31). Lyotard says that, ‘[t]o look at a painting is to draw paths across it’ (Lyotard, p.9). The participants in the experiments seem to have drawn similar paths, and to have engaged in a process of making sense, or reading, that could only occur alongside or via a kind of dance around the spaces of the poems.

work.<sup>57</sup> We cannot progress through this poem from top to bottom, but must, in a sense, go back in time (or re-trace our footsteps, as it were) to re-read certain parts in order to build meaning through making connections. In other words,

syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood, these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously.<sup>58</sup>

At several points in the poem it is unclear which word or ‘line’ should follow another, forcing the eye to range round the proximate parts of the poem in search of possible meaning. In effect, this means that ‘sightings’ of words or groups of words in the poem occur in both ‘simultaneity’ and ‘succession’, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, forming a constellation like the ‘constellation of givens’<sup>59</sup> that is the perceptual environment. Each image or idea is encountered in isolation and in connection with the images or ideas surrounding it.

*the gates are open*  
*& all the paths are clear*

autumnal

pelage

hinging between September/October forces a seam from the temporomandibular to the jumping muscle	stress   sub		say say grey hares white rabbits
intimations of seizure lunacy lunalepsy <i>the flickering of little hares</i>		orbital	old moon rising, a blood filled cuticle

Figure 7: excerpt from ‘Here Hare Here’, copyright © Elisabeth Bletsoe, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Frank, ‘Spatial Form in Modern Literature’, in *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 5–66 (p. 12).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 23.

In the opening section of the poem, for instance, ‘sub’ and ‘orbital’ seem to relate to the ‘old moon’, but also look like they qualify the image of ‘the jumping muscle’.<sup>60</sup> If we attempt to read the poem left to right, top to bottom, then ‘sub orbital’ also comes before ‘intimations of seizure’, whose meaning is hard to determine.<sup>61</sup> That the moon does orbit the earth means that it is in fact *not* suborbital; could then the ‘jumping muscle’ of the hare be suborbital in that its trajectory is limited by the gravitational force of the earth? A ‘blood filled cuticle’ is perhaps a nail cuticle, or, when read in light of the ‘pelage’ of ‘grey hares white’, it could be the bloodied hair cuticles of a hare caught in the ‘temporomandibular’ joint of a fox.<sup>62</sup>

These are only some of the connections it is possible to make between elements in this poem, but they show how the eye must become actively involved in navigating the poem, making explicit the fact that ‘the eye moves in order to see’ – that ‘[t]he seeing eye participates in the visible world it views’.<sup>63</sup> By drawing attention to its internal relations in this way, the poem reflects on the flowing spatial navigation required by visual perceivers; ‘*the flickering of little hares*’ occurs as little, and as flickering, in relation to the light of the ‘old moon rising’, for example.<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor observes that ‘[t]here is no such thing as the single, independent percept. Something has this status only within a wider context that is understood, taken for granted, but for the most part not focussed on’.<sup>65</sup> The poem calls on us to interpret individual words in unusual grammatical or syntactic positions, according to the wider context of linguistic knowledge and meaning, and at the same time, its spatial aspect makes an analogical demand for us to situate it in the wider context of the world. As Taylor argues, we may not focus on the context in which we encounter little hares running around, but nor do we experience them as single, independent percepts. Rather, the hares, the ‘old moon’, the ‘fading light’, and the ‘stubble grown long’ all coalesce to produce this particular ‘autumnal’ experience.<sup>66</sup> In Bletsoe’s poem, ambiguity in the grammar, syntax and versification testify to the ambiguity of perception at the

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<sup>60</sup> Bletsoe, ‘Here Hare    Here’, p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Bletsoe, ‘Here Hare    Here’, p. 108.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. by Taylor Carmen and Mark B. N. Hansen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 26–49 (p. 36).

<sup>66</sup> Bletsoe, ‘Here Hare    Here’, p. 108, p.109.

same time as the spatial presentation evokes the ‘incomparable’ texture, or ‘specific evidentness’ of the environment represented.

