

**Environment, Creativity and Culture in the Poetry of Jon Silkin and
Simon Armitage**

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Abstract

This thesis approaches the poetries of Jon Silkin and Simon Armitage from the perspective of the ecological. By this I mean that the primary focus is on the poetic encounters with environments and the complex meshwork of ‘intra-actions’ (Karen Barad) between various material, organic, human and more-than-human ‘actants’ (Bruno Latour). The stylistic differences between these two post-War British poets do not suggest them as an obvious pairing, but this thesis develops a critical methodology that sustains difference within points of correspondence. Despite the contrasts, Silkin and Armitage are brought together in this thesis under two crucial parallels. The first is that both poets demonstrate an ethically-grounded environmental consciousness, yet neither is a ‘nature poet’. In quite individual ways, each poet grapples with the difficulties of approaching the more-than-human other without recourse to oppression or hierarchy.

The second parallel is revealed by an exploration of each of the poets’ responses to catastrophes, in the past, present and future. Silkin’s experience as a Jew in twentieth-century Europe and as an observer of nuclear weapons deployment in Hiroshima and Nagasaki colour his understanding of history but also present the real possibility of such atrocities re-occurring. Armitage’s consciousness of climate change and a rapidly shifting, media-driven, consumer capitalist society produces poetry that responds to powerful environmental uncertainty. Silkin and Armitage each challenge rigid categories, such as animal/vegetable (Silkin) and life/non-life (Armitage). In both cases, the reader is engaged in the literary ecology and this presents the opportunity to develop new ethical frames and sustainable practices. The two poets’ works each reveal much about the nature of creativity and its complex, challenging relationship with environmental ethics. When brought into dialogue, the similarity and difference (which is the model of metaphor) between Silkin and Armitage is considerable.

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List of Abbreviations

I will use the following abbreviations to refer to key texts:

- CP* Jon Silkin, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner (Manchester: Carcanet & Northern House, 2015)
- Interview* Simon Armitage, Interviewed by Emma Trott, 18 January 2018
- Seeing* Simon Armitage, *Seeing Stars* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010)
- Stanza* Simon Armitage, Pip Hall and Tom Lonsdale, *Stanza Stones* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2013)

Introduction

The poetries of Jon Silkin and Simon Armitage are vastly different in style. Silkin is serious in tone, complex in syntax and vocabulary, grappling with religion and history, while Armitage is deceptively straightforward in his communication with the reader, employing dry, black and ironic humour, using colloquialisms and regional dialect to defamiliarize the commonplace. At first glance, they perhaps do not present themselves as a productive pairing for literary analysis. Similarities such as their poetic debts to Leeds and West Yorkshire, interests in teaching and non-traditional means of disseminating poetry and Leftist politics may be merely coincidences. In setting Armitage and Silkin in dialogue with each other I do not intend to write out the differences between them, but there are parallels between the poets' (respective) perceptive encounters with the more-than-human world which are revealing about an important aspect of British post-War ecopoetry. Silkin and Armitage are both sensitive to and compassionate towards living creatures, places and environments, in various projects demonstrating all the focus on the more-than-human that we find in contemporaries such as Ted Hughes and more recent poets such as Alice Oswald and Kathleen Jamie. In key works, Armitage and Silkin demonstrate environmental consciousness in interplay with themes of romantic love, domestic relationships, masculinity, culture, technology and society (to name only a few). In such poems, awareness of destructive anthropocentric practices might be only one of several concerns, while in other poems the reader might discern almost no clear trace of environmental engagement. Thus, in Silkin and Armitage I identify versions of ecopoetics in which a meshwork of ecological, political, social and imaginative concerns is evident. Both poets are highly sensitive to environment, with the gifts and anxieties that can produce, but it is by no means their only dominant concern, and, arguably, neither is it their primary one.

Armitage engages with grand philosophical questions through the minutiae and details of events, while Silkin's approach to big questions tend to take a rather different mode of enquiry. A reviewer in the *Jewish Chronicle* in 1971 reviews Silkin's *Amana Grass* as follows:

Jon Silkin is a poet who has never wasted his time and creative energy on the trivia of experience and, in his new book, “Amana Grass”, he tackles the great universal themes of love, death, time and eternity in a language that is both resonant and exact. Through this collection runs a powerful sense of the unity of creation, of animate and inanimate animal, plant and rock, phenomena and all behaviour are both what they seem to be and metaphors, and that literature which does not accede to this cannot properly be called poetry.¹

In his own paper copy of the review, Silkin has annotated the second sentence of this passage with the single word ‘good’.² Armitage, by contrast, writes about the ordinary, defamiliarized. This is a difference in style but it also fits with Ian Gregson’s account of Armitage and Glyn Maxwell as writers who ‘shift the poetic paradigm from time to space, from depth to extended surface’.³ While Silkin is preoccupied with history, from the Holocaust and First World War poets back to medieval accounts of persecution of Jews, Armitage writes about geography and contemporary events. Sometimes this draws on scientific understanding, such as his knowledge of astronomy (*CloudCuckooLand*, 1997), which is often in relation to a West Yorkshire-based bioregionalism and, increasingly, to a world under threat. Armitage’s approach to global themes is often not *direct*, though my analysis of his work in Chapters 3 and 4 will cohere with Gregson’s assertion that Armitage ‘engages fully with the threats to nature and the consequent challenges with which all ecopoets are preoccupied’ (*Simon Armitage*, p. 17). In parallel with the ecopoetics I identify in Silkin, Armitage’s ecopoetry approaches the organic with an understanding of the cultural and political discourses with which it is integrated.

It is this point that forms the foundation of this project: while the poets are perhaps a surprising pairing when viewed through the lens of aesthetics, poetic schools or critical reception, they each demonstrate in powerful ways a type of contemporary English poetry in which caring about the environment does not mean one cannot care about anything else; and that being environmentally conscious does not even mean that sustainability must always be one’s *first* priority. This mode of

¹ [Review of Jon Silkin’s *Amana Grass*], *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 June 1971.

² Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 20c Silkin 1/6/6.

³ Ian Gregson, *Simon Armitage* (London: Salt, 2011), p. 82.

thinking is quite different from what some might perceive as the exclusivity in focus of deep ecology, and, I would argue, it has great potential in the development of a society that, in material terms at least, is sustainable. Writing in response to American conceptions of wilderness in John Muir, William Cronon and Bill McKibben, Greg Garrard critiques wilderness ideology: ‘the ideal wilderness space is wholly pure by virtue of its independence from humans, but the ideal wilderness narrative posits a human subject whose most authentic existence is located precisely there’.⁴ This paradox might be overcome by discussion of poetry in which the human is able to interact with places and creatures that are ‘wild’. Garrard continues:

Deep ecology, it might be argued, has conspired with some American ecocriticism to promote a poetics of *authenticity* for which wilderness is the touchstone. To critique this is not to argue for the abandonment of wilderness to the tender mercies of ranchers and developers, but to promote instead the poetics of *responsibility* that takes ecological science rather than pantheism as its guide. The choice between monolithic, ecocidal modernism and reverential awe is a false dichotomy that ecocriticism can circumvent with a pragmatic and political orientation. (p. 79)

This thesis suggests that Silkin and Armitage each develop a poetics of responsibility, as defined by Garrard, neither of which have been often enough acknowledged. I explore examples in the work of both poets in which environmental consciousness is evident yet does not fall into uncritical, undifferentiated ‘awe’.

As climate change becomes increasingly difficult to ignore environmental degradation is politicised and environmental ethics can no longer favour deep ecology’s call for a return to a pre-industrial mode of inhabiting the Earth. Climate change affects where people live and what they eat; it is drawn into divisive debates and produces adherence to identity politics. The impacts of climate change are felt in physical, social and emotional spheres, and there, too, lie the best hopes for averting or diminishing environmental catastrophe. Progress in the sophistication and affordability of green energy is a major factor in business and governmental commitments such as the 2015 Paris Climate Accord and expansions of the

⁴ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 78.

Powering Past Coal Alliance.⁵ Nuclear fallout from acts of war in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, weapons testing and accidents at Chernobyl and Fukushima are global. Thinking about nature as ‘out there’ simply does not suffice in an age when chemical pesticides and pollutants enter the body via the food chain, tap water and the air supply. Further, thinking about rising global temperatures, pollution, species extinction, soil acidification, coral reef bleaching, habitat loss and forest depletion as ‘environmental’ problems can now only be a thing of the past. There is almost no aspect of life on Earth that is not affected by the illness, famine, extreme weather events, mass migration, political upheaval and detriment to quality of life that are produced by the irreparable damage being inflicted on the material, social and psychological foundations of our lived experience. For this reason, the poets I am addressing in this thesis are not ‘nature poets’, although each clearly demonstrates a thoughtful sensitivity to nonhuman life and environmental factors, and neither are they ‘ecopoets’, though the work of each poet does display, in various ways, an ecopoetics. Ecopoetry is defined in this thesis as poetry in which the language provides insight into the more-than-human world, and in which poetic accounts of materiality provide new perspectives on language. Ecopoetics is revealed in form and discourse more than subject, which the ostensibly unusual comparison in this thesis throws into relief. The ecopoem may privilege networks between poetic language, the creative consciousness and living and non-living aspects of the physical world. Where I identify aspects of ecopoetry, this is never to the exclusion of different poetic forms.

