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# **Finding Words**

**A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface**

Patrick George Bond

September 2012

Submission for Doctor of Philosophy

by Creative Writing

Declaration

I declare that this collection of poems and critical preface are entirely my own work and that the material has not been, and will not be, submitted either in whole or part, to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature.....

Patrick Bond

## Acknowledgements

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**UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX**

**PATRICK BOND**

**Doctor of Philosophy (Creative Writing)**

**FINDING WORDS**

**SUMMARY**

**Finding Words: A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface**

*Finding Words: A Collection of Poems with a Critical Preface* is a collection of fifty-five poems preceded by an introductory essay.

The poems were all written in the period 2005 – 2011.

The critical preface is in four chapters. The first is in the form of a recollection of the circumstances of poetry in my early life. The second engages with the critical thinking of Geoffrey Hill. The third responds to an exemplary poem of John Clare's *The Midsummer Cushion* period. The fourth introduces and places in context the poems of the collection, and experience of reading poetry aloud.

Chapter One is a form of autobiography. It retrieves half-submerged fragments of the story of a British Colonial child in the 1950s, seeking out the texture and feel of various discontinuities including the move to the UK from Mauritius, the long-term illness and early death of my father, different languages in early childhood, Catholicism with a southern-hemisphere emphasis, and the growth of an intense dedication to poetry from the age of eleven.

Chapter Two engages at length with the dilemma of an individual poetics which expresses itself in the form, 'How do I understand the conversion of my experiencing into the experiencing of words?' My practice of poetry is uncovered as both unconscious and *sui generis*. The root experience of finding words and forming poems is illuminated by engagement with the ideas of Geoffrey Hill, particularly the moral imagination as the formal creative faculty, words regarded as pledges and not signs,

language that both redeems and betrays the intentions of the poet, and the analysis of grammar to reveal ethical processes. The ideas of phenomenologist, David Abram, are used to illuminate my consistent experience of wonder-in-nature, and processes of sensation and perception as part of the writing of poetry. The discussion returns to Hill at the point of a divergence from Abram on the nature of the imagination, and explores the implications of Hill's rigorous criteria on solipsism, the ambivalent power of words, and the frailty of human attempts at communication. It ends with a brief discussion on therapeutic writing, and acknowledgement of Hill's proposition of a theology of language as a means of grace.

Chapter Three describes a poet, John Clare, with whom I have always had a powerful relationship, even though he is not a direct influence on the style of my poems. The chapter looks briefly at John Clare's unusual literary status, to illuminate aspects of his standing as a poet. It enlists the help of an essay by the philologist, Professor Barbara M. H. Strang, who examines the linguistic characteristics of Clare's poetry. It is argued that Clare's poetry does not need punctuation or other editorial improvements. The semantic insights of Geoffrey Hill on poetry are applied to one of the major poems of the *Midsummer Cushion*, namely *Shadows of Taste*. Hill's observations on 'temper' and 'taste' are linked to Clare via the hymns of the Wesleyan Methodists; and the elements of Clare's linguistic mimesis of nature are elucidated, particularly his repeated use of the word 'joy'.

Chapter Four introduces the fifty-five poems, and discusses the processes of writing, revising, selecting and grouping. Major poetic influences are briefly examined, from the Gawain-poet to Basil Bunting, as well as the main features of the poems themselves, in particular the use of an alliterative pulse modelled on the poets of the fourteenth century. The chapter includes a brief reference to reading poetry aloud in small community groups, and the experience of reading John Clare's poems outdoors in forests and fields.

The thesis is an attempt to define a practice of writing poetry which has been largely instinctive and consciously personal. An attempt is made to sketch the fine boundary between a solipsistic self-expression, and the technical demands of a craft which has its roots in a poetic and cultural tradition of at least eight centuries.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Finding Words for Remembering**

In the beginning... there were, or are, several attempts at writing an autobiographical introduction. The entanglement is part of the telling. In briefest summary, I was born in 1953 in London, the first of three children. My father was 52, English, my mother 23 and not English, but Mauritian. It is a complicated tale which has left its mark on the characteristic voice and music of my poetry. What follows is my latest wrestling with that story, and with the manner of conveying it. I begin with reflections on the process of reflecting.

My first attempt to write autobiographically surprised me by the emergence of a prose voice which seemed to fall back on the grammatical attitudes of a writer in the generation or two preceding mine. Its syntax and diction made use of a tone subtly old fashioned, even for me. Subsequent revision has ameliorated the impression, but my father's generation would have recognised the style which I adopted, or which possessed me. As he was born in 1900, I will reference here without further ado my sense of belonging in two worlds at once, a sense which recurs throughout my story in different ways.

So, now to autobiography... or maybe not. At the age of fifty nine, remembering is itself a problem, and I find that glimpses of the distant past – something forgotten for decades – interpolate themselves unexpectedly, in the middle of the quotidian. It is disturbing.



I start again, with the problem(s) of remembering. First there is the problem of the present, in which the past is to be... what? Mirrored. Captured. Interpreted. Verbalised. I am beset by subtle variations in my options. It is perhaps a poet's quandary, or that of a poet trying to write prose. At any rate, the present is being asked to carry the past in some way, and I will have to work out a way to do that.

So to the problem of words – words that keep trying to turn from prose into poetry, because the act of remembering can only be accomplished through a verbal project, and my verbal projects are always poems. Thus the problem of truth: in so far as poems are 'creative', so also does this project, of 'remembering', appear creative, so full of its own truth that fidelity to the past might become of secondary importance. Words and truth are another of my problems.

Let us assume the past, for a moment. One confronts again the problem of the present, of 'this' moment which can never be finally located, measured, pinned down. Yet in this present moment I find an associated problem: myself, which is simultaneously all I know about the present moment. I find an entity I label 'my-self' but which actually is a shaky, distorting lens through which I am trying to achieve clarity about the past, that which is no longer 'present'. Presence is another key issue for me. For instance, if I foreground the past, it becomes existentially present in my experiencing. The self who experiences in the present moment is also subject to the problem of how to define the present moment.

Moving from the philosophical to the psychological, there is, finally, the problem of finding words for what does not wish to be remembered. This is the problem of looking

backwards at all, a visceral unwillingness, a reluctance not merely the result of fifty-nine years of personal failures, entanglements, dreams and dénouements, but almost certainly an inherited predisposition from both sides of my family line. On my father's side, a scepticism about life which is the lingering, distinctive aftertaste of generations of labourers, grafters, land workers and hired hands. On my mother's side, the disappointed but proud mien of adventurers, roamers, dreamers and seekers, come to grief through loneliness, alcohol, or mental illness. An inherited predisposition of this sort might also be termed *depression*, a common enough motif in the lives of poets.

Let me say that I am aware that such a prejudicate opinion about my relatives and ancestors is highly personal and adopted for the murky purposes of this process of recollection; it is of course inherently one-sided, ill-informed, and partial. It will do for now, and leads me at last to commence a series of recollections, but not before adumbrating one more problem, which reflects in its own way on my processes of writing: the difficulty of starting anything (as exemplified by this long preamble). It is connected, in the language of some Human Resources theories, to my being a 'finisher' not a 'starter' – one who prefers to work out the perfect closing sequence, advantageous both to the objectives of the project and its personnel, and also to beneficiaries and future inheritors of the project's aims, before ever starting anything. A finisher: one who has difficulty starting.

One of my hobbies, or passions, as a boy of twelve and thirteen, was playing patience. I not only played but researched, in the book-length collections of such games put together by enthusiasts, every single-pack game I could identify, grouping them in their various families by rule of play. I wanted to determine which games rose above the

merely mechanical, and of these, which were the most elegant in their methodology, in their layout, and in the likelihood of success if played with reasonable attention. Too little likelihood, or too great, simply resulted in frustration and a sense of being cheated.

‘Bisley’ and ‘King Albert’ come to mind as favourites: all the cards are exposed from the start. The work is to hold them all simultaneously in mind, and since I am not blessed with a card-sharp mentality, basic arithmetical-logical problems like these have a quality of fascination.

In such games, everything seemed to depend on the first move, the first card displaced. The glamour, for me, was in the formality of the rules of movement (varying little between the basics of sequencing and treatment of groups), the visual charm of numbers, suits, colours and pictures laid out, the mixing up of groups both ordered and random, the slow discernment of future blocks to progress, the weighing of alternative avenues to a solution – and the thrill of coming to a decision: which card to move first, knowing that everything might depend on that. There is usually no going back – and no need to go back, if that first move is the right one. Yet frustration or likely failure are taken as read, and always did seem to be part of the play.

On 12<sup>th</sup> July 1967 my father died. I was just fourteen, ending my third year at grammar school. He was 66. It was not unexpected. I received the news when I was called out of a biology class, to take a telephone call in the Bursar’s office. My mother gave me the news: “Dad’s gone.” She asked if I wanted to come home but I could tell she did not really want me there – many years later she told me that she had been obliged, as a child

in 1942, to help nurse her father until his death. I stayed and finished the day as normal. Only my best friend knew what had happened.

It occurs to me that this sense of two quite different worlds, running simultaneously but in parallel, was even then nothing out of the ordinary for me. Perhaps it had always been there: my father had always been different from other fathers, a man of a different era, who taught me to hold doors open for ladies, and to position myself on the outside of the pavement when accompanying a lady in the street. To compound this Edwardian ambience, he had returned to this country only in 1957, having spent all his working life ‘in the colonies’, in Mauritius, ending up as Director of Telecommunications. I remember nothing of Mauritius, despite spending the first four years of my life there. It remains within me, a touchstone for something which I cannot recall: something exotic, tropical, abundant, fertile.

He was a man out of his time. The social and sexual turmoil of the 1960’s precipitated in him only withering contempt. His prejudices of race, gender and class were entirely consonant with his early upbringing, and with his experience of rubbing shoulders with the colonial elite in Mauritius. He was not born into this class – perhaps that made him all the more sensitive. He had joined the Royal Navy in 1918 from an agricultural and artisan background, and trained in the new discipline of wireless telegraphy. He began as a Boy Telegrapher. However, not long after, he had his Commission bought out by the Government of Mauritius after working at a naval shore station there. I think he and a dozen others were bought out, perhaps enchanted by the glamour of a paradise island, or appalled at life at sea. He told me great tales of youthful high jinks – like sawing off

the silencer on his motor bike's exhaust and roaring down back roads in the early mornings, scattering the chickens. The natives called him *Le Fantôme*.

He was forced to retire early, his heart defect acquired through a bout of Rheumatic Fever as a child. He ended up in this country in 1957, on a fixed pension of £1,000. This sum was generous to begin with, but it was steadily and incrementally eroded by inflation, and by 1967 had to support three adolescent children. He had no friends in England, having disowned his birth family after some mysterious feud in the 1930s.

In my recollection of my father, he smoked twenty 'Kensingtons' a day, took great delight in watching cricket on the television, drank whisky from a cut glass decanter, and took soda from a siphon, a glass bottle criss-crossed with metal webbing. The soda was charged with gas by a small metal canister which slotted into a breech, was screwed down on to a spike, and thereby released carbon dioxide under pressure into the water. He showed me how to clean the valves in our family radio, using a soft-haired brush for dust, and carbon tetrachloride to de-grease the contacts. It was about the only father-and-son activity we ever shared, and I was probably 'high' – a bit – on the fumes.

I remember him demonstrating, one day, his old skills. He carefully tuned the VHF band (now called FM) to the range for coastal shipping, and jotted down, quite casually but in beautiful regular script, a message from a ship's captain in the Channel giving details of cargo and arrival times in various ports. He was translating from Morse Code without any apparent quandary or hesitation.

*Remembering what does not want to be remembered.* What made me wake, every morning of the first fifty years of my life, with a racing heart and an acute sense of imminent danger? All my youthful years I took pride in it, as my ability to be instantaneously awake and functioning. My memories start when I am about eight years old. What holds the previous years hidden to my conscious gaze? There are discontinuities throughout my life, but the move to England is the major one, a radical change of culture, status, climate, friends, language, home. Some sort of continuity would have helped, during and after – of location, roots; of friendships and ties; of those who looked after me; of expectations – what does it mean to be an almost-white-skinned immigrant, to try to *outdo the British in Britishness*, to conform to an unachievable and shifting standard? A continuity of unconditional belonging – to somebody, somewhere – would have helped.

Maybe it is too easy to blame. Parents can usually only give what they have themselves received. One of the difficulties I find in writing these thoughts of the past, is the opportunity it gives to introspective hypothesizing and self-exculpatory rationalisations. Or perhaps more accurately, the temptation to indulge a dark strain of negative self-images and shame, powerlessness and exaggerated reticence, which have already wrought enough damage on my life.

Where did poetry come from? What were the sources of the hunger for words that is more than any other instinct? My first four years were in Mauritius. French and English and a casserole of different languages were in the background, including French-Creole with admixtures perhaps of Portuguese and African. Other vocal timbres on the island included Chinese and Indian. It would not be surprising if my babyhood and earliest

impressions prompted a mistrust of words with fixed content, in favour of paying attention to cadence, emphasis, musicality, tone, gesture, *gestalt*.

Where did poetry emerge? I know *when* it came to immediate consciousness, to within a few weeks and days, but it surely did not simply enter from outside. Poetry was a given, already present, and I discovered it waiting for me, when I became ready. It had its own character from the beginning: uninterested in competition, in success, in impressing anyone else. A matter of deep self-scrutiny and awareness, cadenced structured words, self-started speech into the speaking or silent world around me, a matter of celebrations and lamentations.

My ‘mother tongue’, as well as my mother’s tongue, was French, which was the language of the ruling class on Mauritius before the British conquered it in Napoleonic times. At some point before I was four my father decided that I would never learn English if I did not stop speaking French, so I stopped. Curiously, he would use French to my mother if he did not wish us to understand, or Creole (patois of English, French and other words) if it was really top-secret – but she was offended at that mode of speech, and he derived much amusement from using its racy, tortured French. Language was a veil, but we could generally see through it.

I was for a time, at sixteen, fluent in French, during a three-month school exchange in Paris, but I stopped speaking after school. Yet I remain close to the language, as also to German. My A-level education in both, which included Racine and Goethe, is a precious if rusty tool, as is my O-level Latin (like Shakespeare, I have *less Greek*). Most of European literature feels as if it is not separate from me and I have the confidence to

listen carefully if I hear another Mediterranean or Germanic language. I even fancy that I can detect poetry being read when I hear it, no matter what the language.

Is imagination part of the wellspring of poetry? I remember much vivid imaginative play, games of hunting through the woods pretending to be cowboys, or playing with the girls at the flats, myself an Arthurian knight at the court of the Queen. This particular game was paid for in blood, as my younger brother audibly took the mickey, and then accurately lobbed a half-brick at my head as I raced to deal out retribution. The lump is still there on my skull, and I never did learn that lesson. Play was a refuge too: I remember hiding, terrified, behind the sofa during the Cuban Missile Crisis. All through my youth, the threat of imminent nuclear annihilation was an everyday fact of life.

There were few books in my house. We had no Shakespeare, and no Bible – we were Catholics, so not encouraged to read it independently. Yet my father was not uneducated. He was self-educated, in the manner of many men of his generation. He had read the Koran, learned to play the organ, led the choir at the Anglican Cathedral in Mauritius, and dabbled in theology – as indeed I do myself. He had converted to Catholicism before marrying my mother, and the story is that the Bishop of Durban made the crossing from South Africa specifically to give him tuition. He loved to argue the toss with the Jehovah's Witnesses who came to our flat in Thornbury Court – his prankster sense of humour enjoying the challenge of how long he could keep them there, frustrating them of their mission in other doorways.

The first real reading books which were mine were prizes from school. I attended a small prep school from nine to eleven years old, my parents driven to it by my



intellectual and moral decline at the local Roman Catholic primary school in Caterham-on-the-Hill. I remember being thoroughly bullied and ostracized by the local kids. Recently moved from Bath, and no doubt with my colonial ways still on display, I was a natural target, an outsider trying desperately to fit in. By contrast, at Oakhyrst Grange I was helped to recognise the power of my intellectual endowments for the first time, and I began to develop some elements of my personality – I remember comforting a boy who had been bullied.

From about the age of ten, I began to shine in class, and was given as a prize *The Thirty Nine Steps* by John Buchan. I still remember the thrill of finding that I could master the difficulties of reading it – my first ‘long’ book. My ability to be comfortable with any variety of older English endures, having fallen in love with medieval English at university. I realise that this prep school marked the start of my transition from bewildered immigrant to independent intellectual; poetry came a little later.

I remember admiring the very great beauty of the small boys, five and six year olds. I decided then and there, at the age of only nine, that I would marry young and have children of my own. It turned out exactly so, and the moment of my realising this, of my foreknowing, remains vivid. I wrote it down in some of my early poetry. So also with the moment I discovered time. I was waiting to go home, queuing for the coach which would drop me some three miles away, at the top of the hill above my house. All of a sudden it was clear to me that the time between now and tea, and then bedtime, was not infinite with potential and possibility, full of exciting games to play, discoveries to make. Instead, it was a quantifiable space measured by clocks. It was limited, foreknown and divisible.

That moment of disappointment (and rebellion) remains with me, along with the glamour of early autumn sunshine, a big leather satchel, and a small motor coach which seemed very large. It remains through and because of the words I wrote. My non-verbalised memories all seem to fade and disappear. Paradoxically, on recently re-reading some old letters of mine, from forty years ago, I discovered memories which seemed to not be mine, and had to be re-created on the basis of the evidence of my own handwriting.

In 1957, having been uprooted from a paradise island, I found myself in central London, at the age of four, then in Caterham, then Bath, then back to Surrey (Whyteleafe), at the age of eight. London was sooty, dark, and carried the scars of war. Sugar was still rationed. Our family finances were always limited, at least within my memory: not nearly enough really, to keep up the level my mother had married into. My father was generous with money, and impulsive. I take after him, so that money has always been more or less hand-to-mouth, a matter of what was next needful. Savings have perished in various life calamities. Luck follows me around, never predictable: it seems important not to give in to unnecessary fretting. What is in the moment is always vital. I seem to conform to several stereotypes of the feckless artist.

Poetry arose in 1964. In that year I entered an all-boys Catholic grammar school which modelled itself on a public school, its sporting ethos mixed with a self-segregating Catholicism. There I was fated to meet a teacher who would confirm poetry in me. Mr Hennessey taught English in my first year, and he concentrated on encouraging verbal creativity not drilling rules into us. His edict was simple: "Forget everything you think

you know about poems; I want one idea per line.” Miraculously, he managed to obtain half-decent poems from nearly every boy in the class, and duplicated for us a small collection. Seeing my work ‘in print’ opened a door in my mind. I was from then on a poet. I have never doubted that primary conviction. It was a naked love affair, right from the start; more than a vocation.

My second year English teacher, an Irish priest more inclined to bookkeeping, drummed into us grammar, punctuation and spelling, but fortunately he was too late to kill the fire that had begun to burn in me. In this year Mr Hennessey took us for art, but was forced to resign from the school after asking one of us to volunteer as a nude model. He later (I was told) took his own life. I remember that art class as thrilling and focused, without a hint of anything smutty; I discovered the living vibrancy of the line in drawing. I remember Mr Hennessey as passionate and idealistic, with something of D. H. Lawrence about his appearance. I still grieve for him.

There were, of course, no poetry books at home. My only acquaintance with structured language would have been hymns every Sunday at church, and prayers in Latin or English. Too poor to buy any book first hand, and too ignorant to know where to start, I was forced to pick up what I could. My father knew some poetry by heart, perhaps from school days – true to his darker side, he could recite the morbidly melancholy ‘I Remember, I Remember’ by Thomas Hood, and some verses from Fitzgerald’s translation of the ‘Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam’:

The Moving Finger writes, and having writ  
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,

Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.<sup>1</sup>

These lines he would intone with melancholy gusto, and indeed they fitted perfectly his own experience of life, and engagement with loss. His assertion was that the world engaged in war every thirty years or so, and therefore another one was due; observing the crises of the Cold War confirmed his belief, and he would say, “I’m glad I won’t be here when it comes.” He was in his mid-sixties, increasingly bed-ridden as his heart panicked him and diabetes wore him down. He dumped his gloom on me without much awareness. He was much older than a normal father, and too close to be a grandfather. I adored him, and idolised him. He had just begun to open up to me when he died.

My mannerisms include a sort of patrician, old-fashioned type of manners, in deference to my father’s mores and norms. I seem to mirror exactly my father’s aura of displaced rootedness – a man who came back to his country after forty years and found it changed. I reflect his aura of present connection with times lived and lost, and a sort of baffled yearning for a bygone age. Perhaps there is an indicator, here, for my strong taste for the poetry and concerns of the medieval and early modern period, from the Gawain-poet of the 1370s onwards to the poets of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century – a time of religious ferment and sensitivity to the power of ancient symbols and myths.

The first poetry book to come my way was John Galsworthy’s slim volume of 1926, *Voices New and Old*<sup>2</sup>. I was twelve or thirteen, and found it in a church jumble sale. The poems are highly competent in a Georgian style, reminiscent of Housman and Masfield. Galsworthy’s work is characterised by nature mysticism, a sense of place,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Fitzgerald, ‘Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of Naishapur’, in F. T. Palgrave, ed. *The Golden Treasury* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940, reset 1956) p. 349.

<sup>2</sup> John Galsworthy *Verses New and Old* (London: Heinemann, 1926)

somewhat formulaic outcries to the Deity, and sentimental memorials of the young men lost in the Great War – all enlivened by his novelist’s eye for quirks and details, and carried on a good ear for rhyme and cadence. I look back, astonished at my precocious self-direction, and the avidity with which I made this book my own, against what I felt as a hostile, dismissive world.

It was not long before a second book, Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* <sup>3</sup>, came into my possession, donated by a neighbour who, on learning of my interest, passed it to me. The edition is dated 1956. I could empathise with Galsworthy’s feelings – while resisting his sentimentality – but the impact of so many poets all at once, and the personal predilection displayed in Palgrave’s selection, which seemed clearly to incline to the gloomy, was baffling. ‘Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples’ (Shelley), ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ (Hood), ‘Elegy’ (Byron), ‘The Death Bed’ (Hood), ‘On an Infant Dying as soon as Born’ (Lamb), ‘The Affliction of Margaret’ (Wordsworth)... and on and on.

Yet I was fascinated, too. I read without critical apparatus or introduction everything from sonnets by Shakespeare to Odes by Milton, Wordsworth’s later profusions, Browning’s narrations, the florid abundance of Victorian heavyweights, the orations of Swinburne, and the quirky selection from contemporary writers. Overall, the effect on me, as a lad of fourteen and fifteen, was diffuse, sometimes emotionally draining, often verbally exhilarating. I was learning by a process of osmosis. I felt like a pebble-hunter on a vast, stony beach. The poems of Hopkins shone out like a beacon. To this day, the

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<sup>3</sup> F. T. Palgrave, ed. *The Golden Treasury* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940)

font, layout and page size of this particular volume induce feelings of moderate passivity, gloom, and helpless fascination.

Throughout my later childhood, I was conscious of being in no hurry to grow up, and I was a late developer, sexually. I never saw a couple embrace till I was fourteen. On a school exchange in Paris for three months in 1969, I wrote an essay on Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* for my English A-level studies, and found I did not have any relevant vocabulary for the sexual encounters between Paul and Miriam. I had to make do with the clumsy biblical turn of phrase, to 'lie with'. Putting this essay in the post to England merely compounded the intensity of my embarrassment.