### **Environmental navigation and the cultural construction of landscape**

While the spatial presentation of this poem discloses something of our perceptual response to our environment, and the leaps – saccadic and imaginative – that we make in order to construct meaning out of the flow of our experiences, Bletsoe’s syntax invokes different conventional portrayals of landscape in order to interrogate our construction of that meaning. The ‘autumnal’ scene gives rise to a range of associations and moods. The ‘open gates’ and ‘clear paths’ invite the reader into a domesticated version of nature. The ‘stubble grown long’, the ‘bristly ox-tongue holding / the fading light’, the ‘mumbler of cabbages’, evoke an agricultural bleakness that is yet tinged with nostalgia in the implication of its loss (as in the ‘fading light’), while the ‘blood filled / cuticle’ inflects this with overtones of dark pastoralism.<sup>67</sup> In addition, ‘too poor for flour’, and ‘*malum omen*’ imply environmental degradation.<sup>68</sup> The poem therefore links the processes of the ‘motor cortex’<sup>69</sup> in enabling spatial navigation of the environment with the way in which we generate different versions of landscape (Figure 8).

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.108.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

stubble grown long  
 shadows grain  
 too poor for flour

mazed:  
*hic a'ier hock*  
*hicker to hacker*

this season

rendering  
 down to feather  
 & bone

"she ran her life away, her  
 blood gone all to froth" (such a rare cruel hunt)

flattened  
 stems of redshank; torn  
 integument a form  
 like the impress of a human knee

bulge of the eye so prominent  
 from behind we could see through  
 directly

set so high  
 jewel-cold  
 through which the ordinary becomes  
 luminous

the aqueous humor

discharging focus  
 across the motor cortex

random

sightings  
*malum omen*

Figure 8: excerpt from 'Here Hare Here', copyright © Elisabeth Bletsoe, 2011.

These aspects of experience can be understood as different points on what Taylor calls the 'spectrum' of abilities with which we encounter the world:

at one end, beliefs that we hold, which may or may not be "in our minds" at the moment; at the other, abilities to get around and deal intelligently with things. Intellectualism has made us see these as very different sites, but philosophy in our day has shown how closely akin they are, and how interlinked.<sup>70</sup>

Perhaps it seems obvious that encounters with poems or other artistic works might activate certain beliefs or involve certain intellectual activity, where navigating a wood might require us to use our

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, pp. 31-32. Whether or not beliefs are 'abilities' is questionable. Mistaken beliefs might of course be hindrances to our ability to 'get around and deal intelligently with things'. The two ends of Taylor's 'spectrum' might be understood as 'knowledge that' and 'knowledge how' respectively, which philosophy does not conventionally see as connected in this way, but which the poem makes an effort to join.

ability to get around things, but according to Taylor the reverse is equally possible. Poems such as Frances Presley's 'Blurred passage' (part of the sequence *Somerset Letters*)<sup>71</sup> which must be turned like a map in order to be read and understood (Figure 9), might recall or engage our imaginative capacity for spatial navigation, and conversely, encounters with the woods might in turn draw on our systems of belief or certain cultural norms.

a release of water  
swimming beneath the new pond  
some found a right of way

North Furze Hill, Hoar Oak, Long Chains Combe, Pinkery Pond  
Saturday, 3 April 1999 OS 714453

Figure 9: excerpt from 'Blurred passage', *Somerset Letters*, in *Paravane: New and Selected Poems 1996-2003* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), copyright © Frances Presley, 2004. Also published in *Myne: Selected Poems and Prose 1978-2006* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2006).

If this is right, we would no longer need to differentiate between 'seeing' (as in the apparently simultaneous, or at least non-linear, roving eye movement involved in the experience of a painting) and 'reading' (the sequential comprehension of discourse), for these two aspects of perception would be understood to occur simultaneously in many, if not all encounters with external objects, be they poems, hares or mountains. Without endorsing picturesque notions that the landscape can be viewed as if it were an artwork, these poems suggest that our cultural resources and contexts play a strong role in how we view, understand and navigate our environments, just as, conversely, our perceptual-navigational capabilities are exercised in reading visual poetry.