I Approaching Silkin: An ‘ecologist *avant la lettre*’

Silkin’s contribution to the development of a new environmental ethics is largely unexplored, but it is considerable. In 1980, Terry Eagleton describes Silkin as ‘an ecologist *avant la lettre*’: an ecologist, rather than a nature poet, to acknowledge the variety of disciplines informing his creative imagination.⁶ His poetry is, by turns,

⁵ Damian Carrington, ‘Political watershed’ as 19 countries pledge to phase out coal’, *The Guardian*, 16 November 2017,

<<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/nov/16/political-watershed-as-19-countries-pledge-to-phase-out-coal>> [accessed 17 November 2017].

⁶ Terry Eagleton, ‘Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin’, *Poetry Review*, 69.4 (1980), 7-10 (p. 7).

politically charged (Socialism, pro-CND), sensitive to religion and the divine (fluctuating relationships with a sometimes distant God), concerned with history, trauma and Jewish identity (personal, genealogical and cultural), preoccupied by sex and romance (sincere, idealistic or cavalier) and by filial love (memory and grief). None of these modes of poetic enquiry are isolated, of course, and aspects of the social, emotional, political, philosophical and religious in Silkin's poetry are complexly interrelated with the animal, the botanical, the mineral and the organic. His poetry also demonstrates a sustained, complex interest in creatures and natural objects, for their own sakes and for their relationships with human beings. This thesis addresses a striking omission in ecocritical accounts of post-War poetry, and it also seeks to redress the imbalance in Silkin criticism. Much criticism of Silkin's poetry has focussed on his historical consciousness and his regionality, and while this is important, the reader has much to gain from a focus on Silkin's ecological consciousness. It is for this reason that I generally do not respond to Silkin criticism when I explore various references to the Holocaust, for example – exceptional though much work on Silkin is, in terms of providing insights into his complex engagements with politics, atrocity and historical events, the perspective from which I read Silkin is different. In this study, the diversity of intellectual, cultural and imaginative engagements at work in his poetry are approached always through the idea of ecology.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore the poetic ecology of Silkin's 'flower' poems (first published 1964), using his own conception of 'organic poetry' to identify relationships between the creative process, the printed poems and the reader's experience. Analysing Silkin's draft materials relating to the discursive, prose 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' reveals that three defining features of organic poetry can be identified in the generation of the poem as well as in the definitive text. I unpack the notion of the 'creature', and what Silkin's descriptions of the flowers as creatures reveal about his poetic project, and suggest to the reader about a vegetal poetics in post-War British ecopoetics more widely. Silkin's idea of the creaturely in this context includes: individuals rather than homogenous taxonomic categories; diversity in terms of the responses they inspire in others (they are by turns attractive, alien and downright unpleasant); self-determining agency; the capacity to suffer; co-existence within an ecosystem; similarity *and difference* with human and nonhuman animals. There is a self-conscious ethics within the project's

efforts to articulate a conception of the complexity, variety and sentience of flora. I will consider Eagleton's assertion that Silkin was an 'ecologist *avant la lettre*' by showing that environmental ethics are embedded in Silkin's poetry, in ways that (generally speaking) are only later achieved by other poets. My interpretation will draw the reader's attention to parts of the 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' that adumbrate such theorists as Michael Marder, Randy Laist, John Ryan and others working at the intersections between notions of plant intelligence, environmental philosophy and poetry. While studies of plants and contemporary poetry by Laist and Ryan engage with a range of important poets, Silkin is not mentioned though he would be highly appropriate. This is coherent with the great majority of work on post-War poetry published in this millennium: Silkin has been woefully overlooked. Given the sensitivity with which his critical intelligence responds to the more-than-human world, just as there is much to be gained by bringing ecocriticism into Silkin studies, it is time that Silkin is brought into conversations about plant poetry.

Critical plant studies 'attempts to reverse the tendency denoted as *plant blindness*',⁷ which refers to plants being undervalued or overlooked in sustainability and other cultural discourses, 'arising, perhaps, out of a view of the plant world as merely a background for animal life'.⁸ Given that plants sustain animal life they are much more than a 'background', and while sustainability campaigns usually focus on creatures at the top of the food chain, loss of habitat for flora has far-reaching consequences. Counter to plant blindness, Marder's conception of 'plant-thinking' is a welcome example of how we might co-exist with plants, as it 'situates the plant at the fulcrum of its world, the elemental terrain it inhabits without laying claim to or appropriating it'.⁹ Encountering the plant on its terms within a mode of exploration consciously set against subjugation, as Marder implores us to do, is precisely what Silkin was doing when he wrote the 'flower' poems over fifty years ago. When Marder writes that plant-thinking is 'an invitation to abandon the familiar terrain of human and humanist thought and to meet vegetal life, if not in the place where it is,

⁷ John Ryan, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 7.

⁸ Padma V. McKertich and V. Shilpa, "'It happens quietly": Plant Poetry and the Botanification of the Imagination', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 9.2 (2016), 36-49 (p. 36).

⁹ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 8.

then at least halfway' (*Plant-Thinking*, p. 10), echoes of Silkin can be heard: 'the poems do not poise themselves centrally between the two. They concentrate closely on the flowers, and it is towards their centrality they tend to draw *human* life'.¹⁰ It is not only a utilitarian understanding of their importance to the endurance of every ecosystem on the planet (profound as that is) that is demanding a reassessment of our attitudes to plants. Plant blindness 'is based on a perceived absence of intelligence, an inability to move at will or to communicate with others', which feed common conceptions of 'the lower status of plants in the hierarchy of evolution' (McKertich and Shilpa, p. 37). Plant neurobiology, an emerging field of research in botany, is posing a radical challenge to these perceived notions, and discussions about the ways we interact with plants are increasingly not only a question of biology, cultural studies or sustainability, but also of ethics. For example, Marder invokes published research from 2011, by

a team of scientists from the Blaustein Institute for Desert Research in Be'er Sheva, Israel [...] [who] reveal[ed] that a pea plant subjected to drought conditions communicated its abiotic stress to other such plants [...] through the roots, it relayed to its neighbours the biochemical message about the onset of drought, prompting them to react as though they, too, were in a similar predicament. Curiously, having received the signal, plants not directly affected by this particular environmental stress factor were better able to withstand adverse conditions when these actually occurred. This means that the recipients of biochemical communication could draw on their 'memories' – information stored at the cellular level.¹¹

According to this research, then, plants not only communicate but *learn* from shared experiences, and the radical differences between animal and plant life are rendered slightly less concrete. From this perspective, Silkin's tendency to treat flowers and people as creatures in a community seems prescient:

¹⁰ Jon Silkin, 'Note on 'Flower' Poems', *CP*, pp. 285-88 (p. 285). All references to Silkin's poetry, including the prose 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' and excluding draft materials, are found in Silkin's *Complete Poems* (known hereafter as *CP*). I refer the reader to this edition, from which I will give page numbers for individual pieces. Where a poem falls on a single page, I will give the reference only the first time the poem is invoked.

¹¹ Marder, 'Is it Ethical to Eat Plants?', *Parallax*, 19.1 (2013), 29-37 (p. 29).

[‘Milkmaids’] avoids any tendency to anthropomorphize the flower; it tends to assert that the plant and the human are two separate but confronting parts of one society. [...] The Milkmaids absorb the experience of the human being and are changed – one creature’s mind changed by the condition of another, so deeply, that this change is inherited by their children. (‘Note’, p. 287)

Although Silkin suggests that flowers share formative experiences with offspring rather than neighbourly sharing as in the Blaustein Institute research, Silkin’s willingness to attribute powers of communication to plants and his awareness of their sensitivity to environment is striking. Marder writes: ‘ethically inspired decisions cannot postulate the abstract conceptual unity of ‘the plant’; they must, rather, take into account the singularity of each species with its unique temporality and non-generalizable existential possibilities’ (‘Is it Ethical’, p. 36). Each ‘flower’ poem addresses one species, with careful attention to what distinguishes it from others. Identifying correspondences between Silkin’s vegetal ethics and Marder’s (which are generated in the context of cutting-edge scientific research) is suggestive of the prescience (literally, then, pre-science) of Silkin’s understanding of communication between vegetal beings. The general reader is more likely to find (no doubt important) work considering plants as a food source rather than as *beings*. Some readers might think that the position of nonhuman animals in global culture necessitates a focus on the lives of animals in factory farms, tourism and the pet industry before we set our sights on campaigning for the rights of plants. Yet critical plant studies does not focus narrowly on plants, but goes to the roots of ecosystems to ask questions that have consequences for discussions about the ontology of all forms of life, animal and human animal included. Art must engage with the nuances and complexities of this philosophy of ecology. In the ‘Note’, Silkin frequently identifies the plants as ‘creatures’ (pp. 286, 287, 288), with appetites and fleshy forms, ‘hover[ing] tentatively between’ plant and human life (p. 285). Flowers, animals and human beings are all creaturely. The community of creatures (which includes flowers and human beings) is called a ‘bestiary’ (‘Note’, p. 286): we are asked to consider the flowers, as we might think of animals, as sentient, intelligent, dynamic creatures. ‘I am trying to find some common denominator that will pull together these two kinds of life’ (‘Note’, p. 285): Silkin challenges his reader to see that the capacity to desire, seek, harness, occupy and, even, to abuse, are not *human*

traits, but *creaturely* traits. Philosophical inquiry into the ontology of plants poses a significant challenge to received cultural conceptions of the radical differences between plants and animals. Ryan writes of a study by the Darwins:

Charles and his son speculated famously that the tip of the radicle (the part of the embryo that becomes the primary root), with its “diverse kinds of sensitiveness,” is analogous to the animal brain and mediates the processing of sensory information within the plant [...] It is not accidental that the Darwins reserved the contentious “root-brain” hypothesis for the final lines of *The Power of Movement in Plants*. The proposal that plant mentation has an anatomical correlate instigated – and still instigates today – a radical levelling of botanical and zoological ontologies while retaining the essential difference between the two discrete domains of life. (p. 3)

As Ryan explains, efforts to understand what is human about plant beings, and what is plant-like about human beings, must avoid homogenisation as much as they must avoid division. Differences can be maintained while hierarchies are challenged, and this is precisely how Silkin formulates his project. Such a ‘levelling of botanical and zoological ontologies’ is acted out in the ‘flower’ poems by Silkin’s addressing the flowers as creatures in a community, who are by turns inviting, repellent, accessible and distant. Nonetheless, letting the imagination produce a felt coherence between the (human) self and plants is not easy. As Laist writes, ‘Plants seem to inhabit a time-sense, a life cycle, a desire-structure, and a morphology that is so utterly alien that it is easy and even tempting to deny their status as animate organisms’.¹² Silkin confronts the alien-ness of plants, never denying their otherness while exploring possible points of identification between human and flora. The model is one of similarity and difference, interaction and alienation. The difficulty of getting close to plants, fully acknowledged by Silkin, produces poetry that explores a range of poet-plant encounters, and that articulates moments of correspondence while remaining ‘respectful of the obscurity of vegetal life’ (*Plant-Thinking*, p. 124).

How, then, can poetry properly articulate plant ontology, or as Marder and Patricia Vieira ask, ‘How can literature disentangle vegetal life from its symbolic meanings and, to borrow the phenomenological battle cry, go back to the plants

¹² Randy Laist, ‘Introduction’, in *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies*, ed. by Randy Laist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 9-17 (p. 12).

themselves? In other words, what would be the protocols of a phytophilic *poeisis*?¹³ What is the specificity of *poetry* (as opposed to other forms of discourse or art) in this encounter and this discussion? Ryan brings us close to an answer as he writes of the ‘*perceptual challenge* to apprehend the movements, patterns, needs, and potential dangers of plants and thus to come to appreciate their being-in-the-world’ (p. 6, my emphasis). Poetry’s ability to ‘redescribe reality’ promises the reader altered perceptions, and might reframe the challenge and offer fresh insights into the lives of plants.¹⁴ Ryan coins the term ‘phytocrritical’ to describe an ‘outlook [that] emphasizes the agencies of botanical beings in poetic texts’, and suggests that the phytocrritical reader must be sensitive to:

the potentially negative construal of the vegetal world through the human proclivities for aestheticization (plants as pretty objects and picturesque scenery), appropriation (as expendable materials or throwaway matter), and figuration (as symbols, tropes, and linguistic artifices rather than presences, bodies, and sensory entanglements). (p. 14)

In chapter 1 I will explore in detail examples from the ‘flower’ poems in which their repellent, unattractive and even violent aspects are fully confronted. This is in keeping with Silkin’s professed aims to encounter the flowers’ natures in the poems rather than letting them exist as metaphors. In his own language, he is ‘concerned with [wild flowers’] vigorous contribution to the domestic land, their proximity to, not their symbolizing of, human beings and their activity’, and he criticises the ‘abuse’ of ‘cutting [flowers] down for our rooms, or perceiving them as useful illustrators of ‘human character’’ (‘Note’, p. 286). McKertich and Shilpa define ‘plant poetry’ as that in which ‘the agency of plants is the defining feature’, and that is defined by ‘a view of the plant world as active, intelligent and as constantly interacting with its environment, being affected by it and affecting it in turn’ (p. 40). I do not suggest that Silkin’s ‘flower’ poems can unproblematically be assigned to this category, but the parallels with Silkin’s avowal to discuss plant being rather than their function as metaphors is striking, and there are elements of plant poetry in the

¹³ Marder and Patricia Vieira, ‘Writing Phytophilia: Philosophers and Poets as Lovers of Plants’, *Frame*, 26.2 (2013), 37-53 (p. 44).

¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. by Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 5.

‘flower’ poems. McKertich and Shilpa ‘place plant poetry within the larger conceptual framework of ecopoetry or ecoliterature’, and I argue that there are also clearly discernible elements of ecopoetics in Silkin’s poetry (p. 40).

The ‘flower’ poems are, as I have suggested, unusually insightful in their efforts to get closer to the flowers’ ‘natures’. While the poems were generally well received on publication in the 1960s (and for the second edition in 1978), they are challenging and sometimes obscure. A recent example of work that offers a critique of Silkin’s engagements with his more-than-human environments is Molly Mahood’s *The Poet as Botanist* (2008). This thoughtful and engaging book briefly considers two Silkin poems; unfortunately it does so in a rather dismissive fashion, and does not give the reader a full sense of Silkin’s plant poetry. Mahood’s account of Silkin opens as follows:

A poet wanders into an unimproved meadow in June, his or her mind full of some private emotion that may conjoin with that roused by the field’s flowers [...] But what if the thoughts the poet brings are of Auschwitz or Hiroshima? The difficulties that then arise are well illustrated in a poem of the 1960s, one of fifteen ‘Flower Poems’.¹⁵

The approach to reading the ‘difficulties’ in the ‘flower’ poems is a good one. Mahood gets Silkin’s date of birth wrong, but her point that he is ‘a young Jew who is just leaving childhood when the full horror of the extermination camps becomes known: revelations that leave him a victim to survivor’s guilt’ still stands.¹⁶ She is particularly critical of ‘Milkmaids (Lady’s Smock)’. While noting the poem’s success at ‘calling up the plant’s light vigour of leaf, stem, and finally flower’, the ‘confrontation’ between the seeding flowers and prisoners behind barbed wire causes Mahood some concern:

To link the grim historical facts of the Nazi final solution to 1960ish fancies about plant awareness is, on the face of it, so inept that we begin to search for a sub-text that will offer an escape from our unease. (p. 236)

¹⁵ Molly Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 235.

¹⁶ Mahood gives 1933, while Silkin was in fact born in 1930 (p. 236).

Her argument about survivor's guilt is convincing but she fails to follow the point through to its conclusion: that this poem explores the nature of evil. In proposing the encounter between the milkmaids and the prisoners, Silkin asks his reader if such terrible brutality as the Holocaust is natural – given that even the most atrocious war crimes are performed by human beings, which are animal – or whether, with the exponential increase in scale of the suffering we can inflict, we have grown beyond nature. Silkin describes nature as a 'preying upon' ('Note', p. 286), yet there is clearly a difference between hunting, competition and violence even between large groups of creatures and the mechanisations of killing that reached such heights in the concentration camps and nuclear weapons deployments of the Second World War. Silkin writes: 'man grows from Nature and remains a part of it yet by virtue of his intelligence grows apart from it' ('Note', p. 288). A similar idea is articulated, with a more ominous tone, in 'Nature with Man', the title poem of the full-length collection that featured the 'flower' poems (published 1965, one year after the pamphlet, *Flower Poems*):

But are the humans here? Nature
Had a human head. The mouth
Turned on its long neck, biting through
Scale, sinew¹⁷

In this account, humanity has divided from its roots and trunk by self-inflicted brutality. The singularity of the 'mouth' and the 'neck' articulates a belief that violence inflicted on one group in society is violence not only to the entire species, but to all living beings. Silkin's writing is always positioned in the shadow of atrocity, and I will explore the effects of his consciousness of evil on his poetic encounters with his environments and the organic in different ways in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis.