I 'fell in love' many times before sexual experience of any kind. In a platonic, puppyish way I loved the mothers of my friends; then more troublingly, a younger boy at school when I was sixteen; and then girls, like a thunderclap out of a blue sky – as the French saying has it, to fall in love is to undergo *un coup de foudre*. Sex and love hit me when I was seventeen, with full force, and at twenty I was married, to my first girlfriend. It was a romantic gamble, and perhaps if I had not been unfathered, I might not have run for emotional security quite so young and so naively.

My first son was born two years later, by which time I had graduated from Cambridge with a degree in English, and was seeking work on the land – in forestry. The powerful drive to find what I called 'productive' work, to establish a home in the country where my children could grow up in the open air, and to work with trees, resulted in my taking a job with the Forestry Commission for nine years – as a Craftsman, a worker not a supervisor, occupying a tied house in a village in Northamptonshire.

It was pure romance on my part, we were isolated and poor, and it was physically demanding – for the first two years, almost more than I could handle – but I was lucky enough to work with a small group of older men, who effectively initiated me into adulthood. It was a nine-year rite of passage. I was their apprentice, and they took me on largely with good humour and patience; I am grateful for what I learned.

Learning to use hand tools, especially the traditional reap-hook (sickle) and slasher (a long-handled curved blade for thick vegetation), was a matter of blistered hands, strained muscles and overloaded joints, and numerous opportunities every day to amputate some part of oneself – the older men warned of men they had known, missing the little finger on the left hand, taken off with a right-to-left cut with the reaphook whilst weeding round tiny trees. Work with clearing saws (petrol-engined brush cutters equipped with a 24-toothed metal cutting disc) could get monotonous, swinging from side to side for hours on steep roadside embankments, but it allowed me to keep a copy of Shakespeare's sonnets in my back pocket, repeating the poems line by line in rhythm with the saw. I got to know at least a dozen by heart. The hand tools were all about rhythm, once you built up the muscular framework suited to the tool itself; without a sense of rhythm, you were a danger to yourself and to your fellows. I was no longer a weakling when I left the job: thirty three years old, twelve stone and not an ounce of spare flesh; divorced and a single parent too. It had been a tough nine years.

As a 'cradle' Catholic I have no conscious memory of how Catholicism started in me, and no reference point of non-belief, for comparison. I have never had any doubts about believing, nor have any of my parallel systems of investigation (such as depth

psychology, or existential theology) ever come near the rooted depths of faith – nor do they need to. I resemble Jung, in his famous response when asked if he believed in God: I do not have to believe, *I know*. However, had I not encountered Jung, I would long ago have despaired of the culturally narrow, unimaginative and self-interested interpretations of faith which come out of the institution of the Church. Jung allowed me to sense the full import of the weekly rituals as symbols of a profound mystery; with such concepts I still grapple, and faith continues to be part of my *metanoia*, my conversion through life.

As part of that faith I have an uneasy relationship with guilt, and count myself a ‘southern hemisphere’ Catholic, more interested in processions, music, incense and good food, than hair-shirts, flagellation and guilt. Some might call me a bad Catholic, but I would prefer ‘complex’ Catholic, and in that I am probably a typical Catholic. Of course, in espousing such a personalised version of faith, I run between the *Scylla* of perpetual prevarication, and the *Charybdis* of dependence on my own self-mythology. Poetry positions me on a fine dividing line between the two, and does not absolve me of guilt for my free-thinking.

My sense of being ‘other’ and my sense of being in two worlds simultaneously may both be associated with my Catholicism. It is extremely difficult to get perspective on a layer of my personality which is so close to my skin, and perhaps I should assert also that the stereotypical Catholic identity in England, the ghetto mentality and the tribal divisions, was never mine. But I will acknowledge the influence of other features: the importance of ritual observance, a conviction of belonging to a body of faith beyond my immediate locality, the simple communal joys of choir- and hymn-singing, regular



participation in a liturgy and theology with continuity over 2,000 years, a vivid sense of obligations and serious responsibilities in life, and the cyclic celebration of feast days within a liturgical calendar that gives spiritual meaning to the passing of time. Above all, and probably least visible to me, is the ‘sacramental’ understanding, in which what is visible is an active, effective sign of an invisible grace.

The Church also has a power over evil: it is a force for good (notwithstanding all its very manifest failures), an absolute power not a manifestation relative to anything else. There is no other way of saying that, paradox and affront though it may be; and my position as a ‘complex’ practising Catholic is very much part of that statement. My search for personal ‘meaning’ in poetry, and for poetry to ‘mean something’ may have an origin in my religious background, as also my need for fulfilments of form in what I write, the need to constantly deepen the craft of words, a watchful self-doubt in the aspiration to perfected expression, and openness to inspiration that is impersonal and unitive.

So, I reach a point where this is written, and I have remembered, or half-remembered, or mis-remembered. In one instance at least, I now know that I have remembered correctly, but was originally deceived. Having written thus far, I was led by some mischievous sprite to enter the name of my English teacher, Mr Hennessey, and my old school, into the oracular maw of the internet, via Google. I discovered that, far from committing suicide, he had bounced back, notching up a long and honourable career as a teacher, going on late in life to become a priest and well-loved father confessor, and dying only a few years ago, not many miles from where I now live. My astonishment has been vividly irradiated by anger at the deception which was perpetrated upon me as a child of

twelve, in my innocence and willingness to give credence to those in charge of me. I feel as though I have been deprived of him, bereaved, twice over. He was the father to my poetry, and I owe him a profound debt.

In many ways, I started young – poetry, marriage, babies, and ill-advised career moves. I had a lifetime of learning in front of me and I was keen to get on with it. But I put my faith in poetry, and in that conviction I never shifted. I moved that first card of the game in total confidence that it was the right move. Perhaps I shall never know if I was right, but the game has not yet finished – the pattern has not yet resolved.

## Chapter Two

### Finding Words for Poetry

I have told a story, made up a frame for bits and pieces of my life. I hope that the frame was consistent, the telling eloquent. As for truth, I am in a quandary, for a different frame would tell a different truth. *There was a sensitive boy, whose imaginative life lay parallel to his real life and constantly tempted him away into adventures, into story books, into dreaming states of awakeness, into nights of terrifying dreams which could not be remembered in the light of day, into yearning states for which there are barely any words...* This dreaming boy does not easily fit into a speculative narrative framework such as I have written about my childhood and poetry. My poems catch him at work occasionally.

As I move now, from telling the simple story of the gradual assembling of my individual persona through childhood, to the sophisticated critical consciousness required for an inspection of my 'poetics', I am brought face to face with a dilemma: much that needs to be revealed is located in my practice, which is not wholly conscious and has never needed to be. Since my experiencing of life appears to me as both unconscious and *sui generis*, I am forced to reckon with that kind of experiencing in my account of my poetics. My dilemma formulates itself therefore as *how I understand the conversion of my experiencing into the experiencing of words*.

My method will be to pay attention to what is characteristic of my own 'finding words for poetry' as occasion arises, in this chapter and the next, before making a more particular introduction to the poem collection, in chapter four. One major focus of this chapter will be a discussion of elements of David Abram's phenomenological approach

to experience, nature and language, as they apply to my ‘experiencing’. However, my introductory remarks will take some ideas from Geoffrey Hill, and I will return later to consider his various critical alignments on words and the obligations of writing, and what might be encompassed by his term, *moral imagination*. However I would not wish to imply that a critical preface such as this could comprehend the full implications of his complex vision: I will merely make use of what I can.

It would be easy to summarise my poetic practice, my ‘finding words for poetry’, in simple terms. I write with a strong sensitivity to rhythm and cadence, based on a version of the medieval alliterative pulse. I write to make pictures and tell a story in quite a traditional understanding of the lyric style. I write with subject matter taken from my own emotional life, from experiences in nature, and from an intuitive religious sphere. I have a dogged need to keep querying the underlying meanings, connections and patterns in life. I take delight in the spoken sound of words as much as the meanings.

The first essay in Geoffrey Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings*, entitled *Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’* begins with a similar, and equally hypothetical, assertion of radical simplicity:

Ideally, as I have already implied, my theme would be simple; simply this: that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense — an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony...<sup>4</sup>

The rest of Hill’s essay conducts the reader in a slow spiral fashion, away from and around this ‘simple’ statement to a wider and wider debate about the validity of any

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings* ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), *Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’*, p. 4.

such mimetic protocol, without ever devaluing the statement as it stands. His initial quote from W. B. Yeats about a poem ‘com[ing] right with a click like a closing box’ is immediately queried by reference to the argument between proponents of spontaneity as against form and structure. The same procedure, of quotation followed by query, is followed rigorously to the end, without any sense of the usual purposive structure of an essay – or at least, he works diligently to frustrate such an expectation. On the last page of the essay, Hill seems to devolve, finally, upon the necessity of fear, at the most profound level of dealing with words. He quotes a poem by William Empson which recommends that we ‘take fear as the measure’, and which concludes: ‘There is not much else that we dare to praise’.

Yet, far from recommending fear – and the essay is full of other seeming recommendations, from atonement, to definition (Pound), to disinterested stoicism (Coleridge), to ‘the positive virtue of negative statements’ (Hopkins, Arendt), and so on – the whole essay, in its dizzying circling around and around the theme given deliberate shape as ‘menace’ and ‘atonement’, is precisely an imitation or demonstration of its own thesis: that in using words, there is a need to query, and to keep querying, significations, tones and contextures. In that endeavour, Hill’s reader will have to mimic Hill himself, and deploy every intellectual strategy not only of the literary critic, but of the historian of ideas, the philosopher, the theologian, and the poet.

Stunned words of victory less memorable  
 than those urged from defeat; not that the vanquished  
 are more to be believed. In effect  
 it cries out for silence: whose  
 silence, would you say? I say endure  
 by way of enduring: the secular  
 masques, *Laus et vituperatio*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) section LXXXIX p.46.

The quotation from Hill's long poem, *The Triumph of Love*, illustrates his procedure of constant query, the habit of thinking in polarities (speaking well and speaking ill: *Laus et vituperatio*, praise and blame), as well as his emphatic curving back on himself – 'I say endure/by way of enduring'. The ability to 'return... upon [one]self', in the sense of circling back to look again, is cited by Hill as the crucial vindication, for Matthew Arnold, of Burke's integrity.<sup>6</sup> However there is another sense of 'curving' in Hill's use of the word, to do with a collapse of perspective, and the two senses are not dissociated:

My capacity to make any judgement on these matters is confined to the field of semantics, and one must therefore face the prospect that what Luther, in his *Lectures on Romans*, calls the 'terrible curving in on itself' of the life of mere nature is apparent even within the small compass of these words.<sup>7</sup>

His 'judgement' refers to matters concerning Augustine's doctrine of original sin, which Hill correlates with:

that imperfection which stamps all activity of the graceless flesh...if the work is done 'without faith', 'with oute the sprite of God'... [It is a] sense of natural inborn helplessness, 'when a man wills to act rightly and cannot'<sup>8</sup>

Such a powerful espousal of religious terminology results from Hill's understanding of literature as a matter of obligations – to words and language, to the 'civil polity' or society, to oneself and one's experiences as an ethical being, and to the imagination. His outlook is 'moral' at the profound level of a search for meaning within meanings, for fine distinctions. Hill believes that words matter, in an absolute not a relative sense, and in a civic, political sense as well as a personal and expressive one. In such an understanding, a relationship with the question of 'concupiscence and wilfulness' in

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<sup>6</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement', p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Of Diligence and Jeopardy, p. 282.

<sup>8</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Of Diligence and Jeopardy, p. 282.

human nature cannot be avoided. Yet his use of religious terminology is an aspect of his literary criticism; the terminology *may* derive from his religious faith, but he has no sectarian axe to grind, and his morality is precisely Christian in a cultural sense, not a credal one, as far as I understand the matter; he might argue that those moral dilemmas and problems are an inextricable part of western culture *per se*. As a practising Catholic, I do not recognise any religious force in his criteria; they are not injunctions about living a good life; but as a poet I recognise a potent instrument in the search for meaning.

If that search is itself denoted as a culturally limited aspiration, in a supposedly secular and avowedly value-free intellectual atmosphere, I do not see that Hill's erudition can be gainsaid so easily – the 'morality' under scrutiny is implied and rooted in the very words we use, and Hill is at pains to demonstrate this. It is of course reasonable to assert that such a search for meaning has to root itself in the mores of the present time rather than the past, but Hill stands for values which have not been overthrown, merely passed by; he resoundingly condemns 'methods of communication and education which have destroyed memory and dissipated attention'.<sup>9</sup> His own pursuit of the ethical inflexions within words and grammar, through words which coerce as much as they facilitate meaning, is passionate and unremitting. He sees the imagination as the creative faculty which is dedicated to a restored and renewed clarity of perception.

A confession about poetry and wonder – which is a kind of clarified seeing – brings my dreamer back into the frame. It is difficult to describe or explain wonder. My relationship with poetry is similarly difficult to describe. I can only aver that I fell in

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<sup>9</sup> *Collected Critical Writings, Of Diligence and Jeopardy*, p. 287.

love with writing poetry at the age of eleven, and that nothing has ever come close to its power over me. I think it took me forty more years to realise that poetry was the contribution to the world which I had to make in my own individual right, under my sole name. Nothing lasted and nothing satisfied me unless it was poetry. I put poetry on a backburner, but actually it dominated everything I did, conditioned all my experience and my decisions, and outlasted everything else.

I made you my Goddess, still you turn as you always do,  
A snake of fire holds up its brilliant head.<sup>10</sup>

How to account for the thrill, the holy mystery, of words? I would not say that I write about nature, but that the wonder of nature manifests in me in words as I write.

Time burns. For an instant, ash leaves  
Print on my white page  
Primary codes, exit visas, love notes.<sup>11</sup>

Wonder, for me, is intimately connected to Nature: a sense of wildness and otherness; experiences of the earth and being rooted in earth; a sense of original abundance (by contrast with 'original sin'), plenitude, and multi-level complexity; the mystery of a pre-writing, pre-reading mode of knowing; elevated states of mind linked to periods of intense observation; the spell of patterns, connections, design; the fascination of reciprocations, of symbolic and metaphoric thinking; and a kinship with the 'inanimate' of mountain and lake, as much as the 'animate' of tree or bird.

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<sup>10</sup> Collection, *After Strange Dreams*

<sup>11</sup> Collection, *Stoke Park Wood, Northants*



Being aware of myself as this kind of person, as a poet-nature-wonder-person, is not the same as having confidence to assert myself or my poetry. I have lived with profound internalised criticisms, which until now I have not rebutted: animism, primitive or magical thinking, paganism, nature-worship, childishness, solipsism, anthropomorphic self-projection, and instability. My only explanation, from my earliest consciousness of this dilemma, was that I was 'sensitive' but it did not seem a very robust retort. Spending nine years as a Forest Craftsman was perhaps a sterner test and a way of proving the nature of the sensitivity.

How to understand the quality of my experiencing? *Being-Knowing-Imagining-Nature*: the hyphenated super-concept is my struggle to speak. I have been acutely aware of inheriting a cultural and religious framework, which has no category for Nature as I *experience-am-know-imagine*... I have struggled with a norm of intellection, embedded in the very language, which is inherently antithetical to what I try to realise in the saying of my experiencing. This has to do with the implications of the subject-predicate structure which is taken for granted at the linguistic level, but to me, at some level of awareness, is not 'natural'. The grammar of language itself tries to deny my way of perceiving. By this I refer to a problem thrown into relief by the following entry in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, under the heading 'Japanese Philosophy':

Many of the philosophical categories that seem natural in the West are simply not found in East Asian thought. This is in part a function of the structures of the Chinese and Japanese languages, which are quite different from the subject-predicate structure of Indo-European languages. In Chinese, words that would for us be substantives function more as verbs, corresponding to an experience of the world as dynamic process rather than as substance; in Japanese, so much emphasis is placed on the predicate that the subject is usually omitted altogether,

while there are two verbs for ‘is-exists’—neither of which is used for the copula.<sup>12</sup>

The power of this bias in the western languages is such that what comes so naturally to me can hardly come to consciousness at all. The simple statement, ‘I am a poet’, struggles for definition on any level. The question, ‘What is your poetry about?’ leaves me speechless. That struggle marks the peculiar twist of seeing in my poem, *Shive Lights*, which uses the paradox of naming the unnameable, and of interchangeable perspectives, to embody and mimic this self-haunted state:

I stumbled on words,  
Now they smoulder in my head.  
Shive lights, omens, shadows,  
A twist of air, dream of waking.  
They flit without weight,  
Buoyed on a viewless wind.  
Viscous, pulling back,  
– A tight horizon of thoughts.<sup>13</sup>

The mode is one of stating in ordinary words and in metaphor, the attenuated perceptions which – I warn myself – will attract the condemnation of the hyper-rational contemporary consensus; I can neither know exactly what I am experiencing, nor whether the words I use carry over the exact quality of that experiencing. There is a poignant sense for me of something both inevitable and utterly regrettable.

Between dissatisfaction and finish  
Is where it goes wrong...<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Professor Graham Parkes, ‘Japanese Philosophy’, in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 426.

<sup>13</sup> Collection, *Shive Lights*

<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2011), Section 12, p. 22.

What I have described as the *quality of my experiencing*, or the ‘super-concept’ *Being-Knowing-Imagining-Nature* can be approached through the perspective of phenomenology. David Abram, ecologist and philosopher, in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous – Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*<sup>15</sup>, interprets his sensitive, sensuous experiencing of nature in the light of the work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. His exposition takes ‘thinking’ as based not in the brain but in the whole body; identity becomes something which is not discontinuous with other identities; time is primarily cyclic and implicit in sense experience, rather than linear and external; and perceived actuality is an awareness of overlapping realities rather than separated realms demarcated within a hierarchy of truth.

In this view, ‘the event of perception, experientially considered, is an inherently interactive, *participatory* event, a reciprocal interplay between the perceiver and the perceived. Perceived things are encountered by the perceiving body as animate, living powers that actively draw us into relation’<sup>16</sup>. Abram maintains that ‘our spontaneous, pre-conceptual experience yields no evidence for a dualistic division between animate and ‘inanimate’ phenomena, only for relative distinctions between diverse forms of animateness’.<sup>17</sup>

The phenomenological approach takes sense data as ontological, primary, immediate and incontrovertible. Abram takes as his starting point the long-lost, now unsuspected, participatory kinship between humans and the whole realm of animals, plants, earth and air. As a practising magician and a researcher into the psychology of perception, he is

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<sup>15</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous – Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997)

<sup>16</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous* p. 90.

engaged with the malleable textures of perception, and with alterations of consciousness; his book works to mediate the nature of a reciprocal relationship between the human and the ‘more-than-human’.

Abram validates my instinctive, primary experiencing of the world. Particularly important, for my purposes as a poet, is that he allows for the ambiguity of sense data, and in so doing authorises the energetic being of the sensed phenomenon to be present when I write: he explains my instinctive response, which is to look away from the pre-programmed delineation of the phenomenon, the mechanistic restriction to function and pre-conceived purpose. The poet’s words must match ambiguity and presence, without losing definition and precision in themselves.

... the ambiguity of experience is already a part of any phenomenon that draws our attention. For whatever we perceive is necessarily entwined with our own subjectivity, already blended with the dynamism of life and sentience. The living pulse of subjective experience cannot finally be stripped from the things that we study ... without the things themselves losing all existence for us.<sup>18</sup>

Abram advances a view which has a potent bearing upon the ecological debate, especially the underlying problem of how human beings relate to nature – something which will be seen to be prominent in John Clare’s experience, in chapter three. But equally, there is a bearing on literature, at the level of how language is part of the human interaction: there is a demand for an effective ethical response, for speech that is not a partial and inert acquiescence in the *status quo* and its associated linguistic formulations.

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<sup>18</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous* p. 34.

The enigma that is language, constituted as much by silence as by sounds, is not an inert or static structure, but an evolving bodily field... Merleau-Ponty here distinguishes sharply between genuine, expressive speech and speech that merely repeats established formulas. The latter is hardly 'speech' at all; it does not really carry meaning... It does not alter the already existing structures of the language, but rather treats the language as a finished institution.<sup>19</sup>

Abram takes language to be rooted in the 'flesh of the world': it is part of earth's expressiveness as much as it is part of ours. Language is embedded in the material landscape, and this gives words an uncanny reality and power for oral and indigenous peoples. Abram states that:

... Merleau-Ponty's view of language as a thoroughly incarnate medium, of speech as rhythm and expressive gesture, and hence of spoken words and phrases as active sensuous presences afoot in the material landscape (rather than as ideal forms that represent, but are not a part of, the sensuous world) – goes a long way toward helping us understand the primacy of language and word magic in native rituals of transformation, metamorphosis, and healing. *Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter and transform the perceptual world.*<sup>20</sup>

Whilst oral, indigenous cultures could interact with their surroundings as expressive subjects, powers and entities, we no longer (normally) have the experience that trees and birds speak to us, that we are addressed by nature. Abram suggests that, in our society and culture, the 'animating interplay of the senses' has been usurped by another 'locus of participation':

*It is the written text that provides this new locus.* For to read is to enter into a profound participation, or chiasm, with the inked marks upon the page. In learning to read we must break the spontaneous participation of our eyes and our ears in the surrounding terrain ... so we focus our eyes upon these printed marks and immediately hear voices. We hear spoken words, witness strange scenes or visions, even experience other lives... the 'inert' letters on the page now speak

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<sup>19</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>20</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous* p. 89.

to us! *This is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism nonetheless—as mysterious as a talking stone.*<sup>21</sup>

Abram accurately describes an interaction so long vanished from our cultural awareness that it is no longer missed: how, for most people in nature, the immediate reciprocal communication with ditch bank, muddy pool, ancient tree or passing bird formation is unthinkingly denied or forgone. My working experience in forestry authenticates this interpretation. Working in remote locations requires an alert, listening, active connection to the whole environment – animals, vegetation, insects, earth and sky – because without it, serious injury is more likely than not; the landscape is never less than hazardous, and for workers using tools it is dangerous. A different sense of passing time is necessary: slower, more focused on rhythmic timing than on the hands of the clock. The day has its own rhythms of time.

Abram blames the animism of reading printed words, for our culture's shift away from a participatory, reciprocal relationship with nature, and the resulting treatment of the natural world as if it were an unnecessary or irrelevant category of experience, a factor of no consequence. It has induced a solipsistic blindness, an inability to make the connection between the printed word and actual events; he claims that the alphabetic script, which points only to the 'gestures' of the human mouth and not to the reality of the world beyond the words, has worked to subtly reinforce the illusion of the superiority of the human over the 'more-than-human', the primacy of individuality over communal belonging, and the obsession with solitary personal identities.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous* p. 131.

However, I must make a distinction which Abram does not need to do because his focus is on the shift of a culture, a categorical transformation which has applied to a whole civilisation. For the individual artist, seeing beyond the limitations of the medium is the prime task. My point is that the alphabetic ‘pictorial image’, the word-on-the-page, is not the word on my breath. The invocatory and transforming power of words remains, especially when a poem is read out loud. Moreover, in a poem the artifice of structured speech or formal shaping remains, by way of cadence, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, line length, stanza form and other repeating patterns. Line breaks, syntactical arrangement and intonation patterns are forms of rhythmic spacing on the breath. The metaphor or image is a way of naming or invoking. The suspended or altered consciousness of a poem-in-the-making is a detachment from learned ways of seeing: intense observation of one’s environment weakens the cultural divorce from nature.