### Philosophical implications

In 'Open Woods', Peter Larkin objects to 'nature typed out of ripeness',<sup>72</sup> expressing in poetic terms Adorno's anxiety in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Kate Soper observes that for Adorno, it is precisely its 'lack of conceptual definition [...] which is the essence of [nature's] beauty'.<sup>73</sup> Typing, which Larkin here invokes both in the sense of typed text and the typological classification of natural objects, surely

<sup>71</sup> Frances Presley, 'Blurred passage', *Somerset Letters*, in *Paravane: New and Selected Poems 1996-2003* (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), pp. 64-65.

<sup>72</sup> Peter Larkin, excerpt from 'Open Woods', in *The Ground Aslant*, ed. by Harriet Tarlo (Exeter: Shearsman, 2011), pp. 66-69, (p. 69).

<sup>73</sup> Kate Soper, *What Is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 231.

‘rescues over into form something of the amorphous’, which Adorno claims does ‘ineluctabl[e]’ violence to the natural object.<sup>74</sup> This act of ‘rescuing’ from formlessness is a manifestation of what Adorno contends are ‘our persistent attempts to subsume nature under concepts for the purpose of controlling, manipulating and exploiting it’ (which he further argues ‘reveal that nature continues to inspire fear, dread, even terror’ despite our attempts to ‘type it out’ of this threatening ripeness).<sup>75</sup> Larkin’s line voices a self-consciousness that reappears at several points in the anthology, and a deep uncertainty that nature should be represented in poetry at all – an anxiety that artistic productions somehow sanitize or reduce the experience of nature to an experience of a representation (like Skoulding’s ‘bleached white’ page).

We may turn back to Noë, and to Gibson, for reassurance that they do not. Firstly, Gibson argues that the term *representation* itself is ‘misleading’, used only in the absence of a more appropriate term for what the artist ‘actually’ does.<sup>76</sup> This, he claims,

is not to replicate, to print, or to copy in any sense of the term but to mark the surface in such a way as to display invariants and record an awareness. Drawing is never copying. It is impossible to copy a piece of the environment. Only another drawing can be copied. We have been misled for too long by the fallacy that a picture is *similar* to what it depicts, a *likeness*, or an *imitation* of it.<sup>77</sup>

Informed by his theory of visual perception, he claims that in visual art ‘[t]here is no such thing as a literal re-presentation of an earlier optic array. The scene cannot be re-established; the array cannot be reconstituted. Some of its invariants can be preserved, but that is all’.<sup>78</sup> In this sense, Bletsoe’s ‘random sightings’ are preserved invariants, inflected with personal and cultural significance, and when Tarlo ‘settles on letters’, she preserves visible aspects of her environment as they momentarily

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<sup>74</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 50. <<https://istifhane.files.wordpress.com/2012/04/aesthetictheory.pdf>> [accessed 20 May 2015].

<sup>75</sup> Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), p. 45.

<sup>76</sup> Gibson, p. 279.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*



obtain a stable appearance. In both a preference for the poetic representation of subjective perceptual experience replaces the attempt to ‘evoke’ the appearance of the landscape itself through description, which, importantly, provides a way to re-think the function and purpose of mimesis.

That is not to say, however, that artistic representations ‘stand in for’ or approximate the artist/poet’s experience of the ‘real world’. This, Noë argues, is a notion which has been erroneously substantiated by the ‘inadequate reasoning’ of cognitive scientists, who claim:

we see the world when we look at a picture for the same reason that we see the world when we look at *the world*. And what reason is that? When you look at the world, what you really see, what you are really given, is a retinal (or neural) *picture*. All seeing is an encounter with pictures. So whatever impels your brain to see the world when you are confronted with the retinal picture will impel your brain to see the world when you are confronted with an external picture. How do pictures work? When you see a picture – a picture of your grandmother, say – according to this view, you encounter an object that produces in you just the effect – the image, the experience – that a direct encounter with your grandmother would have produced. [...] seeing a picture of Grandma would be an experience of the same kind as the visual experience of Grandma herself.<sup>79</sup>

This cannot be true, according to Noë, for whom ‘the whole point is that the phenomenon of seeing in pictures is not like seeing what is depicted’.<sup>80</sup> In a more obvious sense, seeing the poems is not *like* seeing the landscapes to which they refer, but rather discloses aspects of the landscape via an experimental rendering of perceptual experience. The fact that the world, and artistic productions which record awarenesses of that world, are experienced by the same perceptive faculties as independently real objects (as I suggest above) is not to say that perceivers do not determine qualitative differences between a mountain, say, and a painting of, or a poem about a mountain – like Tarlo’s to Black Combe. The important thing about this difference is that the ability to understand the