A second criticism that Mahood levels against Silkin's project relates to a perceived lack of feeling in the poems:

When readers complain, as I have heard them do, that for all his painstaking, cerebral descriptions Silkin's flowers are not *there*, they are really saying

¹⁷ 'Nature with Man', *CP*, pp. 247-48 (p. 247).

that enjoyment is missing. [...] Silkin looks at each flower with a grim determination to discover human analogies, but hardly ever with loving and informed insight into the processes that have brought it into being. (p. 237)

It is true that the aesthetic of the 'flower' poems is tough and gritty. Mahood suggests that the flowers are not really 'there' for two key reasons: because of the reader's lack of 'enjoyment' and the poet's focus on human analogies. In Chapter 1 I explore various organic processes evident in the 'flower' poems – the development of a flower's form, its interaction with aspects of its environment, the poet-flower encounter. These are always articulated with a respectful seriousness and attention to detail that surely refute Mahood's charge that they lack 'loving and informed insight'. At the same time, Silkin's aim is not to write out what is uncanny about plants, the ways they can be repulsive (e.g. odour) or unknowable – though also with the aim 'to maintain and nurture, without fetishizing [...] their otherness' (*Plant-Thinking*, p. 3). Silkin's flowers do not ask to be taken care of, and there are no delusions on the part of the poet that the flowers take any particular interest in the human observer.

Despite the importance of breaking down binary species constructions, Silkin and his reader are not under the delusion that we are getting to know the plant in its entirety. In their list of attributes of plant poetry, McKertich and Shilpa include, alongside 'respect for the botanical world' and 'an intention to explore deeper', 'an acknowledgement of ignorance' (p. 42). I argue that this is at the heart of the difficulty of the 'flower' poems and the lack of pleasure that Mahood (and others) find in reading them. Mahood suggests that Silkin's focus on 'human analogies' is to the exclusion of encountering the plant's being. It is a difficult thing to cross into the botanical imaginary at all, even before we consider the parallel challenges of attempting to think beyond common cultural expectations of flowers (as beautiful, as gestures, as bringing us pleasure), and of writing about atrocity. If the reader finds difficulty in connecting with the flowers, this is because the poems are encounters that speak as much about the meeting as about the alien-ness of the flowers and our inability to 'know' them completely. One might argue that the flowers will become more powerfully 'there' if a 'grim determination to discover human analogies' is rejected and human influence removed from the poem. However, despite the poet's efforts to integrate the self with the plant, 'Less emphasis on the self of the poet does not and cannot lead to a complete negation of the human self. Plant poems are

therefore not completely objective' (McKertich and Shilpa, p. 46). The approach Silkin takes is to acknowledge the 'awkward, inevitable co-existence of plant subjectivity and anthropocentrism' by allowing the poems to bear traces of human perception, language, imagination and behaviour (McKertich and Shilpa, p. 46). Silkin's evident anxiety in the 'Note' relates the complex negotiation the poet makes when attempting to keep (necessary) human intrusion to a minimum, but he is aware that if formal language is used to create a sense of encounter with a nonhuman other (as it is in a plant poem), writing out the human can only be a falsity or a delusion. Kate Rigby writes that the literary text or ecopoem

draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing. In this sense, the literary text saves the earth by disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place. [...] Only to the extent that the work of art is self-canceling, acknowledging in some way its inevitable failure to adequately mediate the voice of nature, can it point us to that which lies beyond its own enframing.¹⁸

Effective ecopoetry makes the reader think about difference and is thus self-conscious about both its possibilities and its limitations. Silkin acknowledges the failure of his project to capture *fully* 'plant being', but an approach to the limits of language is here (as it is often) a sign that the poetry is working.

Mahood seems to be asking for a poetry that perfectly takes the shape of the flower, or as close as one can come to finding the flower 'there' in the poem. Silkin is doing something rather different: not only is he describing an encounter rather than an artificially created portrait, his work demonstrates what Rigby describes as 'a crucial dimension of literature [...] it both draws us in and sends us forth, urging us to "interrupt" our reading by returning our gaze to what lies forever beyond the page' (p. 438). The ethical consequences of this poetry are generated not only by giving the reader a fresh perspective on the flowers, but also by stimulating a strengthened engagement with flowers, plants and organic ecosystems. In Rigby's words, only 'by insisting on the limits of the text [...] can we affirm that there is, in the end, no substitute for our own embodied involvement with the more-than-human natural world' (p. 440). Effective sustainability relies on a detailed understanding of

¹⁸ Kate Rigby, 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis', *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), 427-42 (p. 437).

the ecosystems under consideration, and so successful practices are most likely to emerge from a community that is positively, materially engaged. This is one discovery the reader will make in relation to the Stanza Stones in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

While the Stanza Stones are in mind, I want to make a further, brief, refutation of Mahood's account of plant poetry. She suggests that the poems are limited by their difficulty, which, as I have suggested, is produced by their refusal to feign an absence of human involvement. Even Hughes, whose poetry no one could reasonably describe to be lacking in 'enjoyment', does not deliver what Mahood appears to be asking for. In a firm contrast to Silkin, in much of Hughes's work, and particularly in his creature poems, what is achieved with such brilliance is a representation of the poet's experience of the creature, not any kind of mimetic reproduction of the creature itself. Hughes never loses sight of the inevitable human intrusion (of the eye, brain, ear, memory, body) in the poet's approaches towards the more-than-human world, and the poems reflect his efforts to avoid the creature becoming merely a poetic device, or feigning that the poem is not a human construct. The imaginative engagement with water and landscape in *In Memory of Water* (Armitage's poems written for inscription on the Stanza Stones) indirectly invokes Hughes in a number of ways. One way in which the language is reminiscent of Hughes is where the poem produces water as it is experienced by the poet, without the pretence that language can objectively and accurately represent materiality. There is an element of honesty in Hughes and Armitage's engagements with the more-than-human world which enables us to nuance our criticism of anthropomorphism. Jane Bennett suggests that, 'We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world', thus suggesting that anthropomorphism might be one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal against anthropocentrism.¹⁹ Armitage describes his own thought process towards a similar idea:

I have stopped worrying about anthropomorphising in poems. I used to be anxious about it, but I'm not any more. I arrived at the conclusion that I can

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xvi.

do no more than be human, and that every way I perceive the world is filtered through being human, and that recognising human traits or projecting them onto other objects is a fairly natural thing to do. (*Interview*)

Silkin is no less aware of the tricky negotiations the poet must make, but he responds to the problem in a very different way. Rather than privileging the sensory and cognitive information the poet receives during an encounter with another creature, Silkin articulates an understanding of what cannot be achieved by the poet. Starting from a point of objectivity, he then shows the reader the point beyond which he cannot know anything more of the creature. Knowledge always has limits, and the acknowledgement of this in poetry can be very productive.

Silkin's account of creaturely life involves God, who is a kind of creature or divine species, and acknowledges limitations to his communication with God. Silkin's spiritual poetics produces experiences of the divine that range vastly between experiences of alienation, love, confusion and anger. There is never more than one god at any particular time, but the nature of that God and of the poet's response to it change dramatically. Reflecting on Silkin's work, the impression is of a poet committed to an exploration of the impact that belief in a divine Creator has on society, ethics and the life of the imagination. It is not at all clear that Silkin subscribes to a scriptural account of a god that actively seeks to help those creatures it has created, or indeed that it even pays them any attention at all. While my readings of Silkin's encounters with the divine are produced with an awareness of ecotheology, I have chosen not to overtly ground my analysis of the poetry within this field. While recent critiques of the relationship between Judeo-Christian scripture and environmental concerns, beginning with Lynn White's now seminal essay 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' might provide a useful background to Silkin's poetic accounts of God and the more-than-human, Silkin's religious experience is so varied and so individual that debates relating to the effects religion might have on environmental consciousness are less valuable than a close reading of the various manifestations of the godly in the poetry. Silkin uses fragments of scripture and he clearly has a good understanding of the Torah, but, I argue, the way his religion manifests itself in poetry privileges a deeply personal experience. At times Silkin seems able to access the divine, often in tangent with positive earthly experiences such as sex, love, nature and learning, while at other times it is catastrophe, suffering and injustice that provoke Silkin's communication

with his God. Frequently, the poet seems alienated from the divine, in various moods such as melancholy, bravado and anger. Silkin's relationship with the divine is defined by many of the same characteristics as his encounters with earthly creatures. The boundaries between human beings and God are challenged in a number of ways, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

II Reading Silkin: 'Moses Harris and the butterflies'

As I have explained, I read Silkin's 'flower' poems through the lens of the 'creaturely'. In the following discussion of 'Moses Harris and the butterflies' (*The Lens-Breakers*, 1992), which focusses in part on insect life, the reader can identify correspondences between Silkin's approach to animal life and plant life.²⁰ This poem provides a useful introduction to several key aspects of Silkin's work that will be explored in this thesis: close descriptions of nonhuman creatures, and their rights; the nature or natures of God; violence (both human and nonhuman); the Holocaust; and modes of knowledge, exploration and learning. Moses Harris was an eighteenth-century lepidopterist, and Silkin argues passionately against the capture of butterflies and moths even (or especially) when it is to advance knowledge. A butterfly caught in the lepidopterist's net is 'surrendered as Job / to Satan is she to him'. Silkin's sympathies are clearly with the insect as a living, feeling creature, and the poet seems to dare the reader to see the catching of the moth as anything other than a brutality:

He depicts his trade: 'what I do
is not who I am.' Yet in his nets more tensile
than sea, unless weight
is strength, her wings flummox and tear.