Reading out loud is for me an important witness to the voice of the poet, and a form of vivification for the words as sounds. The connectedness which a poem invokes has roots in communal dance, chant, the out-of-body states which can be associated with drumming and controlled breathing. The word-sounds of a poem make so-called ‘music’ on the strength of the vocal and auditory quality of each word and the words in sequence. There is something primitive about such ‘music’, something which convinces just on the strength of sound without necessary reference to the meaning – hence my conviction that I can recognise a poem (as a poem) being read or recited, even if I do not know the language. Abram corroborates my instinctive knowledge:

Active, living speech is ... a vocal gesticulation wherein the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words.

Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of experience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

My awareness of the individual breath and speaking leads me to query Abram on the nature of the play of imagination over consciousness, which is an important facet of *the conversion of my experiencing into the experiencing of words*. Since he speaks about communicative meaning, and the resonance of one entity with another, and about *The Spell of the Sensuous*, I need to discuss his notion of imagination.

From the ... phenomenologist's perspective, that which we call *imagination* is from the first an attribute of the senses themselves; imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things... with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible.<sup>23</sup>

I am, in my experiencing, part of the phenomenological ontology: I write poems out of the primary sense of being touched by something 'other', often beautiful, sometimes horrifying. I relate to my natural surroundings with intensity, with sensitivity to the manifestation of the moment. I am an inwardness that is momentarily brought into being by awareness, and I am unsure if that awareness is mine or not. To this extent, I am in debt to Abram for giving me a vocabulary and perspective that allows my mode of sensing, of sensitivity, to have some clarity of exposition. I believe his profound insights into our relation to the natural world (to which I have not alluded in this essay) are part of the great re-thinking which is going on in the field of ecology. He formulates a bridge between psychological research and animistic perception.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>23</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 58.



However, I am a poet of the written word. I balance my outer-sensing awareness within my awareness of what can be spoken in words. My understanding of the imagination is not so limited by what seems a doctrinaire functionalism, and a relegation of the faculty to a pre-reflective speculation about what is not ‘immediately given’. Apart from the extract above, imagination does not feature in Abram’s book, despite the extraordinary experiences he recounts, and his mastery of the flow of descriptive writing. He seems content with an understanding of his experiences as something that simply comes to him from outside. As a poet, I know that it is not that simple, though I can readily agree with Abram that imagination is not a separate faculty of the mind. Hill seems to be of the same mind: he rarely uses the word ‘imagination’ unqualified. I have picked up his frequent usage, ‘moral imagination’.

Abram does not treat words as more than expressive gesticulations, rooted in the body and carnal perception. Once they acquire conceptual meaning, they become capable of being thought of as arbitrary labels. He accounts this as a ‘shift in the perceptual field’. Hill, however, envisages something more complex than this stark opposition of different states. For Hill, words are a pledge not a sign, and the way a word is used both represents and betrays the writer’s intention. He would however agree that the integrity of words suffers, as soon as they become other than ‘active speech’ or spontaneous expressiveness: ‘When that much has been conceded we are left with ... ballooning platitudes, further symptoms of a diremption between perception and utterance, energy and effect’.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Redeeming the Time, p. 100.

It is not the spontaneous use of words as responses to phenomena, which carries responsibility or obligation. It is their being my formulated and adjudged symbols, deliberated gifts of mine to the external wonder of the world. In writing a poem, there cannot be a pure response to the sensed phenomena, unalloyed by responsibility, choice, and awareness. Innocence is a characteristic of sensing and responding, but not of the initiated response in words, the *experiencing of words*.

The *conversion* or turning of experience into words, or words into experiencing, remains a key node of my dilemma. Hill draws attention, in the essay *A Pharisee to Pharisees*, to image-clusters in Vaughan's poetry, one of the largest being the idea of magnetism, and he suggests that the images drawn together within the 'dominating metaphor' of darkness are by this positive embrace converted to vision and intensity:

...we discover how the sympathetic attraction of otherwise disparate images and echoes from the Old and New Testaments... creates a positive embracing of abnegation, a transferring of potentiality from the darkness of a stricken soul, a stricken cause and a stricken church into a visionary intensity... all these attractive and repellent nocturnal associations are synthesized, transfigured, converted by the dominating metaphor of the darkness which saw the conversion of the Pharisee Nicodemus. 'Conversion' is the key to the metaphysics of *Silex Scintillans* and to the poetics of 'The Night'.<sup>25</sup>

In the mysterious way of such coincidences, I am drawn irresistibly to balance two sets of triads: Abram's 'native rituals of transformation, metamorphosis and healing' and Hill's 'synthesized, transfigured, converted'. My search for meaning by way of metaphoric echoes suggests that the play of the moral imagination in Hill's triad is what makes an unearthly radiance shine from his selection, while an earthy magic shines from that of Abram. It is a point to which I will return in chapter four.

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<sup>25</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *A Pharisee to Pharisees*, p. 321.

Hill, I believe, thinks and writes within the ‘metaphoric mode’ – my coinage, not his.

The *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* comments:

Metaphors are the growing-points of language. A cursory glance shows just how much of the language of mind is metaphorical in origin. These metaphors die, of course, and lose their metaphorical force though their origins may be still visible.<sup>26</sup>

Hill says, in the same essay, that ‘Poetic metaphor is a means of converting the actual into the real’<sup>27</sup>. He expands this when he comments:

There seems no reason to dispute S. L. Bethell’s claim that in this stanza the poet ‘recreates through sensory material an intuition of eternal reality’. It is significant that Bethell refers to ‘sensory material’ rather than to ‘sensuous experience’. Sensuous experience is what is evoked; the sensory material I take to be language itself.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, ‘converting the actual into the real’ adumbrates the relationship of sensory material – language, or words – to ‘sensuous experience’, on the one hand, and to ‘eternal reality’, on the other; possibly the same polarity as evoked by my dilemma, that of the *conversion of my experiencing into the experiencing of words*.

Hill works in and through metaphor all the time: I do not believe he is ever free of the necessity to speak in an *as if* mode – not that he can never speak ‘from the heart’, but he can always add a further qualification, or his asseveration is so embedded in contingent and hostile circumstance that it is impossible to retrieve the one without all the rest – and he intends it should be so. His subscription to the idea of sin is overt:

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<sup>26</sup> Professor Robert Sharpe, ‘Metaphor’ in Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 555.

<sup>27</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees, p. 318.

<sup>28</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees, p. 322.

Karl Barth remarked that sin is the ‘specific gravity of human nature as such’. I am suggesting that it is at the heart of this ‘heaviness’ that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the ‘density’ of language and the ‘specific gravity of human nature’.<sup>29</sup>

It is in this context that the need for vigilance becomes clear. Language and human nature are equally dense and recalcitrant: therefore his emphasis cannot be on a poem achieving ‘objective perfection’ but must look to matters of technique, craft, the solving of problems of grammar and etymology – the problems within language. Any solution of the latter will imply a reaching of perfection in the poem: a minor triumph, but a vital one, for human nature.

At the same time I would claim the utmost significance for matters of technique and I take no cynical view of those rare moments in which the inertia of language, which is also the coercive force of language, seems to have been overcome.<sup>30</sup>

Hill is concerned with experience in and through words, and his essays are a testament to the agony of writing, and the responsibility of the obligations involved.

...the real challenge: that of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive. ...Language, the element in which a poet works, is also the medium through which judgements upon his work are made... however much a poem is shaped and finished, it remains to some extent within the ‘imprisoning marble’ of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection.<sup>31</sup>

Language will both support and coerce, and Hill’s focus is upon the technicalities of language which alone can disclose its power both to betray our intentions and to reveal our inner integrity. In his sensitivity to all aspects of ‘style’, to that which shows ‘sense

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<sup>29</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’, p. 17.

<sup>30</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’, pp. 3-4.

inflections'<sup>32</sup>, Hill treats of 'particulars', because meaning is more than just intellectual content:

Our main concern here is with matters of style: with particulars of syntax, rhythm, and cadence, and with the problems of pitch. Considered in its negative aspect, a writer's style is what he or she is left with after the various contingent forces of attrition have taken their toll. Considered more positively, style marks the success an author may have in forging a personal utterance between the hammer of self-being and the anvil of those impersonal forces that a given time possesses.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear that what a poet manages to say, in the attempt to speak directly and honestly, is baffled by the nature of language. In so far as the words are the 'personal utterance' of the poet – the 'giving of oneself', one might say – all that remains, beyond the contingent, is the battered 'graciousness' of the attempt. The use of words is a matter of personal suffering, and of gains which accrue to the spirit only through attrition. In *The Triumph of Love* he puts it this way:

... Donors are permitted  
to give of themselves, with saints and martyrs,  
kneeling at the altarpiece's edge,  
catechumens of final judgement.  
....  
how delicate in self-exaction  
they appear; with what severity  
of graciousness in these and in like matters  
they keep their places.  
How carnally nonetheless  
such things of the spirit are wrought by attrition;  
what misplaced, mistimed,  
hammering perfects them: the ephemeral  
attacking the absolute  
with ruining and/or ruined force.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Alienated Majesty: Walt Whitman, p. 512.

<sup>33</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 407.

<sup>34</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1999) section XLVI p. 23.

Hill questions the ‘textual nature of the work’: he looks not for ‘meaning’ but for inflection within an inflected context. Brilliance of writing (‘if the thing sounds right’) is no guarantee of it being ethical:

In the work of major writers we may wish to believe that it is unnecessary to separate questions of moral nature from the textual nature of the work; that the author, in some mysterious way, will have taken care of that, will have ensured by virtue of profound semantic self-questioning and sifting that if the thing sounds right it will also be ethically right. However, there are strong challenges to this assumption.<sup>35</sup>

I believe Hill’s perspective is that semantic self-questioning is actually solipsism; only grammar, or the textual nature or craft of the poem, reveals the moral nature of the writing because it reveals the process of making the words come right. Trying merely to be clear, or honest, is not enough. In my own poems, the temptation to a solipsistic fascination with my own experiences, to a mutual seduction by and with words themselves, and to believe that I have access to an arcane power of insight, something worth saying, is a load I take on my back every time I search for words. My circumstances, and the circumstances of the occasion of the poem, are always a distraction from what the poem really wants to say, but I am usually the last person to know.

Hill elucidates the ‘contingent’ – that which has affinity of nature, or is a possible occurrence in the future, or is the chance or fortuitous accompaniment<sup>36</sup>. The contingent circumstances are the special verbal conditions of the poem. Awareness of etymology and semiology, critical appraisal of the ordering of the words, and of the affective devices employed, will allow a proper measure of the achievement.

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<sup>35</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Alienated Majesty: Walt Whitman, p. 512.

<sup>36</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees, p. 326.

Contingency surrounds, in the form of grammar, syntax, and verse-structure, the 'Dionysian' absolute, the 'deep, but dazzling darkness'.<sup>37</sup>

In the process of revising a poem, or in the process of writing, what I can do, to penetrate the distraction, is to keep a balance, an ordinacy or orderedness.

With Donne, style *is* faith: a measure of delivery that confesses his own inordinacy while remaining in all things ordinate.<sup>38</sup>

Elsewhere, Hill wryly notes that 'inordinate' was Donne's characteristic pejorative, even though 'he himself inclines to the inordinate'.<sup>39</sup> However, the line is not easy to define or hold:

I have observed that in the contextures of this writing the inordinate and the ordinate are at times finely separated... There is, however, a particular complicity of actives and passives invoked by these writers which may take its bearings from Calvin's interpretation of Augustine on free will and the bondage of the will. I have particularly in mind 'Man receaued in deede to be able if he would, but he hadde not to will yt he might be able'.<sup>40</sup>

I too confess to being inordinate (immoderate) in respect of my indiscipline, wilfulness, and overweening hopes for my own poems. I am one who likes 'to will yt he might be able' (as I read it, thinking that to will something is the same as to accomplish it). Loyal friends – fellow poets – provide advice, but time is the most useful tool of perspective on one's own writing. Revision, which is also the learning of technique, is a delicate skill in itself, as poems respond to the process (in which case I count them still 'alive') or they immediately fall apart, in which case their inertness cannot be disturbed – the

<sup>37</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees, p. 326.

<sup>38</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Preface to *Style and Faith*, p. 263.

<sup>39</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Keeping to the Middle Way, p. 312.

<sup>40</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Keeping to the Middle Way p. 314. Noted on p. 683 as: Calvin, *Institution*, p. 68 verso (I: 15,8)

poems each have their own internal time scale, after which revision is not viable. Some poems can stay alive for as many as thirty or more revisions – for instance, *The Roundhouse by Afon Fachwen*; a few never need it, like *Grief*; some, thankfully rare, are never properly finished, yet stay alive and torment me from a distance of decades.

Diligence is Hill's word for the necessary skills of attention, application, vigilance, to achieve such ordinariness:

One's understanding of 'diligence', 'diligent', 'diligently', would be that they trace the barely distinguishable spiritual boundary between that which is immersed in and that which is detached from the world's business. In doing so they undertake their own proper business within the grammar of the covenant. 'Diligence' is in part defined by that 'jeopardy' which its task is to resist and endure.<sup>41</sup>

As a poet, such observations – ordinariness, vigilance, aural sensitivity, the grammar of contingency, language which coerces and supports, the necessary fascination of solipsism – constitute a stern test, requiring an almost inconceivable self-reflexive awareness of one's own writing. The requirement must be to have sufficient distance from one's own impulse to write, in the instant of inspiration, such that a simultaneous perspective on, and an involved relationship with, all three things is maintained: the pull of the occasion, the medium of words, and the personal utterance. I take 'ordinate' to mean all these things.

Hill seems to offer encouragement, in his use of Donne as one of the epigraphs to the collection *Style and Faith*:

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<sup>41</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Of Diligence and Jeopardy, p. 294.



*'Knowledge cannot save us, but we cannot be saved without Knowledge; Faith is not on this side [sic] Knowledge, but beyond it...'*<sup>42</sup>

I confess to enjoying the paradox in Donne's admonition: something beyond intellectual knowledge exists, which yet cannot be attained without strenuous intellectual effort, and is a matter of faith – by definition, something that cannot be known. Hill's second epigraph, from Benjamin Whichcote: 'If it were not for Sin, *we* should converse together as *Angels* do' is equally encouraging. If I take the 'conversation of Angels' as an aspiration for poetry itself, then I can readily see the infinite variety of ways in which my misapprehension, my mistaking and running astray, ruins my attempts at conversing like an Angel, writing communicatively perfected words. I use 'perfect' in its original sense of that which is fully worked through, an exact fulfilment of the template – not in the sense of something without fault.

Since words never do accomplish what I believe I want them to, I have, through this, another understanding of what Hill means by 'original sin': the capacity of almost anything to be a miscommunication. The words seem to convey exactly what the author intended, and in so doing reveal what the author did not intend, failed to evaluate, or imitated unconsciously from elsewhere. It is the heaviness at the heart of human nature, as it is the density of the medium with and through which we attempt to communicate.

I cannot myself see any way of escaping complete assent to the doctrine of original sin, which, in the contexture of this argument, may be understood as no more and no less than 'the imperfection which marks all human effort, especially where it aims to avoid it'.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, epigraph to *Style and Faith*, p. 261

<sup>43</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 362; noted on p. 696 as quoted from *William Tyndale's Five Books of Moses, called The Pentateuch*, 1530, ed. J. I. Mombert, 1884 (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), p. vii

Elsewhere he refers to original sin, or jeopardy, through a quotation from Ricoeur: it is ‘the involuntariness at the very heart of the voluntary’<sup>44</sup>. In so far as poems are voluntary efforts at some kind of perfected speaking, such an assurance of the involuntariness of failure is both reassuring and all too familiar.

For Hill, words are pledges and therefore can hold a writer of words to account. The measure of an author’s words, the authenticity of his statement, can be reckoned.

We are hereby committed to the critical view that shades of distinction – in sensibility, imagination, and ethical position – can be semantically ‘placed’ and assessed. Further, it may be possible to comprehend an ethical distinction grammatically...<sup>45</sup>

Hill speaks of the ‘deleterious effects’ of:

the widespread emphasis, among theologians as well as scientists, on words as ‘arbitrary signs’. From the seventeenth century to the present day it has led to false conclusions, such as Rivers’s [editor of the work under scrutiny] own suggestion that Watts’s ‘tone and method of arguing are of more interest than his doctrinal solutions’ ... Language, especially in the authors discussed here, *is* a doctrinal solution, in which ‘solution’ acts or suffers what it describes... with finesse or not, as the case may be; with or without direct authorial agency.<sup>46</sup>

‘With or without direct authorial agency’ – these words seem to pick up on the enigmatic independence of words, when I am writing. Words seem to arrange themselves as I situate myself inside a seeming whirlwind of semantic possibility; I try to select, block, encourage trends, but there is an unpredictable order which imposes itself, similar to the order I was trying to find, yet not quite. Occasionally, a poem is more than I intended, wished, or believed I could do.

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<sup>44</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Of Diligence and Jeopardy, p. 283

<sup>45</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Language, Suffering and Silence, p. 400.

<sup>46</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Weight of the Word, p. 363

Language, or the poem as a solution, ‘acts or suffers what it describes’: it cannot be merely a signpost to a conceptual resolution; and the theological, intellectual or revelatory resolution could not happen in words that were any different. Hill has a startling observation on the relationship of language to actuality, and it is of a piece with his insistence that language is a moral issue, an issue of life and death.

Whitman is a man of his age as well as a great original; and it may be the case that such writers *experience actuality as a form of language, and language as a dimension of actuality*, amid which, against which, into which, and for which, one’s own personal utterances are to be fed, rejected, tried, and measured. The evidence of Whitman’s notebooks bears witness to a form of radical experience which was initially ‘poetic’ in the quasi-euphemistic sense that is still current, and which, by a sudden leap of the creative faculty, became reconstituted, reconsecrated even, in terms of a language-experiment.<sup>47</sup>

My own formulation, that I try to ‘balance my outer-sensing awareness within my awareness of what can be spoken in words’, is perhaps another way of putting this. Hill goes on to link Whitman’s poetry with the practical ‘experiment’ of liberty in the youthful American republic:

What is surprising is the strong bond of identity that Whitman establishes between ‘the depth of radical poetry... in the hearts of all men’ (the language of democratic sentiment) and the technical business of ‘language experiment’.<sup>48</sup>

Such deep or archetypal ideas, embodied in key words such as ‘liberty’, or ‘nature’, or ‘God’, are symbols or living metaphors (not signs) in the thought-worlds of whole generations or eras of humanity. Whitman’s term ‘radical poetry’ makes the link between words and the root or radical symbol, under the aegis of poetry. Thus the poet

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<sup>47</sup> *Collected Critical Writings, Alienated Majesty: Walt Whitman*, p. 513 – *italics mine*

<sup>48</sup> *Collected Critical Writings, Alienated Majesty: Walt Whitman*, p. 514.

is directly part of the potentially transformative process of symbol-formation, at both personal and civic levels.

For Hill, the ‘sudden leap of the creative faculty’ which occurred for Whitman in the move from the merely ‘poetic’ to ‘the technical business of “language experiment”’ is paralleled by the shock of recognition which can occur, for a reader, within prose or poetry:

In both sacred and secular writings we may receive, at any instant, a sense of things inaccessible suddenly made accessible, where grammar and desire are miraculously at one... what delights and silences us is the sustained moment of communion between the two kinds of eloquence and apprehension...<sup>49</sup>

Clearly he is not intending the reference to ‘communion’ to be predicated only on some kind of emotional or solipsistic revelation. It is the combination of *grammar and desire*. The inordinate is contained within the order of grammar. ‘Semantic recognition’ is Hill’s usual formula, with cognates such as reconciliation, rediscovery and redemption<sup>50</sup>. The pursuit of grammar has profound consequences.

My wrestling with words in poetry does not usually show success at such a level. What reveals itself in the words that I put together is usually not what I thought I wanted to write. The first word chosen starts to dictate its own course into meaning by choosing other words to follow. One image dictates others, one sound requires another to echo it, one pulse looks for another pulse to create a cadence. I wrestle less with meaning than with the relentless force of language, grammar and syntax and cadence – language which either wants to settle for the nearest cliché or plunges into incomprehensibility.

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<sup>49</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Weight of the Word, p. 349.

<sup>50</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Dividing Legacies, pp. 372-373.

Hill quotes Emerson and Coleridge as proponents of a ‘visionary philology’:

For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS (Coleridge)  
Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the  
human mind (Emerson)<sup>51</sup>

My intuition is that, in the writer’s space of conscious imagination, thoughts or words may re-fashion themselves. Ideas become conscious, or conscious of themselves, as words. The re-fashioning happens at a level of contemplative intensity within the author, which is also a situation of imminent mental breakdown because of the pure openness of the moral and verbal landscape within, the moment of inspired or terrified illumination of thought. Christopher Smart, Ivor Gurney, and John Clare all continued to write whilst incarcerated in asylums, attempting to give ordinacy to the obsessing power of words.

Such speculations on the relationship between words and consciousness help me to put in perspective, and explain, my dogged and seemingly ungrateful resistance to the idea that writing poetry is therapeutic, that poetry enhances well-being. With regard to the common understanding of the therapeutic value of poetry, Hill refers in *Tacit Pledges* to John Stuart Mill’s dictum: that whereas ‘eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*’. Hill says:

Mill’s disservice to the critical imagination, as to the civic imagination, is in no way rectified by his persistent harping on the therapeutic value of poetry’s presentation of the emotions. He marginalizes authenticity of feeling as he

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<sup>51</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Common Weal, Common Woe, p. 270. Noted on p. 670 as: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969 - 2002) vol. 9, p. 10 (*Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer); also noted: Ralph W. Emerson, *Nature*, 1836, in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: The Library of America, 1983) p. 24.

pushes away the critical element of the imagination; these qualities are given over, in Mill's commonweal, to the licensed eccentricities that in some unspecified way check and balance the potential tyranny of the democratic majority.<sup>52</sup>

It seems to me that Hill's 'critical element of the imagination' runs in harness with 'authenticity of feeling'; in other words, it would be impossible to have naked self-expression, the pure confession-in-words. Of course, writing poetry can be used for therapeutic self-exploration and self-expression, and it will enhance the therapeutic value of the activity of self-healing; it might well achieve verbal expressions which have innate power and emotional authenticity. However, such achievements cannot be an accurate register of the weight, value or conviction of the poem in itself, only of the writer. The craft of words in a poem cannot be made subsidiary to a pre-existing intention, or the result is a form of propaganda, if only as a plea for one's own personality.

One notes Hill's use of 'critical imagination' and 'civic imagination', as also his reference to the 'critical element of the imagination'. In using 'moral imagination',<sup>53</sup> he makes clear that this also is a matter of fine distinctions, semantic minutiae, which nonetheless have the power of personal revelation. He comments on 'the significance of Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination':

The first represents an ideal democratic birthright, a light that ought to light every person coming into the world. In the event, the majority is deprived of this birthright in exchange for a mess of euphoric trivia and, if half-aware of its loss, is instructed to look for freedom in an isolated and competitive search for possessions and opportunity. Therefore the secondary imagination, the formal creative faculty, must awaken the minds of men to their lost heritage, not of possession but of perception.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 408.