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<sup>79</sup> *Strange Tools*, p. 150.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

world as constituted by ‘freestanding, neutral, physical’ objects is, on Noë’s account, fundamentally linked to the representation, or the recording of awareness of those objects, in art.<sup>81</sup> Noë continues,

It would be wrong to say that you can’t see without pictures, or that seeing has no biological autonomy from the cultural practice of making and using pictures. The point, rather, is that [...] pictures loop down [echoing Hayles’s ‘reflexive loops’] and alter the ways we exercise our visual powers. Pictures become an instrument for seeing.<sup>82</sup>

‘Outcrops at Haverrig’ dramatizes this, the initial pictorial representation giving way to a more dynamic engagement with the visible on the part of the poet-perceiver, who tunes in to the ‘tiny sandscapes’ that form part of the larger landscape. In fact, Noë goes on to suggest that our ordinary experience of the environment is not characterized as ‘seeing’ at all: ‘our fundamental relation to that which we see is not that of looking, or contemplation, or curiosity, but rather something like reliance or dependence or the relation of *taking for granted*’.<sup>83</sup> Objects of our environment are ‘furniture or gear’, he says, and as such precisely not objects, until we exercise pictorial seeing, or pictorial consciousness.<sup>84</sup> Bletsoe’s pictorial consciousness might aestheticize the hares and the ‘autumnal’ scene, but it also ensures that those hares are attended to in a more complex way than as simply ‘furniture’. Similarly, Larkin’s ‘text Enclosures’ invite us to reflect on our intervention in the environment, and our treatment of certain spaces (such as fields and plantations) as ‘gear’ enabling optimum growth yields, for example. One significant implication of radical landscape poetry’s emphasis on its own ‘specific evidentness’ is, then, the claim that artistic ‘representations’ tune us into ‘seeing’ the world, giving us the concept of objecthood by which we distance ourselves from, but also contemplate and relate to our environment.

Martin Seel goes further, positing that seeing artistic representations *as such* is an act which is necessarily anchored in a kind of ontological certainty. In *Aesthetics of Appearing*, he argues that our

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

ability to identify artworks from among the objects of perception is based upon our ability to see the world, and to differentiate between the two:

Plato's cave simile is phenomenologically correct. The cave's occupants are incapable of knowing reality precisely because they are incapable of knowing the presented shadows as pictures. The existence of pictures is thereby a proof of the existence of a world beyond pictures. Whoever can see pictures, runs the conclusion from Plato's imagery, is in principle immune to world blindness.<sup>85</sup>

Seel's admission that it is only the case *in principle* that artistic representations lend perceivers immunity to world blindness, is significant because it allows a more substantial claim to be made for radical landscape poetry. Not only do the poems addressed here alert readers to their own visibility and textual materiality, but also meditate explicitly on the ways in which we encounter and represent the visible. Inherent in Tarlo's generic designation, 'radical landscape poetry', which *The Ground Aslant* bodies forth from existing work by sixteen contemporary poets, is an attitude of criticality towards the processes by which we 'scape' the land – both in subjective acts of perceptual and spatial navigation, and in wider cultural contexts.<sup>86</sup> On this basis, radical landscape poetry achieves a double reflection on the value and critical interpretation of the art object, and on the reader's physical, perceptual, and even ethical relation to the world. 'Whether it is a question of things or of historical situations, philosophy has no other function than to teach us to see them anew, and it is true to say that philosophy actualizes itself by destroying itself as an isolated philosophy.'<sup>87</sup> Merleau-Ponty here provides an analogy for the complex operations of the radical landscape poems I have been discussing: they actualize themselves as material objects and in doing so destroy themselves as isolated objects, bringing to perception the dynamic and relational space of perceptual experience.

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<sup>85</sup> Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. by John Farrell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 184.

<sup>86</sup> Tarlo, Introduction to *The Ground Aslant*, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> Merleau-Ponty, p. 483.