The lepidopterist appears not as a scientist pursuing knowledge, but as a destructive agent seeking to dominate and appropriate, whose selfhood is weakened by his refusal to accept responsibility for his acts of killing. Silkin's description of the

²⁰ 'Moses Harris and the butterflies', *CP*, p. 658. Since the poem is on a single page, I refer the reader to the text for further references.

insect focusses on its physicality, and this sharp observation creates images of a vital, vibrant creature under attack. The lepidopterist takes up

a pin, and presses it in the mid-stream
of a moth's thorax. The spidery fur
and fluid nick with air

The poet's choice to focus on the 'spidery fur' rather than the (more traditionally beautiful) patterned wings speaks to his interest in the visceral aspects of the insect, recalling for the reader invocations of odour and hairiness in the creatures of the 'flower' poems. Silkin opposes himself to the lepidopterist's catching and killing, clearly articulating an ethical engagement with animal rights. The death is a tragedy for the poet: when, in the following lines, he describes 'its sharp / inaudible rush a snatch of dry odour / in the chest', the obstructed intake of breath is human as well as insect, representing the shocked gasp of the observing poet (and reader), and, more grotesquely, the sigh of satisfaction of the lepidopterist achieving the final stage of his capture. Silkin is revolted by the violence enacted on one creature by another, and by the presumption to superiority such an act supposes.

In the final stanza of 'Moses Harris and the butterflies', Silkin offers two conflicting accounts of the godly. This multiplicity is coherent with the mutable nature of the divine in his poetry, an aspect of his spiritual poetics that I explore at length in Chapter 2. On the one hand, in 'Moses Harris' Silkin evokes 'God's dream of mild hinds', alluding to the vision of a consortium of creatures living in harmony (which he makes manifest in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1954), and which is a concept I will discuss in relation to the artist Edward Hicks in Chapter 2). On the other hand, Silkin speaks about a seemingly very different God, who is distant and offers no protection for the creatures he has made, having produced 'cyanide and zinc, God's uneatable delights'. Cyanide and zinc were important tools for the lepidopterist, as Patrick Barkham notes:

Victorian advances in chemistry and the use of poisons like chloroform led to the deployment of a sophisticated 'killing bottle'. Once caught, a butterfly would be tipped from the net into a wide glass jar [...] Beneath a zinc mesh

at the bottom of the jar lay a sponge soaked in chloroform or, later, potassium cyanide.²¹

Systematic, mechanised killing by gassing with cyanide (Zyklon B) delivered through zinc mesh (ventilator covers) is, of course, exactly what the Nazis would subject victims to in concentration camps a century later. Aligning the struggle of one individual or group with that of another is one of Silkin's primary methods of articulating his nuanced ethical imagination. Equating a lepidopterist killing a moth with Nazi genocide is, of course, completely audacious, and possibly offensive to many readers – the first is about preservation, albeit a misguided one that privileges taking possession while failing to respect life, whereas the second is about extermination. Yet a comparison drawn between the two events is logical. The gas and the zinc mesh are common to both forms of killing, and this material parallel prompts the reader's realisation that the two acts of killing are in the 'same moral universe', as Dana Phillips might put it.²² Crucially, the connection is indirect. There is no explicit reference to the Holocaust; rather the connection is left unnamed so the reader can draw his or her own conclusions. The fact of zinc and cyanide being used in both kinds of killing is not engineered by Silkin, and neither is it exploited for sensational effect. Instead, Silkin merely names the chemicals used in eighteenth-century lepidopterology in the knowledge that the words will recall historical associations for the reader.

I argue that the sensitivity with which Silkin sets up the comparison gives the reader a powerful impression of the suffering of each group. As each situation is read in the light of the other, the reader sees the moth as a victim, a creature with rights that are wholly compromised; s/he also sees a defamiliarized account of the death camp victim. While Silkin is generally fierce in his convictions, his avoidance of didacticism strengthens the pull of his ethical imagination. He allows his readers to draw the comparison and related conclusions for themselves. The poem ends: 'Moses Harris, you, depriver of wings / and you, deprived': in Silkin's estimation,

²¹ Patrick Barkham, *The Butterfly Isles: A Summer in Search of Our Emperors and Admirals* (London: Granta Books, 2010), p. 159.

²² 'Not that nature writing is the moral equivalent of strip-mining [...] but the two activities do occupy the same moral universe. This is something that a lot of nature writers and ecocritics would like to deny'. Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 211.

the lepidopterist is emotionally and intellectually poorer for the violence of his modes of investigation, which are more autopsy than biology. In a related way, in 'Furnished Lives' (*The Two Freedoms*, 1958), Silkin writes of 'the drear dampness of cut flowers', evoking decaying organic matter to assert that the flowers, now appropriated for human pleasure, have lost the qualities that first attracted someone to them.²³ So it is that ethics and imaginative creativity are connected in Silkin's poetry.

III Reading Armitage: 'Meanwhile, somewhere in the state of Colorado'

The reader gains a very different perspective on violence from Armitage's account of the April 1999 school shooting in Colorado that has become known as the Columbine High School massacre. Narration of the event constitutes one section of the 1000-line, Millennium poem *Killing Time* (1999). The extraordinary event attracted major attention from the news media, has since inspired multiple copycat shootings and is now considered a 'cultural watershed'.²⁴ The school was named after the perennial flowers that occupy the fields and mountain slopes around the school, and in his account of the shooting, Armitage goes back to these roots and exchanges firearms, bullets and bombs for a vocabulary of flowers:

Meanwhile, somewhere in the state of Colorado, armed to the teeth
with thousands of flowers,
two boys entered the front door of their own high school
and for almost four hours
gave floral tributes to fellow students and members of staff,
beginning with red roses
strewn among unsuspecting pupils during their lunch hour,
followed by posies

²³ 'Furnished Lives', *CP*, pp. 82-83 (p. 83).

²⁴ Ralph W. Larkin, 'The Columbine Legacy: Rampage Shootings as Political Acts', *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52 (2009), 1309-26 (p. 1311).

of peace lilies and wild orchids.

One of the forms taken by metaphors under scrutiny in this thesis is a form of rhetoric where one body stands in directly for the body of another being or object, which I identify as material metaphors. In poems explored in a related discussion in Chapter 3, the poets play with visual resemblances between (in the example from Silkin) a flower and a bird, and (in a poem by Armitage) a bird and a plastic bag. The form of the flower corresponds with the head and beak of a bird, and the bag, caught on an electricity pylon, flutters in the wind like a bird ruffling its feathers. In the case of the Colorado section of *Killing Time*, the material metaphors are generated not from visual similarity, but by an ironic exchange of objects that are not formally alike, but conceptually oppositional. One effect of this is a defamiliarization of horror that will produce a fresh description of the event every time the poem is read. In this way, Armitage ironizes the convention of offering flowers at graves and reclaims the act of deliverance to restore dignity to the victims. Ricoeur writes that ‘metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality’, and Armitage creates a new legacy for the tragedy by means of ‘certain fictions’ (p. 5).

One form that this new legacy takes is in the poet’s posing of questions relating to the ‘naturalness’ of violence. The Columbine High School section of *Killing Time* closes with a carefully formulated enquiry:

As for the two boys, it’s back to the same old debate:

is it something in the mind

that grows from birth, like a seed, or is it society

makes a person that kind?

The reader is brought into a conversation about the respective roles of biology and culture in character formation, which, in neither case, attribute absolute autonomy to the boys. In Chapter 4 of this thesis I will discuss poems in Armitage’s *Seeing Stars* (2010) in which the poet explores influences on the development of character. The studiously casual manner in which the reader is prompted to re-consider ‘the same old debate’ is a nuanced assertion of defamiliarization’s power in this example. It is reasonable to assume (as the poet does) that most readers will have spent time, at some point, thinking about nature and nurture and the nature of evil. Having read

this radically different version of a narrative, the reader finds the old questions posed in entirely new ways and revisits the topic in a fresh light. While the reader is not intended to finalise their thinking on the subject, the poem demands that a new perspective be brought into the conversation. It is chilling to note the slogans on the t-shirts worn by the schoolboy shooters: Dylan Klebold's declared, 'Wrath', while Eric Harris's said, 'Natural Selection' (Larkin, p. 1317). Co-opting the theory of natural selection for a mass shooting that, in any case, was largely indiscriminate is a monstrously narcissistic act. Whether knowingly or otherwise, Harris prompted his 'audience' – survivors, victims' families, locals, consumers of the media – to ask whether violence of this nature (pre-meditated, revelled in, and making victims out of peers and friends) is indeed 'natural' behaviour. Silkin explores the relationship between evil and the organic world in a related way in the 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' (discussed at greater length in Chapter 1 of this thesis), writing, in relation to the rise of the Nazis in 1930s Germany: 'not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged' (p. 288). On the one hand, some phenomena (political, social, organic) arise without the need of encouragement. On the other hand, the injunction is to not feed *all* movements, political trends and ideologies. The shared root of both interpretations, however, is that even the most barbaric human behaviours are developed and carried out within the same set of circumstances and laws that produce actions motivated by compassion, empathy and love. Armitage's juxtaposition of flowers and bullets places them in the 'same moral universe', and insists on the message that giving flowers as an act of love or tribute is no more or less an act of nature (in the strict sense that these actants are people, people are animals, and animals are not *supernatural*, but simply *natural* beings) than acts of violence, cruelty and murder.²⁵