<sup>53</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 404.

<sup>54</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Redeeming the Time, p. 101.

Hill treats language with extreme seriousness, such that he proposes a ‘theology of language’. Words retain their power to move through the ‘shock of semantic recognition’, that is, the sudden matching of the poet’s intention, with and within the grammar of the poem.

I would seriously propose a theology of language; and a primary exercise to be undertaken towards its establishment. This would comprise a critical examination of the grounds for claiming (a) that the shock of semantic recognition must be also a shock of ethical recognition; and that this is the action of grace in one of its minor, but far from trivial, types; (b) that the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of ‘solidarity with the poor and the oppressed’. Suffering is real, but ‘suffering’ is a sing-song, that is to say, cant.<sup>55</sup>

Once again, I think it pertinent to recall what I take to be Hill’s immersion in a ‘metaphoric mode’ of speaking. I do not regard this apparent proposal as the attempt to found a new religion, and Hill elsewhere warns of the ‘theological view of literature’ which is ‘not theology at all, but merely a re-statement of the neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery’.<sup>56</sup> However, Hill intends the ‘shock of semantic recognition’ to be taken with the utmost seriousness, as being effective and affective on both personal and civic planes: the grace afforded, the moment of communion, is not solitary only but has weight in the civic and political arena. Similarly the impulse to write must look back in reverence of the dead because otherwise a blinkered focus on the living, the ‘suffering’, will only permit the same mistakes to be repeated. The alleviation of suffering is a practical activity not an imaginative mimesis.

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<sup>55</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Language, Suffering, and Silence, p. 405.

<sup>56</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’, pp. 18-19.

‘Active speech’, in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, would perhaps be recognised by Hill in the sense that it acts to change and to modify, to contribute to knowledge, affirm its own saying, and convert acquiescence to radical empathy. But Hill’s more complex vision is of words contingent with human nature, and the near-impossibility of unhindered movement between intention and fulfilment, whether in actions or in words. He has an acute awareness of the vigilance necessary to writing, of the doom of personal utterance which is only just audible above the attrition to which human beings, and language, are subjected. The moral imagination is the creative faculty in its role of awakening perception: it is moral not because it advocates particular norms of behaviour but because the writer has obligations – to words and language, to the ‘civil polity’ or society, to him/herself as an ethical being, and to the imagination. *Finding Words for Poetry* denotes an obligation to seeking, as much as the fortuitousness of discovery; words are as much correlatives of what is sought as they are contingent to the search itself – they are what I express as well as what I seek; and my poems may or may not precipitate the clarified perception which they name or claim. The play of the moral imagination is both energetic and acute.

The next chapter will discuss John Clare’s experiencing of nature, and his devoted and imaginative experience of making poetry, or ‘ryhme’, from the words which made up his eclectic encounter with language.



## Chapter Three

### Finding Words for Nature

The question of how John Clare (1793-1864) found words for his engagement with nature, and how his words came to exemplify those moments of the union of ‘grammar and desire’ which Hill denotes as a minor action of grace, has close parallels with the dilemma already delineated as *how I understand the conversion of my experiencing into the experiencing of words*. In my own life as a poet, circumstance, contingency, and language have been as ambivalent in their influence on converting or speaking my experience, as they were for Clare. Words were Clare’s natural currency in a rural setting of widespread illiteracy. Words were the stories-in-sung-words he encountered first in the ballads his father could sing, and the Sixpenny Romances for which he scraped together his pennies and half-pennies, and in which he thought he possessed all the ‘chief learning and literature of the country’. It was a passion he had to hide:

But as it is common in villages to pass judgment on a lover of books as a sure indication of laziness I was drove to the narrow necessity of stinted opportunities to hide in woods and dingles of thorns in the fields on Sundays to read these things...<sup>57</sup>

Later on it was poetry which came to possess him and mark him out – his first purchased book was Thomson’s *The Seasons* – but words could never be the easy assurance of the ‘educated’ thinker or poet. Clare did not have the luxury of taking words or literature for granted. His ‘experiencing’ was similarly problematical: his mode of participation in nature was alien to the people around him; his living with words and rhyming in a kind of obsession made his neighbours suspicious and earned

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<sup>57</sup> John Clare, *John Clare* eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), The Oxford Authors series, ‘Autobiographical Passages’ p. 429

him the condescension of his social superiors; and his way of always taking life personally, tormented by raw feelings, rendered him, to polite society and to his peers, unpredictable and slightly unpalatable.

Clare's poetry, with its mastery of rhyme and the metric foot, has never directly influenced my writing, in the way that Bunting and the medieval alliterative poets have done, yet he has always been very close to my heart; Clare's greatest supporters have been poets, perhaps because all the paradoxes of a poet's temperament are thrown into such sharp contrast in his story and achievement. When I took on the job in forestry, I had recently come to know Clare's poetry, and it seemed more than a coincidence that I should be working in Clare's home county, Northamptonshire, and that some of the scenes deep inside the old forest boundaries would have changed little since Clare's day. It is my 'dreamer' who knows Clare best:

*At times, when personal betrayals and frustrations become too much for me, I go out into the garden. The earth is my soul-soil. Without such contact, I gradually dry up and start to wither. The process is slow and almost imperceptible. At some point, I snap out of myself and disappear into the woods, or into remote places. A soul without clear boundaries, 'sensitive' or prone to invasion, needs immediate access to solitude, remoteness, stillness, potentiality, the unknown. I seem to live, exactly adjacent to my 'normal' world, in a private turbulence of dreaming imagination, hearing the never-absent hum or call of an urge to write.*

It is ironic that, while my language skills were all that a university education could provide, I was as ill-equipped for speech within the village, as Clare felt *he* was *outside* his. I felt I 'stuck out like a sore thumb' there, as he did in the company of the gentry, and my sense of isolation and a difficult rigour of circumstance was similar: the village was eight miles from the nearest town, and without a car, a phone or central heating the isolation seemed greater; the tied house had metal-framed windows and no insulation;

and extremely low pay had to cover the bills for two children as well. The village was small, 700 souls, and only one other family had a baby; being accepted involved residency measured in generations not years.

Important elements of Clare's appeal reside in his poetics: in particular, his 'attachment' to what he says – the sense that his speaking is a pledge of honesty; his adept and startling deployment of words from different provenances, be they poetic, rural, philosophical, pub ballad or hearthside tale; his modest and apparently un-stylized delivery; and the purely verbal excitement which he generates, those semantic 'entertainments' which Hill prefers to 'meanings', and looks for in words collocated in degrees of contrast and co-existence:

Such meaning is not to be 'ascertained'; it must be entertained, as we entertain, with our sense of the circumstantial shifts of forty years, the difference of implication between 'charitable Latitude' and 'libertinism of principles'...<sup>58</sup>

Clare's poetry is unique for the folk power of its range, its close kinship with nature, and its emotionally direct self-descriptions. The phrase 'folk power' struggles to encompass the way Clare's poetry is sufficient to itself: it sits awkwardly and in its own right, on a boundary which, for a culture which has pre-conceived assumptions about literature and the literate, is difficult to acknowledge. This 'boundary' is where village culture meets the metropolitan; where the peasant meets the country house lord riding out; and where a country walker meets agricultural 'improvement' – scoured-out ditches, treeless and ploughed landscapes, barbed wire fences and 'No Trespassing' notices. Clare was the first to lament these effects of Enclosure. The physical landmarks

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<sup>58</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Weight of the Word, p. 354.

of his village culture and history, of his childhood and his poetry were wiped out in one fell swoop.

Clare takes note of this cultural boundary because he is forced to cross it, and he brings with him a voice and a manner which literary culture has difficulty in recognising as 'literary' at all, one that does not fit well in a culture of the written word: that of the folk ballad, the oral work song, the playground jingle or nursery rhyme, the story teller, and the 'slow spoken' country man (stereotyping names are legion: 'bumpkin', for instance, quick to the tongue but slow to shed any light). This chapter will work at a number of boundaries in Clare's life, using Hill's insights concerning diligence, sensuous apprehension, and the working of ideas through the lines of a poem as a form of 'justice'. The chapter will try to take a true measure of Clare's poetry, and in particular the long poem *Shadows of Taste*<sup>59</sup> from *The Midsummer Cushion*<sup>60</sup>. The insights of the philologist, Professor Barbara M H Strang will assist with an assessment of the lexical and orthographic challenge of Clare's written speech.

Clare transcribed all the poems he wanted to publish, from the five years up to 1832, in a single fair-copy manuscript book<sup>61</sup> with the title *The Midsummer Cushion*. It would have been his fourth published volume, but it was not actually published in full until 1979. Clare's poetic output, despite poverty, cramped living quarters and fragile health, had been prodigious: of the period between *The Shepherd's Calendar* of 1827 and the move to Northborough in April 1832, Jonathan Bate says:

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<sup>59</sup> Inserted as an Appendix for convenience of reference.

<sup>60</sup> John Clare, eds. Anne Tibble and R. K. R. Thornton, *The Midsummer Cushion* (Ashington, Northumberland: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group in association with Carcanet Press, 1978).

<sup>61</sup> MS A54 in the Peterborough Museum collection.

The fragmentariness, the multiple versions, the revisions of older work: all make it very difficult to quantify the total output—a rough estimate would be that Clare wrote nearly five hundred new or revised poems.<sup>62</sup>

The average output implied by this figure is two poems per week – some of them of considerable length. In my personal experience as a poet, this counts as astonishing productivity, implying an absorption in writing which would not sit easily with normal life at the best of times, and for Clare ‘normal’ life was penurious and insecure. A similar period of intense poetic productivity in my own life arose out of severe mental distress protracted over five years. Yet the quality of many of Clare’s poems indicates a poet working at a peak of confidence, capability and ambition. *The Midsummer Cushion* comprises a total of some 14,250 lines: 361 separate poems in ordered groups: two introductory, four under the heading *Tales*, eighty-five under the heading *Poems*, fifty-one under the heading *Ballads*; and 219 sonnets. The editors of the 1979 volume (Tibble and Thornton) state that:

Out of what he himself called the ‘disordered state’ of his papers he began to fair-copy. The resulting manuscript...shows him to have been perfectly capable of editing his work without undue interference. By any standards it is a fine manuscript.<sup>63</sup>

This is therefore no ‘peasant poet’, uncertain of his technique or his worth. Geoffrey Hill uses the following passage from a letter by Clare as one of three epigraphs to his book *Collected Critical Writings*:

Just Criticism is a stern but laudable prophet & time & truth are the only disciples who can discern & appreciate his predictions & these touchstones fashionable pretensions with all her mob of public applause cannot pass but shrinketh into insignificance & silent nothingness from their just derision like

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<sup>62</sup> Jonathan Bate *John Clare – A Biography*, (New York: Picador, 2003) note to Chapter 16, page 614

<sup>63</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion* Introduction, p. vii

shadows from a sunbeam & true merit at its eulogys 'grows with its grow[th] strengthens with his strength' & meets at last the honours & glorys of a protracted renown like the unexpected fulfilment of a prophecy.<sup>64</sup>

Clare was an emotional man, and he was a sensitive critic. It is painful to witness from his prose writings the extent of his anxiety not to be unfairly dismissed by 'fashionable pretensions' and the 'mob of public applause'. Clare has referenced Pope's *An Essay on Man*, quoting a line from Epistle 2, 'Of the Nature and State of Man with Respect to Himself as an Individual'. At this point, Pope has just ended a short disquisition on 'Pleasures' by discriminating between the various passions which come and go, and the 'one master passion in the breast' which 'swallows up the rest'. In an astonishing metaphor, Pope compares this to the 'lurking principle of death' which is sown in a man at the time of his first breath, and '*Grows with his growth, and strengthens with his strength*'<sup>65</sup>.

Clare's reference therefore, far from calling up some platitude about future growth of his reputation, tacitly acknowledges his state of being allied to a master passion (poetry) which will surely kill him, yet hints at the paradox that 'time and truth' cannot vindicate him until he is in fact dead and gone. In a letter to Thomas Inskip, following the death of Robert Bloomfield in 1823, he noted: '—neglect is the only touchstone by which true genius is proved.'<sup>66</sup> His true tone of voice, the quality of his reading and apprehension of the issues, is not to be construed from a first or unwary reading, and his transparent hurt is equally a matter of genuine humility in the face of his vocation and destiny. His

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<sup>64</sup> John Clare, quoted by Geoffrey Hill *Collected Critical Writings* ed. Kenneth Haynes, Preliminary Epigraph (page not numbered). Referenced as from *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), p. 218. Hill adds that Clare quotes Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle 2, l. 136.

<sup>65</sup> Alexander Pope, ed. Bonamy Dobree, *Alexander Pope's Collected Poems* (London: Dent, 1956) p. 193, ll. 131-136.

<sup>66</sup> Letter, date not given, probably 1824; *John Clare – A Biography*, p. 192.

point is stated obliquely, and it is also masked by his prose style and orthography: Clare almost courts misinterpretation. Yet this is Clare's truth and integrity: he has the ear and eye of a poet, but the look and feel of a countryman, one who works on the land – vulnerable to every prejudicate opinion we might harbour.

In his essay *The Weight of the Word*, Geoffrey Hill touches on issues to do with the 'temper' of a writer. Clare's temper is delicate, with admixtures of steely determination for his poetry. One of Hill's critical touchstones is a quality of 'resistance': Clare's *tempered* prose voice with its edgy tone of defensiveness combined with scorn, of confidence in his satirical rhetoric combined with a resigned appeal to posterity – is to be read as more than a factor of his circumstances, more than a weak mumbling of justifiable resentment. For Hill, so to construe it would be a

...failure to recognize that a 'peculiar edge' can ... mark, stylistically, the ethical line between compliance and resistance, sentiment and reason, enthusiasm and meditative attention...<sup>67</sup>

These six qualities are key 'touchstones' for Hill. As applied here, they illuminate Clare's ability to define and hold firm to a fine ethical line, an intellectually and morally honourable boundary between conflicting actualities: between his willing compliance in the honourable status of villager and poet, and his fierce resistance to condescension and misinterpretation; between his emotional entanglement with his home scene and its memories, and his striving to provide appropriate contexts of philosophical and literary interpretation; and between his vivid engagement with nature, and a writer's typical stance of disengaged yet concentrated appraisal.

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<sup>67</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 359.

Hill is always aware of contingency, or the ‘special circumstances’ of a life, which, if carefully attended to, allow of no easy judgements or casual simplifications. He quotes Bishop Bramhall:

‘For as much as actions are often altered and varied by the circumstances of Time, Place and Person’; ‘of such questions they cannot determine without rashness, in as much as a great part of them consisteth in speciall circumstances’; ‘And also the same could not be simply determined without rashness, forasmuch as a great parte of the order of this question consisteth in circumstances’.<sup>68</sup>

These circumstances surround the life of a writer and constitute the contingency of everything he does. Hill defines contingency, from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

...a term which covers ‘close connexion or affinity of nature’ (1612), an ‘event conceived as of possible occurrence in the future’ (1626), and mere ‘chance’, ‘fortuitousness’ (1623).<sup>69</sup>

Contingency is present in the glaring discrepancies of Clare’s life: in the chance factor of his birth, which is also the determining of his continuing poverty; the close connexion of his rural origins with his affinity with nature; and the mere fortuitousness of his gift of poetry. Clare does not flinch from speaking contingency as it is – painful, disruptive and unavoidable. In Hill’s terms, Clare deals with contingent circumstances, accepts the attrition of his situation, and works that awareness through his writing. Hill says that such a ‘working through’ is:

a most immediate realization... of the contingent and circumstantial in which one is caught up or, all too often, merely caught.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Eloquence of Sober Truth, p. 341. Referenced on p. 328 & p. 687 as John Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, *A Defence of True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsicall Necessity* (1655), a volume forming part of the boxed 6-volume set *Early Responses to Hobbes*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers (New York and London: Routledge: Thoemmes Press, 1996).

<sup>69</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees, p. 326.



The ‘realization’ is important. Hill explains it as:

...that instantaneous realization of the correlative within the contingent, a realization which is the ‘something indispensable’, the ‘*sine qua non*’ of working justly in words; of working justice into and through and out of language.<sup>71</sup>

Clare matches pitch and register to purpose, verbal ‘entertainment’ to irresolvable contingent circumstance, to form poetry of immediate, realised actuality. The sonnet *Winter Fields* is one example amongst many:

O for a pleasant book to cheat the sway  
Of winter—where rich mirth with hearty laugh  
Listens & rubs his legs on corner seat  
For fields are mire & sludge—& badly off  
Are those who on their pudgy paths delay  
There striding shepherd seeking driest way  
Fearing nights wetshod feet & hacking cough  
That keeps him waken till the peep of day  
Goes shouldering onward & with ready hook  
Progs off to ford the sloughs that nearly meet  
Accross the lands—croodling & thin to view  
His loath dog follows—stops & quakes & looks  
For better roads—till whistled to pursue  
Then on with frequent jumps he hirkles through<sup>72</sup>

Clare’s mastery of the sonnet form allows him to rhyme this one in a variant form (as he often did) a b c b a a b a // d c e d e e and, with the help of enjambed lines, internal rhymes and acutely observed detail, match the grammar to the content, the movement of the words with the shivering movement of shepherd and dog.

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<sup>70</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Eloquence of Sober Truth, p. 341-342.

<sup>71</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Translating Value, p.390.

<sup>72</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion*, Sonnet: Winter Fields; page 485.

Clare's resistance to editorial interference in the printing of his poetry is part of his 'working justice into and through' his own particular language, words which have their own power but sit uneasily on the boundary line with literary culture. Yet it has to be admitted that his language, on initial encounter, does present difficulties. Hill would have won wholehearted agreement from Clare, in respect of the 'contrary' nature of writing, when he remarks:

I am willing to claim as an empirical fact that when you write at any serious pitch of obligation, you enter into the nature of grammar and etymology, which is a nature contrary to your own.<sup>73</sup>

Clare was avid to read and write, and took every opportunity to teach himself, and to learn from an early age. His poetry makes use of a free and flowing mode, a 'speaking' (rather than addressing) delivery which tends to imply that the reader is walking with him down some green lane in deep conversation. He could make little of the rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar. He asserted that, for a writer, struggling to learn artificial or academic systems of grammar would:

only serve to puzzle and mislead to awe and intimidate instead of aiding and encouraging him... therefore it pays nothing for the study... what ever is intellig[i]b[l]e to others is grammer and what ever is commonsense is not far from correctness...<sup>74</sup>

Clare concentrates on communicating effectively, not being correct. In his long poem, *The Progress of Ryhme* – Clare's 'Prelude' – he speaks in powerful terms of his first intimations of poetry. However, it has to be admitted that it takes a certain deliberate

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<sup>73</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, The Weight of the Word, p. 352.

<sup>74</sup> *John Clare* The Oxford Authors, p. 481.

intent in the reader, not to turn away from poetry that presents itself on the printed page as disorganised and tricky to follow.

Ive thought so as I used to rove  
Through burghley park that darksome grove  
Of Limes where twilight lingered grey  
Like evening in the midst of day  
& felt without a single skill  
That instinct that would not be still  
To think of song sublime beneath  
That heaved my bosom like my breath  
That burned & chilled & went & came  
Without or uttering or a name  
Untill the vision waked with time  
& left me itching after ryhme<sup>75</sup>

A familiarity with Elizabethan and Jacobean modes of speech and poetry eases the understanding of such a passage, though Clare does not fail to make an impact nonetheless; – and read out loud, the poetry is both clear and immediate. These issues are elucidated in a short, extremely perceptive essay by the philologist, Professor Barbara M. H. Strang, entitled ‘John Clare’s Language’.<sup>76</sup> She notes that:

In four main aspects of its grammatical structure, morphological and syntactic, Clare’s language is closer to the norms of the sixteenth century than to those of the nineteenth, but it is rather doubtful whether these features should be called archaisms. Rather, most of them belong to a generalized poetic tradition that survived among Clare’s contemporaries...<sup>77</sup>

Clare puts the poetic tradition to his own uses with something of a quiet flourish. The tetrameter couplets are deftly used to present a dramatic situation in words of immediate effectiveness. Concealed within his unpredictable spellings and diction, unpunctuated

<sup>75</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion*, p. 228, ‘The Progress of Ryhme’, ll. 193-204

<sup>76</sup> Barbara M. H. Strang, ‘John Clare’s Language’ in ed. R. K. R. Thornton, *The Rural Muse, Poems by John Clare* (Ashington, Northumberland: Mid Northumberland Arts Group with Carcanet New Press, 1982) pp. 159-173.

<sup>77</sup> *The Rural Muse*, p. 168

lines, and old-fashioned syntax, is a notable verbal intelligence, giving scope for the ‘entertainment’ of meaning which Hill recommends. For instance, to ‘rove’ in a formal ‘grove’ is paradoxical – in the smoothness of the rhyme is a concealed tension. Other instances appear in the following lines: the loss of perspective in the gloom in line 3 enacted by the slight tongue-twisting of ‘Limes where twilight lingered’; how line 4 appears to repeat line 3 but is in fact a contrasting, a re-statement in plain language of its high-flown sentiments; the enjambment of line 6 after line 5, with the whole force of the metric pattern and the dramatic stress landing on ‘not’; the strange reversal of perspective in which it is the song beneath his breastbone that heaves his breath up, invoking an overwhelming tidal force, through the play of metaphor; the fevered, sickbed verbs of line 9 followed by the unnamed and silent presence of line 10, a ghost which precisely demands words and speech in poetry; and the ‘vision’ of line 11 – which, by the syntax, ‘waked’ or awoke to consciousness but also *left him on waking*, infected now with the irritable, sensitive, and irresistible desire to put something into rhymed poetry. The whole passage ‘acts or suffers what it describes’<sup>78</sup>, the process of a vocation which came to him in the grove – as if a sacred grove – and was as unlooked for as he was unprepared for it; the passage is alive with its own process of self-recognition.

Clare’s education, lacking anything resembling a university level (though he read voraciously, retained complex ideas and was a perceptive critic), did not condition his mind to analyse, compress, and categorise under recognised intellectual hierarchies – something taken entirely for granted in the background of cultivated speech. What may be construed as Clare’s parataxis and an apparently unchecked flow of description,

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<sup>78</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 363.

drawing from different styles simultaneously (personal and conventional, dialect and literary, lyric and narrative) can equally be construed as an alternative mode of poetic speaking, having the virtues of immediacy, flexibility, and responsiveness, grounded in Clare's sensitivity to verbal register. His poetic voice resembles his experiencing; he composed outdoors, muttering his lines over to himself, and his poems come over, 'carry', superbly well in the open. They seem to be addressed, not to an open auditorium, but to someone walking by his side.