Armitage does not absolve the media of responsibility in that he does not imply a *direct* causal link – he does not imply that the media *caused* the boys to become murderers – but reminds the reader that these boys were part of a community. His focus on the 'society' implies a prescient knowledge about the

²⁵ I take the definition of 'actant' from Jane Bennett, who writes: 'The term is Bruno Latour's: an actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. It is "any entity that modifies another entity in a trial," something whose "competence is deduced from [its] performance" rather than posited in advance of the action' (*Vibrant Matter*, p. viii).

legacy of the Columbine massacre. He could not have known that the shooting would inspire copycat events, changes in school, police and judicial policy and a newly politicised mode of rampage violence, but he seems to have read the media frenzy as the form of inscription into public consciousness that it indeed turned out to be. The ‘same old debate’, which presumably was passed between every surviving witness and observer, reveals an anxiety about what comes after the event. The real root of Armitage’s closing question is not an interest in causality for interest’s sake, but an enquiry into future risk, and what might be done to intervene in the present. The poem is a tribute to the victims and affected communities, but like most elegies, that genuine endeavour gives way to a focus on the experience, in loss, of the survivors. The defamiliarization of the shooting enacted by the exchanging of guns for flowers demands the reader see the event freshly, without the noise of the TV crews and disturbing footage. Yet the new description of the event is not static. Speaking of the Colorado section of *Killing Time*, Armitage remarks:

I feel as if that poem is quite powerful. I feel as if it creates responses and reactions, and I think largely I have managed those and my intentions as a writer are largely carried through, but there’s another part of that poem which is slightly out of control, and I don’t mind that. (*Interview*)

This work is not public poetry in the way that projects such as the Stanza Stones are (under discussion in Chapter 3 of this thesis), yet the combination of sensitive subject matter and reliance on metaphor makes the reception of the poem potentially volatile. Rich Murphy writes: ‘Only metaphor and irony address society with a nimbleness worthy of chance and rapid change, not necessarily with therapeutic intentions, but with an ability to manage that experience, or perhaps create new descriptions of it’.²⁶ When the reader engages with a text, the ‘intentions’ of the author are repurposed and might produce a new understanding of the subject or theme; I will discuss the significant role of the reader in the creation of literary ecology in Chapter 1 of this thesis. What is apparent from *Killing Time* is that a clearer understanding of the root causes of an atrocity may deliver power from the narrativizing, entertainment-seeking media back to the traumatised citizen or observer, who may be able to prevent future tragedies. In Chapter 4, I theorise the

²⁶ Rich Murphy, ‘Poetry’s Evolving Ecology: Toward a Post-Symbol Landscape’, *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 1.2 (2009), 131-40 (p. 135).

role of irony in poetry in relation to *Seeing Stars*, which in the case of that collection also includes black humour, and that chapter will also further our exploration of the role of the news and entertainment media in contemporary experience. The uneasy position of a poet responding (almost in real time) to contemporary tragedy, and to the potential of repeated or future trauma, is characterised in the exploration of Armitage's poetics in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.

IV Approaching Armitage: Poetry of 'volatile and contested areas'

Armitage's interest in space and place, which most prevalently appears in his poetry in evocations of northern England – Manchester, Yorkshire, the Pennines and Marsden – often leads to assertions that his work is regional. This is a reasonable account, but I want to focus more on the idea of bioregionality, in terms of Armitage's interest in ecosystems, non-living organic topographies and the interactions these have with human creativity. Gregson notes the importance of Armitage's 'sense of how Marsden is set upon the margins of both the urban and the rural and [that] his poems have repeatedly referred to the points at which the two interpenetrate each other' (*Simon Armitage*, p. 86). This suggests that Armitage's most fundamental understanding of place – which stretches from childhood to the present day – is one in which organic, man-made, political and imaginative interests messily co-reside. This is evident throughout his poetry. In Silkin's 'flower' poems, an ostensibly organic subject matter is drawn out in poems that do not attempt to hide the intrusion of the human imagination and language. While this intrusion manifests itself in a very different way than in Silkin's poetry, Armitage nonetheless also accounts for human beings in work that engages with the more-than-human. Silkin died before climate change entered common discourse, though, as I demonstrate in this thesis, an environmental ethics is very much alive in his work. For Armitage, a poet who has always been engaged with the contemporary, environmental degradation is an unavoidable reality:

One of the things I would have to acknowledge is that when I started writing poetry, environmentalism as an idea was only in the background. But I don't think it's possible now, if you've got any kind of conscience, to write nature poetry or to engage with the topic of nature without that shading in at some level – or even becoming the dominant subject. (*Interview*)

The transformative effects of climate change are evident in the poet's creative trajectory, as the cultural landscape increasingly pushes the environment to the foreground. This is identifiable in his work, and is the reason why my analysis of his poetry in this thesis largely, though not exclusively, focusses on work published in the last decade. As well as a cultural landscape, this is an ethical landscape, evidenced by Armitage's reference to 'conscience' (rather than, say, creativity, intelligence or trend-predicting nous). Armitage consciously develops an environmental consciousness in his poetry: 'If you're involved in language, the moment that you start using any vocabulary which refers to those topics, you're aware that you're in volatile and contested areas – you're alert to those signals' (*Interview*). For Armitage, then, it is impossible to write poetry in the current moment in which encounters with the more-than-human world are not coloured by self-consciousness and anxiety.

In Chapter 3 I will consider Armitage's collaborative project, *The Stanza Stones* (2012), six site-specific poem-objects arranged in a line from Ilkley to Marsden and featuring poems written by Armitage. Each poem – 'Rain', 'Mist', 'Dew', 'Snow', 'Puddle' and 'Beck' – describes water in a process of transformation, both within each poem (for example, the water in 'Mist' transforms from flow to spray) and across the group (for example, rain in one poem transforms into the beck in another, as the reader or walker seeks out another stone or turns the page). The change at the heart of this project is positive, elemental transformation, and as such is quite different from the unsettling environmental changes that, I will show, pervade *Seeing Stars*. However, these different creative responses to a dynamic world nonetheless emerge from very similar anxieties, which are less overt, perhaps, in the *Stanza Stones*, but still formative, as Armitage acknowledges:

I think [climate change] is very present in the *Stanza Stones*. It's not necessarily stated but it's there in the overall title, *In Memory of Water*, which references global warming and suggests an elegiac quality. I've noticed over the last ten years that the moors around where we live aren't necessarily drying out, but certainly things are growing there there which would have been unfeasible twenty years ago – [...] rowan, birch. Growing in the middle of the moors, admittedly where they've stopped grazing sheep, but also influenced by a combination of a warmer climate and the fact that there's less pollution drifting over from Lancashire. So it's very much a

changing environment up there, which was a place that was always quite desolate and barren when I was young. (*Interview*)

Armitage's sensitivity to the local bioregion is defined by an understanding of the symbiosis of various environmental actants – heavy industry, animal husbandry, the south-westerly prevailing wind and necessary conditions for different flora. The elegiac quality to the set of poems is not, however, a *direct* reflection of the anxieties that foreshadowed them, but an interpretation of that experienced insecurity. The transformation of the 'quite desolate and barren' landscape of his childhood into an environment that is more hospitable to trees constitutes a loss for the poet, and while the presence of the trees themselves is not necessarily problematic, his understanding of the influence of a warming climate informs the different (but related) form of elegy in the Stanza Stones poems. By this I mean the commemorative nature of celebratory poems inscribed on (grave)stones, which might one day exist 'on a planet that had either drowned or boiled dry'.²⁷ But I also mean that the Stones perform an elegiac function not only for the poet's experience of bioregional change, but for themselves. While the Stones are 'going to be there for 1000 years', Armitage acknowledges that the transforming environment which provided creative stimulus for the project also makes them vulnerable: 'The more volatile weather conditions will accelerate the wear and tear on the Stones' (*Interview*). We have seen that Armitage relinquishes some control over the reception of the Columbine High School poem, and here, in a different way, he gives the poems up to the audience, which includes readers, walkers, creatures, elements and climate.