Up this green wood land ride lets softly rove  
 & list the nightingale – she dwelleth here  
 Hush let the wood gate softly clap – for fear  
 The noise might drive her from her home of love  
 For here Ive heard her many a merry year  
 At morn & eve nay all the live long day  
 As though she lived on song – this very spot  
 Just where that old mans beard all wildly trails  
 Rude arbours oer the rode & stops the way  
 & where that child its blue bell flowers hath got  
 Laughing & creeping through the mossy rails  
 There have I hunted like a very boy  
 Creeping on hands & knees through matted thorns  
 To find her nest & see her feed her young<sup>79</sup>

We note the 'entertainments', the verbal complexity of yoked combinations: rove/dwell; soft/clap; fear-noise/home-love; year/day; livelong/lived on song; old man/wildly; rude/rode; rode (road)/stops the way; laughing/creeping. There is a poignant implied play on child/bluebell flowers, which is something to do with the mortal frailty of both. We may also note the personal and conversational strategy: not the lyric I-you, but a mode of implied dialogue, of movement together, the companion (reader) paying attention, looking and listening to the prompts and commands: let's rove, listen!, hush!,

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<sup>79</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion*, p. 201, 'The Nightingale's Nest', ll. 1-14. Also cross-checked with eds. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson, *John Clare – Poems of the Middle Period 1822 – 1837*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) Vol 3, pp. 456-461.

let-clap; and the deictic – I’ve, this, just where, & where, there...I. The language is full of energetic response to the presence of nature, in the moment and of the moment.

Hill specifically recommends ‘intensity of perception’<sup>80</sup> as against ‘heavy accumulation of data’ and ‘dissipation of perceptual and structural cogency’. Clare works in a language brimming over with detail and it moves on logical and semantic paths that seem anything but structurally cogent – at least at first encounter. Yet he certainly achieves intensity of perception; and the ‘serious pitch of obligation’ entails a search for meaning, on the part of the reader as well as (or side by side with) the author. Hill defines ‘meaning’ as process or ‘entertainment’, rather than a fixed quantity which can be translated from one context into another by some hypothetical system of equivalence:

Meaning is not ‘established’, even in those writers who greatly desire to see it so; it is concatenation, ellipsis, lacuna: as much in those who speak ‘pertinently, plainly, piercingly, and somewhat properly’ as in those who strain after far-fetched conceits.<sup>81</sup>

Hill suggests that ‘meaning’ has an ephemeral, enigmatic quality: it is a matter of piecing together the elements of the situation, as well as the grammar of the words. Clare aligns the movement of his poetry with the unpredictable, detailed multiplicity of shapes and movements that he finds in nature. If nature were to be parsed, or grammatically analysed, ‘concatenation, ellipsis, lacuna’ might be a useful set of categories for the way fields, woods, flowers and birds present themselves.

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<sup>80</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 350.

<sup>81</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 353.

The provocation of Clare's language also resides, as Strang points out, in the lack of punctuation: she notes that while the impact of this seems at first to be merely visual, it is in fact of structural significance.

Doing without punctuation (as lawyers know) imposes a discipline on both writer and reader, though rhythmical and metrical structure eases the task. It is not, as early editors thought, that Clare leaves out something we can put in for him because we have received a conventional education; rather, he writes in such a way that this troublesome device can be dispensed with. There are syntactic ambiguities in Clare, but they are rarer than in most orthodox poets. The reader, in turn, is obliged to take the verse at a pace dictated by the poet – a pace that enables him to scan the word-sequences for possible groupings and to reject all but the appropriate syntax and semantics.<sup>82</sup>

My experience over several years of reading Clare's poetry aloud is that, once accustomed to his word forms, scanning ahead (the memorising in front of oneself, on the line) is no more onerous than in most other poets. Because of the involutions of grammar and syntax necessitated in poetry, the reader's need to know what is coming is exactly the same: the meaning cannot be assembled before the whole unit is available to the mind. Clare's deliberate searching for words, even repeated ones, his reaching out to the meaning of a movement, a detail, a shift in perspective, his response to the ground-bass of the actuality in front of him and of the movement (verbal and emotional) within, is paralleled and enacted by the engagement that the reader has to have with the words as encountered on the page.

The absence of punctuation actually enlivens my delivery of the poems when reading aloud, because, once the 'meaning' is scanned and held in expectancy, the cadence and flow of the lines can reflect my particular voice and my instantaneous, in-the-moment, breathing response to the words. By contrast, the effect of inserted commas and full

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<sup>82</sup> *The Rural Muse*, p. 161.

stops is to stagger and decouple this instinctive alignment with the import of the words: they enforce pauses and closures without allowing for the fertile complexity of grades and shades of inflexion and silence. That complexity is enhanced, is more acute, when the words play with and against each other at Clare's poetic intensity.

Clare's repetition of certain words is another source of misconception about his apparent naïveté. 'Joy' is a critical focus in one of the major poems of *The Midsummer Cushion: – Shadows of Taste*.<sup>83</sup> Its use in a variety of different contexts makes it of semantic importance. In the poems of *The Midsummer Cushion*, 'joy' is an active word that never fails to exhibit a defining or orienting lustre wherever it appears – as it does in five couplets in *Shadows of Taste*:

Taste is their joyous heritage & they  
All choose for joy in a peculiar way...

There rocked by winds they feel no moods of fear  
But joy their birth right lives forever near...

All share the summers glory & its good  
& taste of joy in each peculiar mood...

In poesys vision more refined & fair  
Taste reads oerjoyed & greets her image there...

His joys run riot mid each juicy blade  
Of grass where insects revel in the shade...<sup>84</sup>

Hill speaks of 'the deployment of words as moral focuses'<sup>85</sup>; these are the nodes where ethical criteria intersect with grammar and etymology; a momentary alignment which

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<sup>83</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion*, pp. 130-133. See Appendix for the complete poem. Cross-checked with *John Clare – Poems of the Middle Period 1822 – 1837*, pp. 303-310.

<sup>84</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion* pp. 130-133, lines 5-6, 17-18, 37-38, 63-64, 113-114.

<sup>85</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Keeping to the Middle Way, p. 309.



becomes visible, of what needs to be said and how it is said. In this poem, 'joy' regulates something like a pulse of order, goodness, and energy. Strang comments:

These images are often enough stated explicitly but their pervasive effect is to throw a semantic warp into some of the commonest, and, outside Clare, commonplace words in the repertoire.<sup>86</sup>

The notion of a 'semantic warp' is another way of looking at the way ideas are yoked together at a verbal and semantic level. We note Clare's method of collocating 'joy' with other categories and aspects to produce different shades of signification:– *choosing* in unique and particular ways; a fearless *birthright*; *particular blessings* shared and available to all; an *aesthetic anamnesis* in poetry; a *revelling and rampant* happiness.

Hill draws attention to the need for:

...a sense of contexture, an appreciation of, and an ability to initiate, the changes that single words and phrases undergo when moved from one context to another... Let us call this method: thinking through the phrase or image; ... [which] signifies that the phrase or image is mediator of the idea. And let us introduce the further sense of 'think through', to resolve by process of thought. These senses are to be understood as working simultaneously not consecutively.<sup>87</sup>

In *Shadows of Taste*, Clare is thinking through a dilemma of experiencing and being in nature: a series of issues concerning the desire to be and to become one's purposed, most fully worked out, self – that which is not just personal choices (as we might say) but 'creative choice' (l. 23): he calls this, 'taste', a word with aesthetic and philosophical overtones which are alluded to, but not foregrounded, in the poem. Clare 'thinks through' and by a process of metaphoric thought 'resolves' the questions into a

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<sup>86</sup> *The Rural Muse*, pp. 167-168.

<sup>87</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918, p. 456.

moral and intellectual realization – not a conclusion. This is not a conceptual exercise: ‘if solipsism is to be redeemed from mere monologue, the intelligence which is brought to bear upon it cannot be simply conceptual’<sup>88</sup>. Hill would set, against the apparent solipsism of an engagement with nature so personal, Clare’s struggle to find a reasoned grounding for his inner intuition, so that he can place fine distinctions within an overarching framework capable of holding them.

I would claim that the poet in the poem is bound to take on the challenge of the ‘usurping consciousness’... many poems move us with their knowledge of what is being exacted by such a confrontation: in this sense there can be a difficult beauty of imperfection; but it is not, in such cases, a beauty of thought. It is a manifest beauty of intelligence—by which I mean, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* means ... “understanding as a quality of admitting of degree”. ...The ‘indispensable centre’ of such work must be realized within the many dimensions of language itself...<sup>89</sup>

As many as are the ‘dimensions of language’, Clare, ‘admitting of degree’, perceives just so many dimensions of ‘selving’: birds, flowers, insects and different kinds of human are all choosing to be their purposed selves. The paradox is of active participation in a situation of contingent circumstance, which does not permit of any other outcome, yet whose initial dilemma is that of willing consent, at some pre-reflective or existential level, to the enigma of selving or being-oneself. Clare’s perception is not of a smooth and coherent co-existence of different beings: their purposes do not necessarily overlap smoothly or harmonise, as the poem makes clear.

Taste with as many hues doth hearts engage  
As leaves & flowers do upon natures page  
Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares  
But birds & flowers & insects are its heirs  
Taste is their joyous heritage & they

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<sup>88</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 422.

<sup>89</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 422.

All choose for joy in a peculiar way<sup>90</sup>

What Hill might call the ‘verbal contexture’ is alive with oxymorons, with yoked images: hues and hearts, nature and page, mind and instinct, birds-flowers-insects and ‘heritage’. Hill calls this ‘sensuous apprehension’<sup>91</sup>, and in so far as words are ‘sensory material’<sup>92</sup>, loaded with contingent circumstance embedded in the grammar, they are the ‘instantaneous realization of the correlative within the contingent’<sup>93</sup>, the emotional force entangled within and embodied by the grammar and syntax.

In *The Weight of the Word*, Hill makes a link between ‘taste’ in Wesley’s hymns and ‘temper’ in earlier religious writers, and thereby throws a light on Clare’s realizations of ‘taste’ in *Shadows of Taste*. Clare had attended the meetings of the Primitive Methodist movement, who were prominent in Northamptonshire from 1818. Their meetings left him deeply moved; he noted that he was left:

so unstrung in their company that I can scarcely refrain from shedding tears and when I went church [(sic) i.e. to the Anglican service] I could scarcely refrain from sleep.<sup>94</sup>

Bate adds that Clare also attended the Wesleyan Methodists, and here he would surely have sung the hymns of Wesley and Watts, in which ‘taste’ is used in respect of the action of saving grace. Examples of such lines (from different hymns) are:

‘Thou hast on me bestowed/ ...The taste divine, the sovereign good.’  
 ‘But we, who taste thy richer grace,/ Delight to bless thy name.’  
 ‘But those who taste his saving Love/ Should sing his praises best.’  
 ‘Nor is the least a chearful heart/ That tastes those gifts with joy.’<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *The Midsummer Cushion*, ‘Shadows of Taste’ ll. 1-6

<sup>91</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Tacit Pledges, p. 409.

<sup>92</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, A Pharisee to Pharisees p. 322.

<sup>93</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Translating Value, p. 391.

<sup>94</sup> *John Clare – A Biography*, p. 255

Hill defines ‘temper’(from the *Oxford English Dictionary*) as ‘due or proportionate mixture or combination of elements or qualities’. He quotes Benjamin Whichcote:

‘When the Principles of our Religion become the *Temper* of our Spirits, then we are truly religious’, [...] ‘The *State* of Religion consists in a divine Frame and *Temper* of mind: and shews it self in a *Life* and Actions, conformable to the divine Will’<sup>96</sup>.

This matter of ‘due or proportionate mixture’, which is also an aspect of ‘the *Temper* of our Spirits’ is at the heart of Clare’s dilemma about taste. We are in a realm of thinking where human spirits are tempered, required to align with ‘the divine Will’ – for Clare, the equivalent is the demand to act with and within ‘taste’, which Clare divines to be nature, or more precisely ‘that great being who raised life from nought’; the collocation with the previous line is ‘swarms of thought’. It must be acknowledged that, for the seventeenth century preacher quoted by Hill, the ‘great being’ can only be God, the divine Will; whereas for Clare, there is no such doctrinaire equivalence to be asserted. Nonetheless, if Clare had meant to say ‘God’, he would have done so; here, the collocation of ‘that great being’ is with ‘swarms of thought’ and ‘life from nought’. Where the syntax points simply to ‘that great being’, the collocation and the rhyme point to the life of thought, that rapture which Clare feels in the face of nature.

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<sup>95</sup> *Collection of Psalms and Hymns*, 1741, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. 1744, John and Charles Wesley, and Isaac Watts. Duke Divinity School website: <http://www.divinity.duke.edu/initiatives-centers/cswt/wesley-texts/poetry-hymn>. From downloaded pdf file, hymns are: ‘God of my righteousness’ (page 9); ‘Sweet is the mem’ry of thy grace’ (p.110); ‘Let every creature join’ (p. 113); ‘Thanksgiving for God’s Particular Providence’ (p.127); provenance given as: Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition under editorial direction of Randy L. Maddox, with the diligent assistance of Aileen F. Maddox. Last updated: August 20, 2012

<sup>96</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 355, note on p. 695 cites Whichcote *Aphorisms* nos. 28, 853; note on p. 624 cites *The Works of the Learned Benjamin Whichcote*, 4 vols. (Aberdeen, 1751)

We are on the ‘peculiar edge’ where the rapture or sentiment Clare feels is to find its right place in the light of reason, the right ordering of nature in a world of human beings. In *The Weight of the Word* Hill considers the ‘grammar’ of phrases like ‘consideration awakeneth our reason from its sleep, till it rouse up itself, as Sampson’, and ‘meditation produceth reason into act’.<sup>97</sup> The language of these phrases Hill describes as moving with a ‘natural mimesis’, a commitment to collocation and consequence:

What I have termed ‘natural mimesis’ is, in Charles Wesley, the ‘spontaneous’ movement of a creative spirit at once submissive to revealed authority and hard-pressed by brute fact. In his case, the ‘peculiar edge’ of the writing is the line which reason draws between enthusiasm and grace. The theme of Wesley’s hymns is recurrently that of ‘taste’; taste is also his ‘temper’, his instrument for endowing hard distinctions with a real effect of ease and freedom.<sup>98</sup>

In Clare’s case, the ‘peculiar edge’ comprises that between, on the one hand, religious notions of God (and a social order ranging from dilettante men of science to the ‘low herd’), and on the other hand (alongside the brute fact of his own penury), the actuality of his experiencing of words: Clare’s edge is the vibrant joy in nature, and the strange, answering vibrancy of thought which is his instinctive response.

If ‘temper’ in Wesley is also taste, and if taste is also the Eucharistic ‘taste’, his rhetoric and ‘inward Sentiments’ would seem, in principle, so remarkably interfused that, as in Herbert, the one is transformed within the other. In practice, of Wesley’s several thousand hymns, a few score at most have this effect of perfect balance, of ‘peculiar edge’, which separated the ‘delicious relish’ of spiritual self-regard from the experiential relish of the awakened heart discovering, or recovering, its true temper.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 359, note on p. 696 cites Richard Baxter, quoted in Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660 – 1780 Volume I: Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) p. 146

<sup>98</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 360

<sup>99</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, *The Weight of the Word*, p. 360.

Clare's poem is an 'experiential relish' of awakening and recovering. He 'oerflows with swarms of thought'. The poem, as a whole, is a realization of his process of engagement with nature, his 'entertainment' of his place as enraptured, overflowing, transient and participant. The argument of the poem is complex but can be discerned as follows. After the introductory lines, Clare applies 'taste' to three component aspects of nature, birds, flowers and insects, before coming to the 'noble insect', man. Each non-human representation has a different quality: birds act and do (nesting, living, loving, being, choosing, trusting); flowers mediate and radiate kindness, tasting and tasting-of joy; insects are varied and busy with joy, tiny sparks of rapture, innumerable, and achieving namelessness in their multiplicity. Clare then treats of man under three aspects: the sublime, the man of science and of taste, and finally, 'wisdom'.

The section on the 'sublime' (ll. 57-96) comprises poetry as spell-making and spell-receiving, the aesthetic rendering of beauty, the meaning of 'living character and breathing word' as they balance time and timelessness; and the prosodic elements – metric feet, musical periods, and the triviality of such considerations in comparison with the 'true sublime' which is 'truth to nature'.

The section on the 'man of sience & of taste' (ll. 97-124), describes someone who roams like the poet but is under the purview of the 'vulgar hinds'; he sees something of what Clare sees, the 'treasures' of simple nature, but it is notable that the 'self interest' of the peasants is not condemned by Clare. He knows that they cannot merely *look* at nature or they will starve; and there is, in his care not to condemn them outright (as also in lines 49-52, earlier), an implied judgment that whatever the scientific value of these observations of nature, it is unlikely to put bread in the mouths of the poor. The play of

this derives from the collocations *nought-nature/wealth-prize* (l. 104) and *wealth-worth-waste* (l. 108). The point is made with unexpected and potent force in the description of the scientist who ‘unconscious gibbets butterflyes’ (l. 117).

Having encompassed aspects of art and science, Clare moves to ‘wisdom’ (l. 124), which might be paraphrased as unitive bliss in multiplicity: Clare’s collocation is *nature-wild-Eden*. To take ‘Eden’ as merely a yearning for lost childhood and innocence, as many commentators regularly do<sup>100</sup>, would seem to attribute to Clare a solipsistic identification of nature with childhood, childhood with innocence, a rural life with goodness, and the dogmas of religion with truth. There is no evidence in Clare’s writings, taken in the round, to give unequivocal support to any such interpretation. If Clare’s poems lament the loss of childhood, lovers, fields and trees, one cannot take the loss to be anything but real; but the reality of the poetry is as realization of the complex, contingent nature of life. The play of ‘Eden’ is metaphoric: Clare’s ‘taste’ for poetry would not permit easy conceptualisations.

It is notable that Clare’s only other mention of Eden in this poem is in the section (ll. 53-56) where he introduces the variety of human responses within ‘taste’. These lines precede the complex exposition of an aesthetic anamnesis of beauty in nature through poetry, and set the scene for it:

From these & different far in rich degrees  
Minds spring as various as the leaves of trees  
To follow taste & all her sweets explore  
& Edens make where deserts spread before

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<sup>100</sup> See, for instance, as one of a multitude, Bate, *John Clare – A Biography*, p. 154: [the poem *Helpstone*] ‘introduced an image to which he would return again and again, that of the Helpston of his childhood as a lost Eden.’

The semantic implications are dense, as before: ‘degrees’ in its implication of careful ordering sits uneasily with the unpredictable variousness of ‘leaves’; to follow is not at all the same as to explore; and it is arguable that the syntactic opposition of ‘Eden’ to ‘deserts’ is not, semantically, one of imposed cultivation to ill-conceived neglect, or of innocent productivity to weed-infested wasteland – let alone a paradisaal retreat as against a compromised reality. Rather, it is the ability of taste (which includes ‘fancy’ or ‘associations’ – ll. 133-134) to see, in nature untouched and un-judged (‘deserts’), the right manifestation of each of its individual tastes or movements-to-being, the manifestation of the right balance of itself in each part and in the whole (‘Edens’). It seems a wholly ecological vision. Taste will ‘make’ Edens (Clare does not say *find*), because it can reveal as beauty, nature as it already is, not as it might be or once was.

So the reference to ‘Natures wild Eden’ is to the wildness of nature, which is what makes it edenic: it is unspoiled, untouched, not innocent. It is the propensity to ‘breath(e)’ this wildness which gives rise to the ‘swarms of thought’ like common blades of grass (we remember that grass is the touchstone for truth to nature in ll. 93-94), and that those thoughts raise up a world of praise and make the heart overflow.

The point of this third section under the heading ‘man’, which is also the opening of the final part of the poem (ll. 119-164), is to celebrate that which in nature cannot be touched without being changed. This is the impossible dilemma of the walk into the garden on the morning of the first snowfall: one touch, one footprint means that the snow is not new, is not pristine, any more. So the man who lives in ‘rapture’ too nebulous or exalted to record, is the one who ‘loves not flowers because they shed perfumes’ – he has no selfish or utilitarian motive for love; he is defined, *tout court*, as



the one who loves ‘the wild and meadow lea’. If there is any motive, it does not involve changing nature at all: ‘The common weed adds graces to his mind’ (l. 131). It is the mind of the observer which undergoes change. Few will see such beauties because, perhaps, they have not been touched by that beauty; they have not been given the grace to see ‘beautys few beside may find’ (l. 132). It is Clare’s peculiar choosing, which is neither self-willed nor a random ‘choice’, to allow himself to be touched by the beauty, and to take up his vocation of making that beauty available to others as a ‘fine idea’.

Clare asserts that the object gives ‘associations sweet’ to the mind; the result is ‘fancy’ on which fine ideas feed. Certain words in this poem act as nodes or intersection points for the development of themes: ‘feed’ is one of these. The next occurrence of ‘feed’ refers to those who feed on or are fed by ‘spruce & delicate ideas’: they dislike the wilderness (l. 153). There is no ‘fancy’ in their imaginings, and the fault is ‘art[’]s strong impulse’ which ‘mars the truth of taste’ (l. 160).

‘Associations’ refers not to mechanical or accidental links created by repetition or situation: Clare seems to suggest something more potent – the power of metaphor. The immediate link is with ‘fancy’, which in its reference to the imaginative faculty signifies an open receptivity and willingness to make connections, a formal absence of rational or analytical focus, and a sensory engagement on many levels. This is the fertile seedbed for ‘fine ideas’. The force of ‘dwelling place’ (l. 139) immediately following ‘the wild and meadow lea’, is to indicate what Clare sees as the essence of nature, a vision which could be termed ecological and holistic, in today’s language. The ‘dwelling place’ is the locus of maximum appropriateness, fecundity, and purpose, and ‘fancy’ is the free-

wheeling cultivation in the mind of multiple images, thoughts, lore, memories, feelings, rhymes, walks, phrases, and starings-into-space.

Clare's vision is of the utmost subtlety:

There hath the flower its dwelling place & there  
The butterfly goes dancing through the air  
He loves each desolate neglected spot  
That seems in labours hurry left forgot

The 'spot' is precious both for being empty of people and left behind, and for the fact of 'labour' having worked there once. People also need a 'dwelling place', and the spot is not unknown; Clare is aware of the contradictions. After mentioning the stunted oak and the glad bird, Clare says:

But take these several beings from their homes  
Each beauteous thing a withered thought becomes  
Association fades & like a dream  
They are but shadows of the things they seem

This is the second occurrence of the word 'beings' in the poem, and signals a pointed recall of 'that great being' in line 130. Here, the flower, the butterfly, the oak, the ivy and the bird are all beings, invested with, and reciprocally investing into the receptive mind, 'associations'; taken out of their natural environment, they are representations of themselves only – 'shadows of the things they seem'. According to the poem, without the 'fancy' arising from these associations, 'fine ideas' have nothing to feed on; what results is the 'spruce & delicate ideas' of line 153; the truth of taste has been marred, is sterile.

A pleasing image to its page conferred  
 In living character & breathing word  
 Becomes a landscape heard & felt & seen  
 Sunshine & shade one harmonizing green<sup>101</sup>

The 'harmonizing' green indicates the unitive experience: light and dark become united in green. The sense of this is the opposite of Marvell's 'Annihilating all that's made/To a green Thought in a green Shade'<sup>102</sup>, where the moment of perception is essentially self-enjoying and self-authenticating, an exercise of the mind in untrammelled fantasy. For Clare, words in poetry convey life, are alive – if they 'breathe'. The landscape lives in an undivided, co-existent state of being, and it lives by its own authority within the poem, not as an adjunct of the observer. The inherent contradictions, of people in nature, are realized by the poem, not conceptually resolved; yet the realization, the correlative within the contingent, is visionary and prophetic.

Finding words is for John Clare both an instinctive experiencing in nature, a 'participation' in Abram's terms, and also a finely distinguished rendering of complexity in nature, which Clare celebrates as a giving and receiving of joy in its right time and place, not denying joy's ephemerality. Once confined to the asylum, nature and joy are not linked in this way for Clare: the word appears in its normal, non-complex range. Clare has moved his focus elsewhere, inward to his disturbance, though his observation of nature is still acute. Clare's deliberate choosing to participate, not only in experience but in writing poetry, is the work of what Hill might call 'moral imagination'. It is an intensity of interaction with nature which is yet grounded in the economic and social contradictions of life in the countryside, and is expressed in a language unique to Clare, the combination of high diction with dialect words, rhyme

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<sup>101</sup> lines 71-74

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Marvell, ed. Hugh MacDonald, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956) p. 52, 'The Garden', ll. 47-48.

and metre with a country story-teller's flow, unpunctuated lines and unusual spellings with intensely crafted poetry.

The next chapter will form an introduction to aspects of my own poems, which treat themes of nature, love, loss, imagination and glory.

## Chapter Four

### Finding Words for Glory

The poems gathered for this collection, *Finding Words*, were all written between 2005 and 2011. The title reflects a feeling of speechlessness on facing the challenge to write, the demand for words, which seems urgent and does not appear to emanate wholly from me. The title also reflects the sensation of standing, as if in a blizzard of words, overwhelmed by that potential, trying to find the right word, the right move to start the poem. ‘Finding Words for Glory’, the title of this chapter, echoes the last of the groups of poems in the collection, and alludes to a certain state of glory or ecstasy in words when they ‘click’ or ‘come right’.

It seems to me that my poetics has not been a matter of rational or conscious choices, much as part of me wishes it had been. Having begun with an instinctive allegiance to poetry, I have proceeded by stumbling upon poets who seemed to speak powerfully and without nostalgia, but in their own voices, from their hearts – Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, Coleridge in *This Lime Tree Bower my Prison*, Bunting in *Briggflatts*, Edith Scovell in her poems of motherhood and wartime, and John Clare throughout his writings. Equally direct in effect, but without the ‘I’ persona, are Hopkins’ evocation of the inward crystalline self of things through instress and sprung-rhythm; the fable-making of Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*, the Gawain poet’s hypnotic alliterative pulse or beat, and his formalised lament for his lost daughter in *Pearl*, and Arthur Hugh Clough’s long, dancing hexameter lines counterpointing tonal and social niceties, in tales of private disappointment and religious agonising. Something about the rhythmic quality of these made special appeal to me.

In my own poetry, I am particularly sensitive to the sound-world of words. The aural elements of words in a poem come from two sources: the speaker, and the literal spelling and pronunciation of the word. Rhythmic pulse is the existential engagement of the reader who speaks the poem, the breath itself and its impulses revealing unmistakably the reader's profound participation, or otherwise, in the poem. The throat, tongue and dental or palatal connections, the unique conformation of all the sound-modifying organs of the voice, also make a part of this, the set of fundamentals belonging to the speaker of the poem. The other set is comprised of the particular spelling and pronunciation of each word, to which the poem adds alliteration, assonance, echo, rhyme, and other auditory effects, modified again by such structural pointings as might be given by caesura, line break, repetition, refrain, metre and stanza form. The conceptual import of a word, which might seem separate from the accidentals of its sound, is also itself a complex amalgam of semantics, etymology, and the poem's syntactical and grammatical framing, its style associations, indications of pitch, and metaphoric fields. A poem demands of the word flexibility and permeability – as it does also of the reader or listener.

My commitment to reading poetry aloud has grown from a sense of the inherent drama of poetry – I can remember being moved to read out certain vivid passages from the book of Revelations, when I was in my mid-teens and my younger brother was trying to go to sleep... At university I must have had some noticeable ability to read aloud because I was chosen to read one of Pound's cantos (number XLV *With Usura*), at a public tribute held in my college in the year he died. Bedtime stories for my children always included rhymes and poems. Eventually I started a project in my community,

which has continued for the last six years. I read to a group of older people from my parish, every fortnight for an hour and a half, poetry from any period and any author; Shakespeare sonnets always open the entertainment, and John Clare sonnets or excerpts from *The Shepherd's Calendar* are also a regular feature. Some members of the group have become very accurate and accomplished listeners, despite having no particular educational or poetic qualifications: they have no trouble in asking questions, or in detecting poetry which is less than effective. Increasingly they have stopped worrying if they *understand*, and begun to simply participate and listen fully. On the evidence that they keep coming back, there must be a value, and it is hinted at in certain comments received – for instance, that a poem had permitted the listener to go home and review certain memories which she had never before been able to deal with. I am not sure who enjoys the sessions more, the reader or the audience.

Five years ago I began a project called 'Finding Words for the Forest', which involves hiring a room in a Forestry Commission visitor centre, in a forest in Northamptonshire near where Clare was born. I invite people to come for the day, and accompany me on short, slow walks in the forest, while I read (in the morning) a selection of Clare's sonnets, chosen for the season and the specific locations (standing in front of a sycamore, or forest trees, or a ragwort, or a prospect of fields – Clare has written poems for them all); and in the afternoon to walk slightly further, and to then pause and listen while I read a longer poem, usually *The Nightingale's Nest*. There is plenty of time for discussion, and for creative writing if requested. I repeated these events two or three times a year for four years, and to my astonishment they attracted a small number of core attenders, as well as many who only came once or twice. The effect of Clare's poetry outdoors is unique: no other poet works so well read out loud in the open – it is

as if the poems were designed to be read in that way, whilst ‘indoor’ poems immediately suffer from auditory interference, a kind of loss of echo, when outdoors. Clare’s poetry transforms the interaction with the surrounding environment: one ceases to be a ‘consumer of the view’, and becomes more a participating, interactive, elemental constituent. I would like to try reading Clare in other parts of the country.

Imaginative participation is part of finding words. To compose into words, with words, is to describe but not just describe. It is to stand within the event or experience, whilst not disappearing into it, not merging with it; to remain alert, vigilant to every shade of variation in the subject, whilst generating a stream of hypothetical verbal engagements with it; to remain detached whilst circumscribing the outline *as if from within*. ‘As if’ is the imagination’s work. Such a form of describing encodes and decodes the different possible versions of reality. The inner protocols of a poem, its grammar and syntax, its prosody, are involved in this reflection of possibilities, both taken up and forgone, of life itself in its most pliable, pithy core. At the level of the sensory, there is a synaesthetic matching, blending or paralleling of sense data: we react with a wholeness of the ‘five’ senses, not a sequence of separate registrations of the data. In this is a model, perhaps a catalyst, for the mirror-imaging and play of the imagination in a poem. This play is a metaphoric mode of suggestion and connection through words and imagery, through auditory echoes and fashioned cadences, and through invocatory repetitions in prosodic forms, which hint at and denote parallels, possibilities, and illuminations.

To ‘find’ or select a word in the way I describe means that words are partners rather than tools. Once a word is grasped, everything else follows, so it is important to be



cautious. I recognise Hill's warning about the intractability of words, the inertial drag of language which resists the impulse and distorts the execution. There are two elements to this: I try to find the right word for the experience and for the poem, but it must also be the right word for poetry, adjudged by experience of poetry. By this, I mean wide reading and diligent observation of *how other poets do it, how the words make their play*: how to let go of the sole ego-perspective; how to frame words to thoughts; how to instate and interlace imagery; how to sense a cliché before it has time to appear; how to pursue a line of thought through metaphor, tact, and verbal dexterity; how to employ different tones, rhythms, formal structures and metres; how to keep a consistent pitch or level. It is a process of familiarisation with the landscape of poetry, without which it is likely that I will become lost.

Influences remain with me in a particular way. It is the vocal, rhythmic 'shapes' which seem to reside in me, rather than the words. *Henry IV Part I* was a set text when I was fourteen, and I had, recently, the uncanny experience of seeing it again after a hiatus of forty five years. The great speeches were still in my memory, completely unavailable to recall as words, yet present and still potent in their rhythms and cadences. At seventeen, preparing for university entrance exams, I read the whole of Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805 version) and was completely spirited away by his command of the iambic pentameter line, and the story he had to tell. Coleridge made his first impression on me, as did Hopkins, and with both of them I am still in a vivid dialogue: I cannot count them as influences, exactly, as their intellectual and verbal prowess seem beyond my scale as a poet, and Hopkins certainly is too distinctive to be in any way imitated. Ted Hughes (*The Hawk in the Rain*) and Sylvia Plath (*Ariel*) came into view at this time: the former

impressed me in the accent and pitch of his lines; the latter with the white-hot ferocity of her verbal play.

Of several anthologies of contemporary poetry, the one poet who really caught my imagination, on the strength of a single poem (*Child Waking*) was Edith Scovell; further reading confirmed my first opinion, of a metaphysical mind in quiet, sometimes ecstatic, retirement of spirit. This was an influence, but perhaps so subtle that I cannot quite name the gift I received; she intended her work to be clear, but also to speak a meaning implicit, beyond words. Her voice has the melancholy distinction of being one of the poets of the modern era whose reading voice was never recorded; she died in 1999 and it was her death and that of another unrecorded poet which led Andrew Motion and Richard Carrington to set up the Poetry Archive in that year.

At university, the discoveries which formed me stand out: *Hamlet* had an effect from which I am still trying to recover – I am sometimes conscious of the rhythms and cadences of the soliloquies in what I write and think of writing. The medieval poets were a fascination, and in particular the Gawain-poet, for the mixture of Celtic myth and psychological morality tale, but above all for his use of the alliterative line derived from the Anglo-Saxon and Old English traditions.

þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,  
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;  
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,  
And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,  
Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,  
Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,  
And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride;  
For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,  
Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,  
And alle his fetures folȝande, in forme þat he hade,  
ful clene;  
For wonder of his hwe men hade,

Set in his semblaunt sene;  
 He ferde as freke were fade,  
 And oueral enker-green.<sup>103</sup>

(When) there rushed in at the hall door a terrible man, the very biggest on earth, thickset and squarely built from the neck to the waist, [and his loins and his limbs so long and so big], I think he may have been half-giant; but at any rate I declare he was the biggest of men and the handsomest knight on horseback; both his belly and his waist were fittingly slender, and all his features wholly in keeping with his shape. They were astounded at his colour, so plainly to be seen. He behaved like an elvish man, and was vivid green all over.<sup>104</sup>

This combination of story-telling, elements of magic and wonder, rich and quirky detail, and the embodied alliterative rhythm I find entirely unified and effective (the ‘bob’ at the end of each stanza is the only part in rhyme and approximate metrical feet). The alliterative line is described as follows:

... Thus each normal line contains four chief stresses, two in each half-line, as in Old English ... The dominant alliterative pattern for the line is aa/ax (or aaa/ax)... The rhythmic variation, which involves variation in the position of the alliterating syllables within the half-line, ensures that monotony is avoided. Alliteration usually falls on a syllable bearing natural stress, but the poet allows himself some flexibility in this respect. A vowel may alliterate with any other vowel or with h...<sup>105</sup>

The virtues of the alliterative line, as summarised below, constitute and facilitate characteristic aims of my own poetry also:

... in [the Gawain poet’s] poetry can be seen the great virtues of the alliterative tradition. The freedom of rhythm permits a more frequent use of homely idiom than does the more measured verse of the French tradition; and this can strike a note of simplicity... The alliteration can encourage concentration of meaning, or rich elaboration... Richness of description is, in fact, one of the outstanding features of this school of poetry... from its earliest days the art of alliterative poetry seems to have had as one of its elements a form of verbal ingenuity: the

<sup>103</sup> *Sir Gawayn and þe Grene Knyzt*, eds. J. R. R. Tolkien & E. V. Gordon, Second edition revised by Norman Davis, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) p.5, ll. 136-150.

<sup>104</sup> *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* eds. A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson, (London: Dent, 1976) p. 164.

<sup>105</sup> *Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969) pp. 19-20.

alliterative conventions themselves encouraged the use of oblique expression...<sup>106</sup>

The cadence of the alliterative line seems to my ear to resemble the cadences of speech; it feels as though the rhythmic drive is basic to the English language, full of energy and flexibility. In addition to this, the double beat in the first half-line, followed by the caesura or pause before another beat (or double beat), seem as natural to speaking and thinking-of-speaking, as the 8-6 or 4-4-4-2 pattern is to the sonnet: it is as if there were a geometrical elegance to certain ways of handling thoughts, essential to their proper expression, which is embodied in certain formal elements of poetry. Hill, in talking of Hopkins' sprung rhythm, makes an observation which I think applies to the way I see the alliterative rhythm:

The achievement of sprung rhythm is its being 'out of stride' if judged by the standards of common (or running) rhythm, while remaining 'in stride' if considered as procession, as pointed liturgical chant or as shanty.<sup>107</sup>

The rhythm is a working or walking device, a way of measuring time against the task, not against the clock. This observation may also have a bearing on John Clare's frequent variation on the strict metric foot and the strict rhyme scheme: his emphasis on communication rather than correctness – not letting the formal requirement obstruct his ability to let us see 'joy' in nature – and Hopkins' denial of the formal technique in favour of a heightened, active language, puts both within my category of 'glory' in words or the making of words for glory.

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<sup>106</sup> *Pearl*, ed. E. V. Gordon, (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. xxxviii-xxxix.

<sup>107</sup> *Collected Critical Writings*, Redeeming the Time, p. 102.

The alliterative rhythm has formed an underlying pattern or pulse in my own lines, in greater or lesser consciousness and prominence, ever since university, though I would not say that it was wholly absent before. At this time, too, the non-alliterative yet heavily accented lines of Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* threw their spell over me, and I heard him read the whole poem in 1974, the Northumbrian accent clarifying and making right the heavy rhythmic pointing.

The criteria that apply in revising a poem have been alluded to in Chapter Two. The critical problem is to remain faithful to the first impulse whilst improving the way it has to be said, in particular the delicacy required when making any adjustments to a verbal structure which is 'alive', because all parts respond to all other parts simultaneously. A change or shift in one part changes the balance of everything else. Revision, in my case, looks to create or enhance effects like vocal presence, opportunities for the force of breath, imitative sounds on the tongue, wonder-working twists of language, sensuous experiencing, enhanced listening, bursts of clarified imagery, a singing or chanting quality, the heightening of mood, the magical detail in nature which is imitated and foreknown in the language. I aim for clarity with intensity: a difficult yoke.

A final, or underlying, element of the process of revision is a review or 'reckoning', which involves a truth to experiencing and a deeply held view of what the poem essentially is, or is 'for'. The validity under scrutiny here has to do with purpose. If a poem has an 'essential' quality, a purpose, *telos* or function, my experience finds the common categorisations troubling, in some way or other inadequate. 'Essence' is not static, a pre-defined goal; rather, it seems to me to be 'in play'. My intellectual doubts take the form of a series of negatives: to the question, 'What is poetry?' – *not*

representation, not allegories, not personal tales; not creativity, not translation, not writing. By ‘representation’, I signify the setting of the inner reality into material or verbal form, a re-cycling, translation or rendering of meaning. By ‘allegories’, I signify the purposeful drawing out of parallels by the writer, the indication of another layer of meaning to be undertaken by the reader’s inference or deduction. By ‘personal tales’, I signify conceptual or narrative content elaborated as self-expression or confession.

Each of these makes secondary what I experience as the primary power of poetry: an engagement of my whole being, a radical commitment of my vital force, and an uncontainable reciprocal affirmation – something like ‘praise’, or ‘glory’, a spontaneous, life-giving participation in saying ‘yes’; and this no matter what the intensity of life’s brute actuality.

In the second group of three ‘negatives’, the aspects of solipsistic concern, I signify by ‘not creativity’ a reference to matters of personal prowess and individual originality, of invention put to ulterior use or deliberate metamorphosis. By ‘not translation’ I signify a reference to the notion of ‘putting something into words’, of transferring as if by a formula from one realm to another, of simplistic transformations of value. By ‘not writing’ I signify a reference to matters of arcane inscription, of magical capturing of life forces, of *soi-disant* healing. In explaining each of these three I have found myself denying, as a function of poetry, the three characteristics of ‘the primacy of language and word magic in native rituals’ given by Abram, after Merleau-Ponty, as ‘the power of spoken language to influence, alter and transform the perceptual world’.<sup>108</sup> Hill’s triad is incorporated in the following three ‘positives’, as a statement of the operative

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<sup>108</sup> *The Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 89

work of the moral imagination, in its play over the heavy, un-illuminated textures of my thoughts and feelings.

Not creativity, then, but *re-working*: a recording which is also a re-engagement, a fashioning which is formal not open-ended, prescribed not free-wheeling; a gathering up which is also something new, a synthesis not seen before. Not writing but *making and speaking*, the craftsman's stamp of authenticity in the moment, the conversion of common materials, words, to uncommon coherence, as good as a change of heart. Not translation but *transfiguration*, the lifting up into a different light, an offering which transcends its own 'essential' quality to signpost and symbolize the play of its own sharpened and centred otherness.

My skill in both writing and revising has grown over time. I intend the following brief discussion of two of the poems, to introduce my criteria and processes of writing and revising.

### ***Grief***

I was thinking about grief – wondering about you.  
Not trusting, necessarily, either you or me.  
I was listening to the beech tree, at my bedroom window,  
Singing the white bone wind, every leaf a note.  
Deep fog roughens through the stiffened stems,  
And it seems there is no more time for love, or summer.

I was wondering about love – thinking about you.  
Not believing, necessarily, how it comes; or goes.  
I was watching woven droplets slant down the pane,  
Spun off the leaf-tips, the tree a loom of moistened light.  
Down at the buried heart, chalk entwines the roots of an autumn gale,  
And it seems that even grief can be written into the rock of things.

I was thinking about love – wondering about grief.  
Not knowing, necessarily, whether it's you, or me.

I was leaning towards the window, to the clean whistle of the wind,  
 To the white streaming fog and the distilled bronzing of green.  
 Dimly, in the ache of its speaking, the tree marks itself out,  
 And it seems that the time may be turning to love, leaf-fall, letting go.

This poem is exactly as first written, and stands as the exception which proves the rule, that revision is a necessity. It fulfils many of my criteria for writing. For instance, the first line is immediate, locating my situation vividly, and setting up a syntactical structure which embodies the logical problem – either this, or that, and both also. My favourite themes are all present: love, grief, and ‘wondering’ or ‘thinking’. They play off each other in pairs, changing partners as if at a formal dance.

There is a repeating structure throughout the three stanzas: first line *I was thinking* (*wondering*); second line *Not trusting* (*believing, knowing*); third line *I was listening* (*watching, leaning*); sixth line *And it seems*. I expect that I wrote the second stanza, first line, with the full awareness of a wish to echo the first line of the poem, and was then beguiled into echoing each subsequent line. The success of this then prompted an effort to do the same in the third stanza. As an added spice, I made the fifth line begin with a D in each stanza. The origin of such a device (repetition of syntactical and prosodic structure) is deep in the roots of poetry, especially in its singing or chanting origins in oral or pre-writing culture.

The poem develops its argument – about whether grief and love are identical – through the repetitions, which evoke a mood of logical or philosophical debate. The development is paralleled by a progression of imagery, which adds to the debate: the fog relates to the mood of puzzlement; the bone wind to the eerie sense of a fated



encounter; the tree/loom to fate, again; the buried heart to grieving. The double meaning given to rock accomplishes the turning point of the emotion of the poem, that is, that the grief can be written into rock (by implication, put down and relinquished, though never forgotten) but also that the tree is rocking in the gale, even though its roots are solid in the chalk. The destabilised sensation goes with the uncertainty of the debate. In the third stanza, the clean whistle, the streaming, and the distilled bronzing suggest the sense of unobstructed, purifying movement, which are the prelude to the resolution of the problem: that love may be possible, that it might be right for the season, and that leaf-fall (loss) might also be letting go (of grief).

The sense of patterning is important to me: groups of two, or three; repetitions across stanzas; sound echoes within lines and across lines – especially alliteration but assonance too (beech... bedroom; white... wind; fog... roughens... stiffens; watching... woven; loom... light; window... whistle... wind).

The lines are extremely long, in terms of syllable-count, never less than twelve and as high as seventeen. However, what I hear in my head is a pulse of four beats, stressed syllables, with an indeterminate number of lesser stresses on either side:

I was thinking about grief – wondering about you.

I was listening to the beech tree, at my bedroom window.

This pulse seems to me to play creatively with the underlying foot-patterns, be they iambs, trochees, anapaests or dactyls. The next line, of eleven syllables (but ten if “every” is sounded as one syllable) can be read as stressed:

Singing the white bone wind, every leaf a note

or as a pentameter of semi-orthodox iambic base pattern:

Singing the white bone wind, every leaf a note

- u        u -        - -        uu -        u -

– but admittedly the ‘running rhythm’ is very destabilised. In my idea of a pulsed rhythm, “bone” has an ambivalent value, being potentially a full beat in itself, and only slightly reduced on account of its position between two other pulse beats. ‘Note’ carries weight by its position at the end of the line, and similarly holds an ambivalent value. In my head, and as I read it out loud, the pattern of pulses is in no way diminished by these two ambivalent values, though I might find it hard to set up a strict rule on this basis.

### ***The Roundhouse by Afon Fachwen***

*At Cae Mabon, where the Fachwen flows into Llyn Padarn*

Cae Mabon stream, cascader, maul of rope,  
Moss green wetted to black, welted to slate,  
I am tripped in your slip-loops, lost in your turns,

Haggle of tongue-root vowels, half-known,  
Spill of spit-words, sibilant, plosive,  
Bursts of froth, bubbling frayed whispers,

– Dazed, out of your wound-maze, I step-dance,  
Smoke-led to sky-cone thatch, stooped threshold,  
To stone Roundhouse,

Stand at bay, at arch-frame gateway,  
Finding coiled fire-eyes, snake-rune spirals,

Myself – in the circle of men’s eyes.

By contrast with *Grief*, this poem reached thirty nine versions after 21 months of revision, but I believe it is now finished. The original version is as follows, with version 20 following it.

***Voice of the Mountain Home*** (v.1)

Cae Mabon stream, white rope cascade,  
 Moss green wetted to black, welted to slate,  
 – Roar voice, of the longer drop, solid tumble,  
 Hiss voice of water fragments, flown apart,  
 Burble voice of the froth, bubbling fog,  
 Rip voice of cold liquid arms, dividing, colliding,  
 Heave voice of the helpless rush, gravity forced,  
 Song voice of vowels unknown and half-known,  
 Word voice of the sibilant and plosive, voluble,  
 Smoke voice that sifts air, grass, bark, log walls, paths,  
 Spider-web voice of this spirited, fiery earth-haven,  
 Flood of our blood in this forest, this mountain home.

***Roundhouse and Stream*** (v.20)

Cae Mabon stream, cascader, maul of white rope,  
 moss green wetted to black, welted to slate,  
 I am lost, looped in your tricks and turns –

haggle of tongue-root vowels, half-known,  
 spill of spit-words, sibilant and plosive,  
 bursts of froth, bubbling frayed whispers –

crossing the wound-maze, crazed, to sky-coned Roundhouse,  
 I stoop under rune-hauled, arch-hewn timbers,  
 stumble into open arms, stories of men, and healing fire.