The potential longevity of the Stones demands that we consider how they are likely to change with age, and the inscription of language, relating to water, into stone reveals the mutable nature of matter (liquid, solid and language). The Stones are not static, but act out dynamic encounters, such as those between language and audience, audience and water, stone and environment, and stone and language. The stone itself, as material, is an actant, as Armitage demonstrates in an account of walking up a hill to see the stone-mason, Pip Hall, at work:

When I reached the rock, the freshly-cut letters shone bold and vivid in the early light, full of oranges and yellows and sparkling with minerals. So for a

²⁷ Armitage, *Stanza*, p. 15.

few moments it seemed as if she [Hall] had opened a chorus of tiny mouths in the stone, each with its own vowel or consonant, and allowed it to speak or sing. (*Stanza*, p. 19)

The mouths represent the multitude of voices of Armitage, his collaborators and, perhaps, local and historical communities, as well as an agency of the stone itself, released by the artists. I will explore the various ways the stone demonstrates agency in Chapter 3: by reflecting sunlight and ‘sparkling with minerals’, by presenting challenges to inscription which ultimately changed the language of the poems, by defamiliarizing the water subject, and by ‘telling’ stories of its formation and subsequent exposure to environmental pressures. Karen Barad’s term ‘intra-action’ is useful in this discussion of the radical ways the *Stanza Stones* demand that the audience think differently about matter (both water and stone), where the non-living more-than-human world is always responding to the actants (elements, creatures, imaginations) that encounter it. Barad writes:

The neologism “intra-action” *signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action.²⁸

The *Stones* have the potential, then, to not only show transformative processes at work in water and stone, in the past, present and future; they also require the reader to reflect on his or her own embodied, necessarily intra-active way of being in the world, perhaps recalling Stacy Alaimo’s ‘recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world’.²⁹ The ethical potential of revitalising our discourses around (apparently inert) materialities may be significant. In Rigby’s words, each stone-poem ‘draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing’, and invites the reader/walker to ‘read’ beyond its edges and pay attention to the landscape, the human body, social histories and possible ecological futures.

²⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 33.

²⁹ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2010), p. 20.

Armitage acknowledges the impact that living in a rapidly changing world has on his creative consciousness:

I think the effects, probably, in me and in my poems (they might be the same things) are: an internalisation resulting from a lack of confidence about how to declare or describe the world; a lack of confidence about our situation in it; and a nervousness about making bold statements generally in poetry (in an age in which the poet as sage or wise person is gone). In those circumstances there's a tendency to be driven inside, and to let those uncertainties play out in the imagination through absurdity, through poems that attempt to avoid conclusion [...] but still with a desire to create lyric lines, and to identify beauty where it occurs, and to celebrate, if possible. Yet always to be bogged down by cynicism and a general lack of conviction. (*Interview*)

Difficulty, it seems, is impossible to avoid, and the poet's uncertainty reaches the very core of his creativity, challenging not only his mode of poetry but the very role of the poet at all. Yet 'cynicism' cannot fully occupy poetry, and these doubts are pulled in in service of creativity.

This last point relates to the stage following my discussion of the Stanza Stones in which I analyse the various uncertainties, insecurities and instabilities in *Seeing Stars*. I have suggested that *In Memory of Water* creatively *uses* the poet's experiences of climate change *without* replicating them in any exact or didactic way, and *Seeing Stars* reinterprets a similar experience of material insecurity to produce a very different type of poetry. As I have suggested, the concern about changing environments that Armitage demonstrates includes the non-organic world. An increasing, heightened consciousness of social and cultural change and the anxieties this produces for people underlies my exploration of *Seeing Stars* in Chapter 4. Claire Hélie writes that 'Armitage's North is one where the social fabric is in danger. Since it is no longer working class, since it is post-Thatcherite, it lacks collective consciousness. The inhabitants are mostly marginalised figures'.³⁰ In *Seeing Stars*, fragmentary social networks and isolated voices are the general mode

³⁰ Claire Hélie, 'Selective Northernness in Simon Armitage's *Selected Poems* (2001) and *The Shout* (2005)', in *Selected Poems: Modernism Then and Now*, ed. by Hélène Aji and Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 143-58 (p. 152).

of communication. The poems are narratives that employ irony and dark humour to generate layered realities where pathos is always disrupted by absurdity and the reader is refused the comforts of stability or conclusions. The characters' lives are unstable, seemingly in response to a world that, beyond their control, is changing rapidly. This includes cultural changes brought about by globalisation and consumer capitalism, and it also includes a sense that the physical world as we have known it is vulnerable. Armitage's characters respond to an uncertain world with varying degrees of anxiety, confusion and distress. In this collection colloquialisms and references to popular culture, which are trademarks of his style throughout his career, often have a darker tone. Gregson writes that Armitage's 'references to popular culture' contribute to a 'sense that intellectual hierarchies were being called into question', and I would suggest that, in *Seeing Stars*, this goes further to produce a cultural climate where uncertainty prevails and the stabilities of society as it used to be have been radically challenged (*Simon Armitage*, p. 11). While this might be politically appealing (and the reader can imagine Silkin also thinking so), in this collection the status quo has not been replaced with anything coherent. Rather, the reader observes a fractured landscape where priorities seem misguided and events, rather than following through to logical conclusions, change course without warning or justification.

If in the Stanza Stones project the focus is on elemental transformation and creativity, the mode of transformation in *Seeing Stars* is altogether darker. Gregson notes that the reader of Armitage's poetry experiences a sense that 'places which are geographically distant from each other can still interact and intermingle', a challenge to the careful bioregionalism of the Stanza Stones project (*Simon Armitage*, p. 74). In *Seeing Stars*, for example, a poem titled 'Beyond Huddersfield' gives the reader every sign that the events described take place in North America without reference to the West Yorkshire town. 'Beyond' apparently represents discontinuation as much as lineage. The darkness in this collection is at its most profound when it is found in black humour. Comedy in Armitage's poetry is 'sometimes [...] a gesture for inviting companionship with the reader and encouraging them to stay with me while I get on to what I really want to say' – a narrative device and an expression of form (*Interview*). The *blackness* of the humour that Armitage deploys with such success in *Seeing Stars* emerges perhaps as a necessary response to the level of insecurity that the poet is articulating:

I think it's sometimes a deflection, I think it's sometimes a disguise, I see dark humour and seriousness as being very, very close. If I ever encounter somebody being utterly serious, utterly, utterly serious, they're only micro-metres away from being absolutely hilarious. (*Interview*)

As this comment suggests, irreverence is a key mode of response for Armitage (this is something that I explore in detail in Chapter 4), both as a writer and as a reader:

For all its seriousness and for all its position as one of the great jewels in the crown of poetic literature, Gawain is funny in parts, it is naturally, unavoidably funny. For example, the author must surely have been aware, when he takes five stanzas to dress pious Gawain in all his various bloomers and shirts and chainmail, that he's sending him up. (*Interview*)

The irreverence Armitage demonstrates in his evident enjoyment at the hero being made a little ridiculous is in line with a pervasive anti-establishment voice in his poetry. The 'pious' knight clearly takes himself with a level of seriousness that neither the Gawain poet nor Armitage can quite stomach. The gap between Gawain's self-perception and the way the poet asks the reader to see him produces irony, which is also humorous and is an example of the pleasure the poet takes in incongruity. In Chapter 4 I argue that *black* humour and irony produce what Isabel Galleymore calls a 'corrective function' in environmentally conscious poetry – that is, the tensions in irony and the refusal to be sanctimonious give the reader the opportunity to challenge his or her own ethical convictions.³¹ My focus on the ecological in *Seeing Stars* is sensitive to the ways such concerns interweave with questions of politics, society and the imagination. Armitage describes a world in which the organic and the constructed are infinitely interactive makes him an extremely powerful voice in a culture still getting to grips with climate change. This makes the encounter I broach between Armitage and Silkin a highly pertinent one.

³¹ Isabel Galleymore, 'A dark ecology of comedy: environmental cartoons, Jo Shapcott's Mad Cow poems and the motivational function of the comic mode', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17 (2013), 151-63 (p. 160).

V Jon Silkin and Simon Armitage: Anxious (Eco)Poets

The reader will note that in this thesis I focus both on poetry that has the organic world as the primary subject (Silkin's 'flower' poems and Armitage's *In Memory of Water*) and on poems in which encounters with the more-than-human are integrated with, and sometimes apparently overshadowed by, religion, politics, society, personal relationships and self-introspection. Considering environmental issues in their broader contexts does not mean neglecting flowers, rivers, meadows, forests and animals, just as focusing on those aspects does not legitimise accounts that separate them from their environments. Their writing careers overlap by eight years – Armitage's first collection, *Zoom!*, was published in 1989, and Silkin was writing up to his death in 1997 – but, broadly speaking, the two poets are responding to different cultural moments. David Kennedy identifies three post-war phases in British poetry: the Movement (accounting for poets such as Philip Larkin), the 'middle-generation' (including Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney and Douglas Dunn, and, I would argue, Silkin), and the New Generation poets (Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy and others).³² In this thesis I will continue to demonstrate the ways in which the poets' approaches to writing about their experiences of the more-than-human make productive correspondences (through similarity *and* difference) with one another. I will also explore a related narrative, in terms of each poet's responses to catastrophe and to the threat of catastrophe. Each poet variously explores both global and individual disasters, and both intentional violence and the traumas produced by indiscriminate or unknown actors.