Version 1 is the poem as written sitting next to the stream, in a notebook, whilst on a short retreat with a group of men. The on-the-spot, in-the-moment quality is evident as a kind of list, but evident also is the formal effort to elucidate various “voices” of the

stream, and the push to conclude with a resolution and a narrative finale. The insight into the linguistic, speaking quality of the water has survived into the final version, but the sound of the water has become representative of one aspect of the poet's mental state. One line has survived entire (line 2). One phrase has survived (*sibilant and plosive*). The list has been abandoned in favour of a developed story line with episodes, and a stanza structure. The Roundhouse itself has manifested, as the refuge from the stream's turbulence, instead of being only implied (*this mountain home*). Characteristic of my poetry are the effort to describe in powerful, accurate detail, and to evoke the sound-world of the place by word-sounds and rhythms, which also evoke the moods (as they shift and change) of the poet. I include version 20 for a glimpse of the process after six months of constant revision.

The alliterative structure of each line is well developed and deliberate in this poem. The dynamic rhythmic drive of the poem is largely due to this feature. It is worth noting that any vowel is considered (in the medieval poems) to be alliterating with any other, and sometimes with h and y also. I have made use of this permission occasionally.

Line 1: *Cae... cascade; Mabon... maul...* (Moss line 2).

Line 2: *wetted... welted; slate... (slip line 3)*

Line 3: *tripped... turns* (though I acknowledge this as an imperfect alliteration: 'tr' with 't'); *loops... lost*. There is also assonance with 'ip' sounds.

Line 4: *Haggle... half*

Line 5: *Spill... spit* (and the 's' and the 'p' used separately in *sibilant, plosive*)

Line 6: *Bursts... bubbling; froth... frayed*

Lines 7 – 10: *step... stooped... stone... Stand*

I will not elaborate further, but the poem uses sound advisedly to mimic the poet's emotional state of mind, but at a deeper level to mimic the dynamic power of words to baffle, mesmerise, energise and destabilise the poet's mind, leading to a vibrant encounter with the creative force itself.

The poems of the collection are presented as the best of an output of some three hundred poems in six years. I have looked for certain qualities in making the selection, such as compression, lucidity, force, elegance, clarity, and vividness, because these seem characteristic of my work. As this is the first time I have tried to select poems for a collection, the identification of themes has been a kind of revelation: *so this is what interests me!* The themes came down to five separate groups: *The World in Spin*, *Nightmares and Puzzles*, *Movements in Time*, *To his Daughter in Absence*, and *Glory*. The personal and the personally revelatory are the material I work upon and through – nature, fate, introspection, love, time passing, intense or ecstatic states of awareness.

# Finding Words

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# Prelude

***Qualities of Being***

Body is not matter, flesh and blood, bones.  
Body is not what lies underneath clothing.  
Body is not sex, or hunger, or vitamins and iron.  
Body is not yours to see, or touch, possess or inhabit.

*For the first-best things, there are no words.*  
*For the second-best things, only words that stumble.*  
The skin has no boundary. I am part of what surrounds me.  
Sometimes I am frightened out of my skin.

My body has no shadow: love does not know fear.  
There are moments – graces, if you like –  
When fear turns into love. Whole, and instantaneous,  
And complete. My body swims in love.

***Hunger for Words****for Kim*

Hungry for words. Mute spiral  
Of Christmas tree lights, a spell.

Hungry for words. Sharp flames  
Cut into the chimney's throat.

Hungry for words. Light scarce,  
Night a black bone for hunting dogs.

Hungry for words. – Your shining voice,  
Pilgrim and shaman in the shivering winter.

Hungry for words. Raw, ragged hearts  
Spin a web of fire.

***Writing Joy****for John Clare*

Shadows of July fall sharp, then blur.  
The words I write, and the years  
Come in and out of focus.

Love, or regret? Corn marigolds, the first courgette.  
A pair of white butterflies takes wing.  
A blackbird see-saws off the elder branch.

Raindrops touch down, each as small as a full-stop,  
Annotate my page, dim out the lights,  
Make blue music on the strung lines.

Longing. Grey lavender, with inhalations of violet,  
Pink starburst chive, the faceted shine of water  
In fragments, deep in striated indigo trumpets.

Rain-bearer wind shifts further west: I shelter  
In the doorway, as John Clare held out under bushes,  
Nursing the words from a drenching.

All the while, wild rhymes  
Rooted through the mazy neurons,  
Nerved him for joy.

# **The World in Spin**

## **Chalk**

Under my feet energy ripples through chalk.  
 Matter meets my stride, at every step  
 Hammers home my presence, sustains my every move.  
 The whole earth echoes me like a bell.

Beautiful, that chalk smell, that sea resonance.  
 Years, by the million, crumble at my touch,  
 Between thumb and forefinger, powder white.  
 On the surface of my skin – a million years.

I am not known to myself, under this name,  
 At this point in Woodingdean, on the Sussex Downs,  
 As Jupiter turns into light, and a new moon sickles the west:  
 Night falls softly upon this page, upon knowing.

We do not know what we know.  
 In our heads, all remains completely clear.  
 But in my heart a string is lodged under tension,  
 And the full length vibrates in chalk.

I cannot tell you what that might mean,  
 But I can feel the drag of waves, of molecules,  
 Of salt, and shells, and the moon,  
 And the crushing weight of millions of summers.

Up through chalk, through the soles of my feet,  
 Into and out through the crown of my head,  
 Past Jupiter, to the rim of the universe,  
 This single instant echoes out and back.

Chalk: the world in spin, stars and wanderers,  
 Blood and bone standing on the Sussex Downs,  
 Salt, shells, new leaves, daylight at the edge,  
 And the flow of May flowering in all I know.

## Three Tree Poems

*Written to celebrate old specimen trees on Sussex University campus, February 2011.  
Tree survey numbers: Beech 271, Ash 278, Monterey Cypress 918*

### Beech

With a timber-man's eye, your stem is clean, productive,  
Eighteen feet of clear growth, before complications.  
But the twists tangle me, the turns entrance me,  
That bunched, muscular stance, that fight-or-flight alertness.

You lean, a little to the west, branches looking south,  
Sinuous as lightning strike, blacker than the eye-dazzle  
After-shock of brilliance: a break-dance rhythm,  
Lift, deflection, whiplash-twist of branch-wood.

As always for me, so now: beech limbs flow  
As if on silk sheets, sensuous abandon of arms, wrists,  
The jazz of the way your fingers improvise, energise,  
Arouse, and every bud nuzzles up, breathless.

### Ash Father

Name for an enigma: *Fraxinus excelsior*.  
Your bole, the bundled heart-sinews,  
Nine twisted stems that writhe in you,  
An inscape of time.

The *lacunae* in your text instruct me.  
Two mighty arms missing, and a third, at ground level,  
Would have doubled you, *excelsior*,  
Each in its own right a tree.

I imagine the coppice stump, your father's shadow,  
In a landscape of other times. Lying vertical, tree rings,  
Circle after circle of synergies,  
And our mere lives subordinate.

My arms, flung wide, would not half-way hold you,  
Muse, old man, riddle and root of time.

## Monterey Cypresses

Seven Cypresses, green and black daubs,  
Sisters, angular dames, upthrust and bony,  
Sewn into the corner of a car park, dramatic, decorative,  
– A dark hint of kelp, Pacific rollers, Monterey mists.

You are careless of our old-world commoners, only weeds,  
Our poisonless ivy, impertinent elder, false sycamore.  
Disdainful, almost, you maintain that certain visibility,  
Haughty seaward elevations, Big Sur vibrations.

You lean to look across, at the low swell of chalk hills,  
Purple feathering of leafless crests, orange lift of larch woods,  
And find, marooned on a mudflat of fog and thin trees,  
The *I Ching* ideogram of a ghostly Cedar of Lebanon.

I sense, in the moody style of you, the twist of your stems,  
An ache for the white sands of Carmel, sea mists, the salt-fretted light.



***Stoke Park Wood, Northants***

The light in here is haunted.  
Midge light. Moss light.  
Miasmic acid smell, swamp litter.

Bark of Scots Pine is sweated, damp.  
Rigid stems root deep,  
Twig tips sky surfing.

On tree boles, phosphoric, sun-shafts  
Flare and fade. Over-clouds topple,  
Spill, shift in soft air.

Time burns. For an instant, ash leaves  
Print on my white page  
Primary codes, exit visas, love notes.

***Formal Gardens***

*Launde Abbey, Rutland*

At clipped lawn's edge, incendiary flush of autumn,  
– A single bush goes up in flame, pale leaves peachy,  
Dusk-lemon, dashed-orange flakes, flare of fire-petals.

But green has a leached look, there is a limpness  
In the lift and sway of loaded branches,  
A thinning flourish to the whole-tree tremble.

I wonder at this late summer line-up, parade of beauties,  
The fading vision of cupped opulence.

I blend words, opaque and full, testing aromas,  
A pungent bouquet that hides what rots away.

***Dawn-break under a Silver Gibbous Moon***

A family group of Great Tits fusses through hedges,  
Delicately inspects yellow leaves, their dog-eared margins,  
Shady undersides, the join of stem and stalk.

They flit from cherry branch to rambling rose,  
Dizzy with dew, with pin-prick stipples of sky,  
Corkscrew flyers, swaying on flimsy seedheads.

I, time-lapse poet, register their turns  
And miss their voids, how water-drops  
Tinge the swing back of a cypress twig.

## ***Sound Totems***

A wheel of homing pigeons  
Pivots around tall poplars,  
Plunges out of sight.

Ice-white seagull looms in,  
Kicks down the breeze,  
Makes landfall on neighbour's roof-ridge.

Jay, burly on elder twig,  
Roughs up his crest, bullies through,  
Blasts with hammer-drill wings.

Sudden thrush, four-square, thrusts out  
Buff velvet chest full of eyes,  
Goes, ghost-quick.

Black-coat crows loaf around,  
Meet by chance at odd corners of sky,  
Swap passwords, move on.

Blue tits flit, chase, chivvy,  
Slip through gaps, sit six on the wires  
Then one, a vanishing chord.

Then the moment of no one,  
Of air haunted with flutings,  
    Double-notes, chucklings, slides,  
        Queries, rasps, tinklings,

Eyries and nests of noise,  
Of life and other-life,  
Totems for a shaman's dance,  
    For trance,  
        For silence.

***Waunfawr***

Moel Eilio and Mynydd Mawr, guardians,  
 Rise out of low cloud. Afon Gwyrfaï hides from me.  
 Tros-y-gol,  
     black bruise of spruce,  
         breathes out mist.

In white sighs, aureoles of soaked air,  
 Shredded silk tendrils on leaden uplifts,  
 I am wreathed  
     in winding sheets  
         of rain.

Closer, Pentre'r-Waun disappears.  
 Soft, clinging wave drowns hedgerows, homesteads,  
 The Parc, Plas Gwyrfaï,  
     Tyddyn-Sir-Hugh,  
         all lost.

Now sun, untidy bundle of gleams,  
 Glimmers and pools over Bryn Gloch,  
 Breaks on farm tracks,  
     gates, up the hillside,  
         scatters

Shines in sheer rocks, as far as Tyddyn Bach.  
 I am lit by bare peaks,  
     stretch out,  
         high as mountains.

*Note: Waunfawr pronounced "Wine-vow-rr"*

***The Startled Time***

*Above Llyn Padarn, opposite Llanberis*

Lying back on leaf litter  
Slanted slate under arched spine,

A new-born soul looks up.  
Sky is pale, pink on streaked grey.

He does not know the names of trees  
That antler out of the mountain's brow

Or speech of lake's lapping, honk of geese,  
Or startle of blue tit,

Only fronds of heather, the feather  
Of mountain ash, black fur of pine,

Cock crowned with crowing,  
The lake's bright lift and fall

So right. So right. The time so right.

***The Roundhouse by Afon Fachwen***

*At Cae Mabon, where the Fachwen flows into Llyn Padarn*

Cae Mabon stream, cascader, maul of rope,  
Moss green wetted to black, welted to slate,  
I am tripped in your slip-loops, lost in your turns,

Haggle of tongue-root vowels, half-known,  
Spill of spit-words, sibilant, plosive,  
Bursts of froth, bubbling frayed whispers,

– Dazed, out of your wound-maze, I step-dance,  
Smoke-led to sky-cone thatch, stooped threshold,  
To stone Roundhouse,

Stand at bay, at arch-frame gateway,  
Finding coiled fire-eyes, snake-rune spirals,  
Myself – in the circle of men's eyes.

***Scrapings***

Descending to depths, December night,  
Hearthfire dimmed, dead weight of space  
Over the chimney edge leans against my heart.

I scrape from white ash black charred rubies,  
Heap slivers and scraps, axe-mauled,  
Lay kindling lightly on embers.

Grey smoke sifts fractions of grief. Flame  
Cracks open, splits threaded fibres, taps through  
Baulks and bones of foundered trees.



# **Nightmares and Puzzles**

***The Heart***

Every morning, I go hunting for my heart.  
It is straying, never in bed with me,  
Often pressed flat against a wall,  
Shivering in the warmest of days.  
I can find it out on the street, kitted up for a mountain hike,  
Trembling, as a seagull's wing balances on sunlight.  
Once, I found it in a filthy cellar, curled among bricks  
Under splintered wood, bright eyes focused on the dark.  
Not much I can say, scooping it up,  
Crying its familiar, thin scream,  
Rigid in my clumsy hands:  
Not much I can do, but put it back inside,  
Listen out for signs of distress, as I go about my day,  
Settle for the night, knowing I will lose it again.

***Severe Gale***

They say that when a lion takes you, it is not dread  
Or fear, you feel, but exaltation.

Tonight, the darkness is a cliff face,  
A roar shudders the world's four corners.

The wall behind my head is howling,  
The beech tree contorted with the same tune,

But in my room a candle,  
Its flame does not flicker or move.

***After Strange Dreams***

I made you my mother, you turned me to others,  
That stallion fire stripped out, confined.

I made you my wife, you turned and let me go.  
A wounded deer still rips through thickets of years.

I made you my masters, now you have let me go.  
A whipped cur slips his leash.

I made you my sons, you turn to tomorrow.  
An old fox with old scars laps secret springs.

I made you my daughter, they said you let me go.  
In mist, in moonlit tree tops, an owl screams.

I made you my Goddess, still you turn as you always do,  
A snake of fire holds up its brilliant head.

***After Nightmares***

Their faces persist over time, the angels of fear,  
Their eyes of cloudless blue, their claws of pale steel.  
They stand in the shadows of the years, they do not pass,  
Their footsteps echo on metal, empty minutes, months.  
I am held in their steady gaze, hard stares,  
Drink the clear liquid of inhuman tears,  
Float in a Petri-dish, plastic, oceanic.  
Each second subdivides my original sin.  
I cannot grasp their purpose, grab only shards,  
Linger over bruises, blows, thin scars  
From razor blades sewn into borders of lace.  
In the dim light that breaks me out  
I draw breath, sense blood, retch thoughts.

***Incident***

*Into the halls of Dis* I thought.

Dark the overarch on Winterbourne Hollow  
And I wound the window down

And a wren

Reeled its fiery premonitions  
Into the pulse of my blood

And Mozart's crystalline finale played

And I arrived home  
Not knowing where I was.

## ***Meditations: April***

### **I**

Copper beech flushes red,  
As April's evening light  
Armours my soul with love.

A strange love, with unreadiness  
And the fall of all that is unsaid  
Replete. I am choking

With the lingering of desires.  
The sun behind cloud sucks in heat.  
A night wind lies at my neck.

### **II**

I am writing my last words:  
This presence laid against that absence,  
This unknowing marking down that unknown,  
This prime moment annihilating that duration.

I am pinned to the four directions,  
A breathing mandala, incomplete  
Without the final Amen,  
The triumph of what I could not know.

Harried by untruth, weighed down  
By mistakes: life insists on the next breath.  
A blackbird sings his last song.  
It is spring.

### **III**

Grey clouds, on the move, carry dark moods  
And the afterglow of heat. April ruffles my hair.  
Her body's warmth lies on my fore-arm

And the back of my hand.  
I tighten my eyes in her radiance.  
The wind in young birch, in evergreen cypress,

In bamboo canes, and wind-stunted ilex  
Sounds a chalice for thought.  
From it I am sipping, at intervals, with care.

***Turning***

Gulls in the grey dawn  
    Clamour, white Cossack cavalry  
Out-riding light, outstretched sabres  
    Of their throats saluting sunrise,  
Quickening, life at the gallop,  
    Maelstrom at the throat of morning.

I feel the wind, strain for light  
    Feast on sound, feather out  
My soul for the swift turn  
    Of seagull stallions, racing round my heart.



## Poets

*Poets are dreamers*, an old man said today,  
And I said, *I know, I am one*. And we fell silent.  
Not that I dream the dreams – no, never once  
For they always dream me  
In the silences, in the falling quiet between words,  
Between high mountains of soul.

A dreamer comes walking down those paths,  
Those glances, those openings of the heart,  
Sayings and non-sayings and wounds,  
Walking down the drawn breath, the half-held sigh,  
The love stories that never happened, took flight  
In the thin air of fate, or fell from dazzling heights.

Still the dreamer comes walking, down the road,  
Down sunken lanes and hollow crossroads,  
By trees of ancient memory and anguish, by the brutal  
Toll of the world, its promises, its betrothals  
And betrayings, the bearing of forbidden fruit  
And burials of consequences.

Yes, the dreamer dreams it all,  
And knows the reason for the crying,  
And never fails the cry.

***Rainbow****for Barbara*

You have come to bless my room, this transit hub,  
The untidy table, ragged suitcases and books,  
This cramped cabin in steerage, my crash pad.

A single man's single room, a whole life  
Stampeded between four walls, chaotic hoof-mill,  
Stilled, in the settled fashion of your passing.

Deity of down-and-outs, my figurehead, my mermaid,  
Friend at the end of the line, my staggering leap,  
My rainbow, my ring of steel, my refuge.

***Attentions of Love****for Barbara*

The way when you come to me,  
Your chin lifts, shoulders brace back,  
Your eyes clarify.

The way when our bodies fold,  
The space between us blurs and deepens,  
The air around us holds firm.

The way when we touch, we outline  
Shapes and shadows on a starchart,  
Eyes open and full of light.

## ***The Guiding Voice***

*for Jonathan*

If I could speak to you as a young father might,  
Holding you on my knee, head balanced on my hand,

If I could say to you again, your soul in your eyes,  
Summer touching your face for the first time,

If I could say to you how the world was born new  
With you, in that restless, endless time,

If I could speak, reaching beyond the passing years,  
To find you listening in that wise, warm way you have,

Then you would know, and I would know,  
How a son might hear, in a father's way,

The freedom of the years of grace  
You have given me.

***To Absolve Her Grief***

My hand on the pillow next to me,  
A gardener's sun-mellowed brown  
On the white, in the dim light  
Is stroking my first wife's shoulder.

I can feel the curve of her flesh,  
My fingers following the joined bones,  
My palm cupped into her young skin,  
Trying to find out where is her pain.

In the space between us, in that caress,  
In the twenty separated years that make up a sigh,  
I reach out. A hand rests on the pillow  
Next to me, all its bones on fire.

***Orpheus Attentive***

Stillness of the heart strung taut,  
The hand of the harpist awaits time.  
The lips of the goddess are lissom, tender:

Aphrodite, perhaps, provocative on her ocean shell,  
Or Mary, gateway to a million pure stars,  
Or grey-eyed Eurydice, grieving no more.

How far, in the half-beat of that upstroke, holding  
Nothing, the full tide of *now*  
Racing in his blood

– How far, within his in-drawn breath,  
Bright lust and longing, would hang  
Upon his fingers the fatal downswing of love?

***Late Afternoon, Good Friday***

Sunlight aligns with the railway cutting,  
Light stripped down to a sign: I look up  
To fresh stumps, the steep bank scraped bare,  
Blotched moss, ivy scree, grey chalk.

Nothing moves but a March wind,  
Brother ice from the north;  
Nothing moves, but sister celandine's  
Blink and break of butter yellow.

Nothing shivers but blanched grass,  
Tilted crazy on tipped-up slopes,  
By the steel trackway that no one walks,  
Baulks of timber buried flush in shingle.

Early spring air is too cold for dust motes  
Or insect clouds, to mark the line of shadow  
That falls, sheer, on earth's opened face:  
I look up, thinking to see some sign of you.

***Making Sense of It***

Running a finger down the join,  
Yesterday with today, this year with next,  
One marriage with another, kith and kin,  
Half-siblings, and other fractions of inheritance.

Running a finger down the join,  
Fifty three years inside the same skin,  
A surface swept by storms,  
And the soul a veil within a veil.

Running a finger down the join,  
No thicker than this paper, but enough  
That these pen-strokes will never penetrate,  
And these words must carry by heartbeats.

Forcing love to come into focus,  
Lines not contrary but incomplete, off-set,  
A crystal on a thread, or raindrop on a window pane,  
Detail catching on fine runs of light.

Forcing love to come into focus,  
A list of names inscribed with numb fingers,  
Or chiselled into the bone of history,  
Stories in a childish script, full of ciphers.

Forcing love to come into focus,  
A fuse whose slow-burn stutters into sparks,  
A slash of white light in a time-lapse flash,  
Too small to reckon, a join too nearly smooth to know.



**Grief**

I was thinking about grief – wondering about you.  
Not trusting, necessarily, either you or me.  
I was listening to the beech tree, at my bedroom window,  
Singing the white bone wind, every leaf a note.  
Deep fog roughens through the stiffened stems,  
And it seems there is no more time for love, or summer.

I was wondering about love – thinking about you.  
Not believing, necessarily, how it comes; or goes.  
I was watching woven droplets slant down the pane,  
Spun off the leaf-tips, the tree a loom of moistened light.  
Down at the buried heart, chalk entwines the roots of an autumn gale,  
And it seems that even grief can be written into the rock of things.

I was thinking about love – wondering about grief.  
Not knowing, necessarily, whether it's you, or me.  
I was leaning towards the window, to the clean whistle of the wind,  
To the white streaming fog and the distilled bronzing of green.  
Dimly, in the ache of its speaking, the tree marks itself out,  
And it seems that the time may be turning to love, leaf-fall, letting go.

## **Shive Lights**

*Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, / wherever an elm arches,  
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long / lashes lace, lance, and pair.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire  
and of the comfort of the Resurrection"

### **I**

I stumbled on words,  
Now they smoulder in my head.  
Shive lights, omens, shadows,  
A twist of air, dream of waking.  
They flit without weight,  
Buoyed on a viewless wind.  
Viscous, pulling back,  
– A tight horizon of thoughts.  
But shive lights touch nothing,  
Show the way in deeper.  
Self-mobile they come,  
Pressing on a thin pane,  
Single eyes, angelic,  
Untroubled grey smoke.

### **II**

The mind a transit camp,  
So many faces, so many foreigners.  
Each thought has its own story,  
Its own way of telling.  
Who makes the journey marks the way,  
Hoping for return.  
Yet no one passes more than once,  
And the music sounds in different moods.  
Some walk about in the light,  
Others keep their eyes hooded.  
I dare not look them in the face:  
It might be better if one of us were dead.  
Or never had been born:  
Nameless, a shive light amongst strangers.

### III

Votive lights. Small circles of prayer.  
 Wistful notes to the unseen.  
 But shive lights are stronger:  
 In the dark, less prone to expire.  
 Gathered, and muscular,  
 They make their point.  
 August gently shortens our days,  
 Light draws down to a late rose.  
 Grey and cool between wet leaves,  
 The muttered offerings, a few memories.  
 Shive lights dance on clock hands,  
 Wavering and waning as the hours pass.  
 Persistent, they reflect on time,  
 Quietly beg forgiveness.

### IV

– All the ways a star can be,  
 Milky Way, Hunter, Pole Star.  
 But shive lights don't have names,  
 Are not located in time.  
 On the shift and slip of a woman's skin  
 I have seen the glow,  
 In the vertical shutters of a cat's eye  
 The aura of a need to kill.  
 Shive lights leave prints,  
 Shape soil under foot,  
 Set pebbles falling.  
 Each mark a clue,  
 Every blink an absence,  
 And a scent of flesh.

## V

One comes with a gift  
 In the night, a voice of leaves.  
 Shive lights pour through branches,  
 Telling stories of darkness and rain.  
 They can change. One turns light,  
 Unsteady flare over trenches.  
 Long lines of men,  
 Sick, blinded, drowning.  
 Shive lights have tap roots,  
 Draw down to death's ferment,  
 A thin dark layer of dreaming.  
 They lie on my skin,  
 A lustre of veins and fine lines,  
 Holding my father's fountain pen.

## VI

Mountain winds are full of them.  
 Shive lights align with stone,  
 Height, long sight, falling.  
 They have tools for shaping.  
 They measure out the stride of a man,  
 Marks on the earth, signs of leaving.  
 On a bare pine table, the spoor of trees,  
 Sacred knots and flowing lines.  
 Ready for journeys, restless,  
 A roaming of shive lights as dawn comes,  
 Slow cascade of sky in tree tops.  
 White powder ash in the bed of a fire  
 Hides them, opened by rake of heat on the face,  
 Hissing with new smoke and steam.

# Movements in Time

## ***In Memoriam***

*Lucy Winifred Bond, aged 32, died 7<sup>th</sup> August 1943 on board S.S. Umvuma, outside Port Louis, Mauritius*

*George Bond, aged 66, born 13<sup>th</sup> December 1900, died 12<sup>th</sup> July 1967, Whyteleafe, Surrey*

*Amy Grace Bond, born 25<sup>th</sup> September 1995, Sheffield*

### **I**

#### **7th August 1943**

Twenty degrees south, fifty seven degrees east,  
The rusting *Umvuma*, steam freighter, four thousand tons,  
Bearing east on a sunlit morning, in sight of harbour.

U-Boat 181, stern tube, standard G7e torpedo,  
Its white trail, a text-book execution,  
Cuts into the line of the ship, at nine sixteen.

Returning from Durban, a young woman alone, Lucy.  
Eighty-nine, including the master, brought safe to Port Louis  
By the salvage tug, *Maurice*. You were lost, your name not listed.

### **II**

#### **Lucy Bond**

My father at the quayside, powerless. Grief passes down.  
I pace the decks, feel the pulse of steam turbines,  
Racing for any sign of you, as the ship staggers.

Were you caught in the flames? Trapped in your quarters?  
Lost below decks, in corridors behind steel doors?  
Sucked down by the back-tow, the pull of her sinking?

I hear your voice, sixty years on, as he could not.  
I know this moment, yours, and not in time,  
Know that I'm far too late to take your hand in mine.

### III

#### Beyond

I stare and stare at this empty place, stunned.  
Here you are, more alive as every wave brings you in,  
Your laughter slipping out between so many stars.

You cock your eyebrow at me, knowing my look,  
My stance, my father's name in my eyes,  
The wide horizon-watch, that never left his.

I am his child, the son you never bore,  
Beyond the fathoms and the miles, the circles of the years,  
An open window between you both, a witness, a word.

### IV

#### Whyteleafe, 12<sup>th</sup> July 1967

Half of him is dead, a door has closed.  
Flesh cools, and a sense of someone there  
Shadows out, distant and dim.

Words dovetail for the walls of a dam,  
Reservoir too deep for sunlight, a grave  
Of regrets, ready for a dying man.

His wife's hands float free in that prism.  
Her face sinks deep in that ocean.  
Her eyes shine up through fire and salt.

### V

#### Contact Centre, 2003

A cut of fate, carelessness, or family curse?  
All trace of the first mistake, if any, grows faint,  
As fast as the children of chaos multiply.

He brings wheat flour, salt for blessing, stirs sugar  
With yeast, in water that is blood-warm, to mix  
Dough for the kneading, proving, leaving.

Seven years old, but when the doors close, she is gone:  
Two hundred miles away, he breaks bread alone.  
Bleak, his father's eyes, one hand on the butt of a pistol.

**VI****Sightings**

Younger than Amy is now, as winter wore on,  
I scraped up flakes of coal by the bunkers,  
Fed them to a fire that could not bring Lucy back.

My father, dying, sat quietly and did not die.  
Love burned steady as the flames slowly failed.  
The child at his knee felt the pulse of the cruel sea.

I sensed her presence there, with a boy's clear sight.  
Now words seal up the dam wall, six years or sixty gone,  
Light and love, Lucy and Amy, hand in hand.



***On an old Photograph of Himself***

A young man waits in his mother's sitting room,  
On the morning of his wedding day.  
He is looking within, his whole life before him,  
And he is willing it to be right.

The years have fallen one by one, since then.  
In the grate beside me small sticks hiss,  
Smoke thins up into the dark chimney,  
Blows away.

In the ember bed, red afterglow,  
In the faded twigs fusing into steam,  
Flame twitches, takes hold, spits into fire,  
A blaze that ignites across then and now.

I wish I could reach out my hand to him,  
(Its scars and lines he would not recognise)  
– And let him know, as far as I can see,  
That all his mistakes were the right ones.

***Autumnal***

*i.m. Jerome Patrick Vitoria*

I breathe deep, under a September sky.  
Birch plume, spangled yellow, gold, green,  
Shimmers grief-eyed when brief gusts cascade,  
Each leaf a thrill, a twist on the air.

The bright days have fluttered and fallen away.  
Still, forty years do not pass unchallenged, or change  
The way you stood, the plume of your hair,  
On the mountain in morning's sunlight – blood-bronze, brilliant.

***Staring Out***

*For Jerome, Snowdon 1971*

I lift my eyes to the line of ash trees, angels,  
Their dark cloaks feather-pointed in the pure light.  
It is dawn, October, yet this summer-like trance  
Is clear of heat, all trace of pain.

The sun ignites, needle-darts pierce, prickle,  
Crevices in the branches crack, brilliant  
Silt of diamond on sentinel trees,  
An honour guard marked with white flame.

I look out to the west, watch the flicker,  
Ripple, blink, rounding an abyss – not birds of omen,  
Not black crow, not trailing magpie – but homing pigeons,  
Pink wing-scatter, circles of trembling life.

And in my gaze, on a mountain top, colossal,  
A young man sits under the sun, beyond us all.

***Time's Usages***

A farthing, proud as a wren, paid down rightly,  
Stands promissory: my childhood's legal tender.  
Laid under my tongue, for Charon to find,  
Its copper-brown taste unlocks old sinews.

Primed by the long beams of September,  
By weightless rememberings,  
By the track of the balance arm, past and back  
To the zero point, to something cancelled,

I print with care the letters of a name  
— More care than moonlight makes with leaves —  
I chisel the words for a testament,  
Shaped out in gold on shining stone.

Love is not measured, or made for return;  
Opens the paradise gate, never looks back.

# **To his Daughter in Absence**

***Not Thinking of You***

Sunlight and sea breeze lie light on leaves,  
    And I do not think of you;  
Seagulls, swifts and starlings bless the blue sky,  
    And I do not look for you;  
Purple *nicotiana*, pink and blue cornflower,  
    I do not name them for you;  
Evening glow ebbs out of everything,  
    But I am not thinking of you.

***The Smile of You***

I saw the sunlight flood, first flush,  
The rush of rapeseed in May.

I saw seeded fire spun into shawls,  
Flung over chalk's bare shoulders.

I saw greetings in greendark fields,  
Bright faces opened to the brilliant sky.

I saw billows and shoals shaping the land,  
Gold sprays curling on the curved hills.

– I saw, and spoke it to you, not thinking:  
And in the golden smiles, warm sun washes,

The rush of you, the running feet,  
The flood and smile of you – almost there.

***Watching Fireworks without You***

I never meant to miss you so much,  
I did not know I could fall so far.  
Standing in the cool blue and pink of waking,  
Hearing the torn cry of the seagull.

I did not know how dark, how velvet and deep,  
The falling, as I watched bright stars that night  
Rise, the silver fluted columns of fire, the ruby rain,  
The knowing I could not catch you, or hold the night for you.

I did not know your face, in photographs, in the fog of years,  
Would pull and pull, that the gravity of eyes  
So arrowed in time, so centred, so love-formed, would pull  
My heart, crying, out of me into the falling dark.



***The Ghost Child***

No, I don't believe you are gone, though the wall  
Is blank where your picture blinded me,  
And morning does not move me from the blaze of night.

Perhaps your heart is beating strong and true,  
Though I cannot stroke your hair, restrain the tears,  
Stare into your face, or touch your fingertips.

Reach out your hand to me in a ghostly way.  
Let your gentle gesture trace my features, track my fears,  
As I would have wished, and done for you.

## ***On the Keenness of Hope***

Nostalgia is for those who cannot remember.  
*Then is now* as Bunting wrote,  
Speaking the only truth that matters.

The notion of time as sequence is a lie.  
Stories are lies, stirring the waters deliberately.  
Being someone is a lie, for I am only one of us.

A rain-mass of black overlines the bright horizon.  
Today, my beech tree speaks with an east wind dialect,  
At its heart a harp singing on its own.

In the forest of my youth, the old men said  
*Let the reaphook rust first,*  
*Whet it late, for a keener cut.*

Eleven years have rusted me  
Since you were born; hope outruns everything  
As you, dear child, will me.

***Walking to the Lost Village***

By the margins of fields I follow,  
By hillside contour and hidden stile  
A road that is not there.

My path is an angled play of arcs  
Through time. Chalk valleys flex and roll.  
The sun shifts and tracks across my shoulders.

On the ash tree's lips, *autumn*.  
By hawthorn, elder, apple, plum,  
I pause, tell over my pilgrim beads.

In the lost chapel, I chant your name out loud.  
Late sun lays a leaf of gold  
Across my right cheek.

A sea breeze gusts and steadies.  
I imagine stone walls, lancet windows, listen  
For the echo of your footsteps, following.

***Prayer for a Child***

There is nothing to be afraid of.  
Silent day has followed silent day,  
Still mists, and midwinter slate smoke.

Now the beech tree murmurs, low notes  
Stroked through tough heart strings,  
First stirrings of a far-away storm.

One tree touches the sky's endless sigh:  
There is nothing to be afraid of.

Let the dark unfold in your heart.  
To close your eyes will do no harm:  
Night's angelic wings bring dreams.

There are voices you cannot hear,  
Unseen guides that pray your every sigh.  
Let the dark unfold in your heart.

***The Catch of Nothing***

We were not meant to be nothing.  
You tore through me like an arrow,  
A blade, a broken shell, crashing in on the tide.

Your name is written in my bones,  
In my blood, in the undertow  
That tastes of nothing.

This love I devote to nothing.  
You are my nil desire, my zero sum,  
My every breath.

***Poppies on the Falmer Road***

The poppies have come early this year. Carmine  
This drift on the field edge, as I drive  
Over the high Downs, drunk with distance.  
The poppies have come early, pinpricks,  
A rush of blood, a bruise on the soft-bladed wheat,  
Inferno in the green stems, fiercer than a million  
Setting suns. The poppies have come, simple  
In the sunlight shades, earth weavings, tree leafings,  
The gold glow of the closeness of summer. Poppies  
That shock and stop sight, well up in sobs, a mob,  
Ravenous red hail, a thrust that bursts  
My heart, catches my breath, crushes  
And rips me against the rock of missing you.

***A Name in the Snow***

A startle comes, in the dream of falling asleep,  
Now and then, racing heart, a prickling of heat,  
A nameless dread that drains away unseen.

They say the heart forgets, sometimes, misses its beat,  
Lets death slip in, one icy finger raised,  
Until a great shudder of breath blows it away.

I saw her name in the snow-blindness,  
As we climbed Kingston Ridge by the steep bluff,  
Kicking our own steps into the dry crystals,

As the wind froze lips, flamed blood in our cheeks,  
Fanned ice dervishes on the hill's shoulder,  
Slivers flicking into our shocked faces.

I saw the letters exposed, picked out  
By grass tips over-topped by driven snow,

The slanted verticals of her name,  
Scratched in blue shadow.

# Glory



***There are no Clocks in Heaven***

The breeze at my window nudges beech twigs.  
Morning nestles in my cheek with a cool kiss  
And I know that summer has passed its peak.

Through massed shimmer of glossy leaves,  
The wind, elemental, without motion,  
Hisses with the sway of the tree.

Leaves, sky, beech tree, a sigh  
Angelic, invoke a prime word, a *let it be*:  
Morning and evening, the first day.

***Abbey Dore***

*On staying in the Pavilion, at White Castle, Abbey Dore*

In the fold upon fold of watchtower hills,  
In the pleats and plays of late summer fields,

One beacon rose of billowed gold.  
Sentinel buds stand out, rain settles in,

Glosses of light on green leaves  
Palm-up to the pin-moist air.

The flower centres my seeing,  
Encircles my sitting still.

Branches clasp the sky in prayer,  
Hold clouds in a halo of light.

Ash tree asks, what can be seen?  
Yellow rose asks, what can be known?

They signal to the tower, to Abbey's pink stone,  
Word of this wonder, this appearing,

The spiral soul of the yellow rose.

## ***Yew Tree at Partrishow***

*At the Church of Merthyr Issui*

Yew tree spires up in pale sun, drinks darkness,  
A cavern where stud berries ember night's longings.  
Chapel gleams through changing light,  
Pink stone almost violet, grey lichen veils, white lace,

Holds fast to its haven words, its hope-light,  
As hazels tint from dust green to yellow,  
Hawthorn to scarlet smoke, field maple to fire feathers,  
And ash into angel wings, in a blue processional.

The church yearns, these hewn stones hum, chant,  
A benediction sluices from its roof-tiles, radiates  
On blackbird's trill, buzzard's mew,  
Scuffle of the nuthatch, tuning this presence,

The flitter of wren's wings under briar,  
The stretch and tumble of sun-soaking stone,  
Carries it, carols it, this light which sings,  
This brightness in the inside spilling out

Into the careful steps of the couple holding hands,  
Into the lettered memory of little Thomas, aged nine,  
Into the silence of those lying at my feet,  
And we who still stand, drinking sunlight.

***Rifts of Glory***

*Church of St Issui, Patricio*

Into the crook of the road,  
Sunlight falls steeply, turns  
On a flare of hazel, field maple, ash.

In its corner, the Holy Well cups  
And calls out the voices of the stream,  
Cold flowing vowels and the cluck of stones.

We climb the straight path, dark under trees,  
Come to church, its perch on the steep valley  
Guarded by gravestones, laid out in light.

Fine sunlight drips through narrow  
Cuts of glass, drops rifts of rainbow  
Stories and stains over stone.

Tracery of carved oak, curling leaves,  
Barrel-beamed roof, pinned and pegged,  
Sighs back to the wide created world

Glory!

***Holy Light***

The light is holy – this wind-hauled, harsh  
Tide racing, radiant with squalls of sun,  
Raked by summer heat, harried by winter.

The light is full – as leaf buds rammed tight,  
Sycamore spring-coiled, beech buds bursting,  
Woodpigeon flying full into the steep lean of air.

The light is of invisible fire, is alive,  
Blow-torch white, beside itself, ablaze with time,  
At breaking point to glory.

***Glory***

I listen to Messiaen's music, long chords held  
To limitless uplift; choral outbreaks  
Of ancient melody, jazz riffs, apsidal echoes,

Clear warbles of winged spirits, wild birds,  
Springs of thunder,  
And silence within vaults of leaping stone.

I am a student of glory in a book of glory,  
A name on a page of glory, lettered in gold,  
One pure note in the open throat of a bell.

***Orion***

I stepped out into the morning  
And there you were.  
I had no time to cry.

Rigged up and ready, reaching up,  
My heart's joy whole,  
Star-mapped and standing fair.

Pure white in the primary dark,  
Dawn's bride-ghost, sharp  
Arrow-beam, hunter's eye.

Imprint and code, precious herald,  
Harp-string's clear hum,  
Night climb to love's look-out.

Bright battle-guard, brass-burst trumpets,  
Heft of heaven,  
Laughing high and swung loose!

## Appendix

### Shadows of Taste

Taste with as many hues doth hearts engage  
 As leaves & flowers do upon natures page  
 Not mind alone the instinctive mood declares  
 But birds & flowers & insects are its heirs  
 Taste is their joyous heritage & they 5  
 All choose for joy in a peculiar way  
 Birds own it in the various spots they chuse  
 Some live content in low grass gemmed with dews  
 The yellow hammer like a tasteful guest  
 Neath picturesque green molehills makes a nest 10  
 Where oft the shepherd with unlearned ken  
 Finds strange eggs scribbled as with ink & pen  
 He looks with wonder on the learned marks  
 & calls them in his memory writing larks  
 Birds bolder winged on bushes love to be 15  
 While some choose cradles on the highest tree  
 There rocked by winds they feel no moods of fear  
 But joy their birth right lives forever near  
 & the bold eagle which mans fear enshrouds  
 Would could he lodge it house upon the clouds 20  
 While little wrens mistrusting none that come  
 In each low hovel meet a sheltered home  
 Flowers in the wisdom of creative choice  
 Seem blest with feeling & a silent voice  
 Some on the barren roads delight to bloom 25  
 & others haunt the melancholly tomb  
 Where death the blight of all finds summers hours  
 Too kind to miss him with her host of flowers  
 Some flourish in the sun & some the shade  
 Who almost in his morning smiles would fade 30  
 These in leaf darkened woods right timid stray  
 & in its green night smile their lives away  
 Others in water live & scarcely seem  
 To peep their little flowers above the stream  
 While water lilies in their glories come 35  
 & spread green isles of beauty round their home  
 All share the summers glory & its good  
 & taste of joy in each peculiar mood  
 Insects of varied taste in rapture share  
 The hey day luxuries which she comes to heir 40  
 In wild disorder various routs they run  
 In water earth still shade & busy sun  
 & in the crowd of green earths busy claims  
 They een grow nameless mid their many names  
 & man that noble insect restless man 45  
 Whose thoughts scale heaven in its mighty span



Pours forth his living soul in many a shade  
 & taste runs riot in her every grade  
 While the low herd mere savages subdued  
 With nought of feeling or of taste imbued 50  
 Pass over sweetest scenes a careless eye  
 As blank as midnight in its deepest dye  
 From these & different far in rich degrees  
 Minds spring as various as the leaves of trees  
 To follow taste & all her sweets explore 55  
 & Edens make where deserts spread before  
 In poesys spells some all their raptures find  
 & revel in the melodies of mind  
 There nature oer the soul her beauty flings  
 In all the sweets & essences of things 60  
 A face of beauty in a city crowd  
 Met – passed – & vanished like a summer cloud  
 In poesys vision more refined & fair  
 Taste reads oerjoyed & greets her image there  
 Dashes of sunshine & a page of may 65  
 Live there a whole life long one summers day  
 A blossom in its witchery of bloom  
 There gathered dwells in beauty & perfume  
 The singing bird the brook that laughs along  
 There ceaseless sing & never thirsts for song 70  
 A pleasing image to its page conferred  
 In living character & breathing word  
 Becomes a landscape heard & felt & seen  
 Sunshine & shade one harmonizing green  
 Where meads & brooks & forrests basking lie 75  
 Lasting as truth & the eternal sky  
 Thus truth to nature as the true sublime  
 Stands a mount atlas overpeering time  
 Styles may with fashions vary – tawdry chaste  
 Have had their votaries which each fancied taste 80  
 From Donns old homely gold whose broken feet  
 Jostles the readers patience from its seat  
 To Popes smooth ryhmes that regularly play  
 In musics stated periods all the way  
 That starts & closes starts again & times 85  
 Its tuning gammut true as minster chimes  
 From these old fashions stranger metres flow  
 Half prose half verse that stagger as they go  
 One line starts smooth & then for room perplext  
 Elbows along & knocks against the next 90  
 & half its neighbour where a pause marks time  
 There the clause ends what follows is for rhyme  
 Yet truth to nature will in all remain  
 As grass in winter glorifies the plain  
 & over fashions foils rise proud & high 95  
 As lights bright fountain in a cloudy sky

The man of sience in discovery's moods  
 Roams oer the furze clad heath leafburied woods  
 & by the simple brook in rapture finds  
 Treasures that wake the laugh of vulgar hinds 100  
 Who see no further in his dark employs  
 Then village childern seeking after toys  
 Their clownish hearts & ever heedless eyes  
 Find nought in nature they as wealth can prize  
 With them self interest & the thoughts of gain 105  
 Are natures beautys all beside are vain  
 But he the man of science & of taste  
 Sees wealth far richer in the worthless waste  
 Where bits of lichen & a sprig of moss  
 Will all the raptures of his mind engross 110  
 & bright winged insects on the flowers of may  
 Shine pearls too wealthy to be cast away  
 His joys run riot mid each juicy blade  
 Of grass where insects revel in the shade  
 & minds of different moods will oft condemn 115  
 His taste as cruel such the deeds to them  
 While he unconscious gibbets butterflyes  
 & strangles beetles all to make us wise  
 Tastes rainbow visions own unnumbered hues  
 & every shade its sense of taste pursues 120  
 The heedless mind may laugh the clown may stare  
 They own no soul to look for pleasure there  
 Their grosser feelings in a coarser dress  
 Mock at the wisdom which they cant possess  
 Some in recordless rapture love to breath 125  
 Natures wild Eden wood & field & heath  
 In common blades of grass his thoughts will raise  
 A world of beauty to admire & praise  
 Untill his heart oerflows with swarms of thought  
 To that great being who raised life from nought 130  
 The common weed adds graces to his mind  
 & gleams in beautys few beside may find  
 Associations sweet each object breeds  
 & fine ideas upon fancy feeds  
 He loves not flowers because they shed perfumes 135  
 Or butterflyes alone for painted plumes  
 Or birds for singing although sweet it be  
 But he doth love the wild & meadow lea  
 There hath the flower its dwelling place & there  
 The butterflye goes dancing through the air 140  
 He loves each desolate neglected spot  
 That seems in labours hurry left forgot  
 The warped & punished trunk of stunted oak  
 Freed from its bonds but by the thunder stroke  
 As cramped by straggling ribs of ivy sere 145  
 There the glad bird makes home for half the year

But take these several beings from their homes  
 Each beautiful thing a withered thought becomes  
 Association fades & like a dream  
 They are but shadows of the things they seem 150  
 Torn from their homes & happiness they stand  
 The poor dull captives of a foreign land  
 Some spruce & delicate ideas feed  
 With them disorder is an ugly weed  
 & wood & heath a wilderness of thorns 155  
 Which gardeners shears nor fashions nor adorns  
 No spots give pleasure so forlorn & bare  
 But gravel walks would work rich wonders there  
 With such wild natures beauties run to waste  
 & arts strong impulse mars the truth of taste 160  
 Such are the various moods that taste displays  
 Surrounding wisdom in concentrating rays  
 Where threads of light from one bright focus run  
 As days proud halo circles round the sun

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