The reader already has a sense of Armitage's consciousness of anthropogenic climate change and environmental degradation. Silkin's understanding of catastrophe comes in the most part from a different form of anthropogenic atrocity in the events of the Holocaust and nuclear weapons detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In both cases, the anxiety of a repeat event was always pertinent for Silkin. The developments in nuclear weapons made post-1945 only heightened this concern. Invoking Adorno, Drew Milne draws connections between 'the destructions of reason represented by Auschwitz and the atomic bomb', in each case

³² David Kennedy, in Keith Tuma, *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and the American Reader* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 193.

exemplifying a sublime form of near-total annihilation.³³ The distress this produces is similarly limitless: ‘the nuclear imagination opens up questions of anxiety, fear and trauma, a mourning that extends from Hiroshima as far into the future as can be imagined’ (Milne, p. 93). In the case of nuclear war, the anxiety is as much a more-than-human concern as a human one, as much ecological as political. Drawing on Jonathan Schell, Frances Ferguson writes:

Nuclear war would, most likely, quickly bring about the extinction of all forms of life [...] nuclear weapons have an extraordinary range of destructive effects by which they achieve what we have routinely come to call their overkill.³⁴

The nuclear is fundamentally non-hierarchical in its destructive capabilities, and the nuclear imagination thus informs a sense of the global-scale catastrophe that threatens life on earth in Armitage’s time. It is also true that the ecological effects of nuclear industries (warfare and energy alike) are an irreversible, powerful, defining quality of the Anthropocene. Like the cyanide and zinc traces that evidence two very different forms of brutality, nuclear fallout is an ecological concern, as Hannah Arendt explains:

Günther Anders, in an interesting essay on the atom bomb [...] argues convincingly that the term “experiment” is no longer applicable to nuclear experiments involving explosions of the new bombs. For it was characteristic of experiments that the space where they took place was strictly limited and isolated against the surrounding world. The effects of the bombs are so enormous that “their laboratory becomes co-extensive with the globe”.³⁵

Just as Silkin’s cultural imagination is altered by knowledge of the devastation in 1945 Japan, so too is his body. The terrifying ecology of radiation is a narrative that extends, uninterrupted, from the life of Silkin to the life of Armitage, and beyond. Parallel to this, often integrated and often divergent, is horror at the brutality that human beings can inflict on their material environments, and a persistent reminder of the volatility of the world.

³³ Drew Milne, ‘Poetry After Hiroshima?’, *Angelaki*, 22.3 (2017), 87-102 (p. 90).

³⁴ Frances Ferguson, ‘The Nuclear Sublime’, *Diacritics*, 14.2 (1984), 4-10 (p. 5).

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 150, n. 13.

I am now in a position to explore the various textures of Silkin's vegetal poetics, and the intra-actions between creaturely life and politics, language and the imagination that Silkin poses in the 'flower' poems. First, I want to briefly draw this discussion back to language. Armitage's response to Silkin acknowledges the differences between the poets while attesting to the possibility of identifications in terms of creativity:

[I] read it and really enjoyed it, incredibly rich. [...] I've always been conscious of his presence and his relevance to Leeds for example, but he's never really figured for me. But I was really taken with the inventiveness of the poems when I read *Making a Republic*, and at the density of the language. (*Interview*)

Making a Republic (2002) is a collection rich with terrors and anxieties (as I will demonstrate in Chapter 2 of this thesis). Armitage's appreciation of the forms of language used in these poems suggests correspondences not in the *style* of the two poets' reactions to disaster, but in the impulse to make poetic language the *medium* of that response. The complexity of Silkin's syntax in free verse differs significantly from Armitage's characteristic clarity and formal precision: the former's complexity is overt, and the latter's layered beneath the surface. Yet Armitage himself suggests what a fallacy it would be to create crude distinctions between poets' usage of language when he remarks of Silkin's 'Death of a Son': 'I remember it from a long time ago – it uses quite simple, quite straightforward language' (*Interview*). The reader might have expected such a description to apply to his own poetry, rather than Silkin's, but, as this thesis will show, the differences between these two remarkable poets nevertheless admit various and multiple points of connection. This Introduction has presented a reading of Armitage's ironic exchange of weapons for flowers in *Killing Time*. The next stage of this discussion will reveal a very different type of plant poetry.

Chapter 1: ‘Organic poetry’ in Genesis: Literary Ecology and Jon Silkin’s ‘Flower’ Poems

In the early 1960s, the flora in the front garden of Jon Silkin’s flat at 144 Otley Road in north Leeds captured his imagination, stimulating the production of the ‘flower’ poems. The poems are species-specific, each poem concentrating on a different flower, and while Silkin does explore the flowers’ forms and behaviours in detail, he is also interested in each flower as a member of a community, a neighbour both of other plants and of the poet. A group of ‘flower’ poems were first published in pamphlet form by Northern House (*Flower Poems*, 1964).¹ A slightly revised selection appeared in the collection *Nature with Man* (1965), including the discursive ‘Note on ‘Flower’ Poems’ (which had been printed in the *Glasgow Review*).² A second edition of *Flower Poems* was brought out by Northern House in 1973. The title of the ‘Note’ refuses to describe the poems as a complete or finished text (as would the title ‘Note on *Flower Poems*’), and I follow Silkin by referring to the ‘flower’ poems throughout. While the poems stand alone, together they comprise a poetic ecology, representing a highly focussed, interconnected group. Silkin’s nature is never passive, insular or indeed *nice*: the poems are brave and darkly unsentimental, figuring the flowers as ‘creatures’ with bodies and experiences, and which may be cunning, power-hungry, duplicitous or sexually predatory, participating in a world characterised by suffering, struggle and pain. Yet the flower poems do not repel, but make an appeal to the reader by means of their visual precision and detailed, visceral accounts of individual creaturely lives. In the ‘Note on ‘Flower’ Poems’, Silkin describes the creative process as a kind of negotiation between flowers and human beings:

¹ Northern House was set up by Jon Silkin and Andrew Gurr in the Department of English Literature at the University of Leeds in 1963, when they acquired a hand printing press. The first three pamphlets, by Silkin (*Flower Poems*), Ken Smith (*Eleven Poems*) and Geoffrey Hill (*Preghiere*) were released in May 1964, with pre-subscription funds raised from advertisement in *Stand*. For more information, see the Leeds Library’s record on *Stand* and Northern House: <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections/collection/38>.

² Silkin, ‘On His Flower Poems’, *The Glasgow Review*, 1.4 (1964-65), 13-15; and Silkin, ‘Note on ‘Flower’ Poems’, *CP*, pp. 285-88.

The method is to take one particular species of flower, and to look at the flower quite closely. I also try to characterize the life and process of the flower and, in making all three substantial, to suggest certain correspondences with human types and situations. Yet although the poems are not only, and not simply, about flowers, they are not only or simply about human beings and their predicaments. They hover tentatively between the two, although whatever object or situation they temporarily absent themselves to they never lose sight of the flower. (p. 285)

The poems are neither solely human nor solely flower, but an integrated composition, conscious of *both* similarities and differences between animals and plants. Although Silkin consciously resists anthropomorphism (he is explicit on this subject in the ‘Note’), the poetic expressions of the flowers’ natures are highly subjective. Nonetheless, imaginative engagement is driven by a desire to be rooted in the earth (as opposed to only in the text), and in scientific as well as poetic knowledge. In a review of *Flower Poems* (2nd edn), John Cassidy notes that ‘the juxtaposing of hard-edged botanical recording with imaginative resonance [...] make[s] a unique record of feeling’.³ They are not scientific poems, if one could define such a thing, but the manner of highly detailed observation and the attempt to gain an insight into the flowers themselves, rather than their cultural significations, has led Cassidy and others to invoke scientific disciplines.⁴ The tension created between a botanical attention to detail – form, physical process, relationship with environment – and the presence of the poet’s perception, language and creative imagination is what generates the substance of the poems. This chapter will explore the ‘contiguous’ relationship between flowers and human beings as manifested in the poetry, to suggest ways of thinking about the relationship between Silkin’s poetic creativity and organic life, and, by extension, to gain insight into the nature of eco-poetics more widely. I will examine draft materials, in order to ‘establish a

³ John Cassidy, ‘Energy and Shape’, *Poetry Review*, 69.1 (1979), 66-69 (p. 69).

⁴ See also Christopher Ricks: ‘The staccato manner successfully combines the gnarled gruntings of a gardener with the aloof daintiness of an encyclopedia’; James Dickie: ‘[the] poems fuse exact biological observation with an intuitive understanding of a flower’s character’; and, for a less sympathetic review, Robert Nye: ‘their ‘worked’ cleverness speaks of the poet grubbing about in the dictionary and the botany book for his effects’ (Ricks, [Review of *Flower Poems*, 1st edn., by Jon Silkin], *New Statesman*, 24 July 1964; Dickie, ‘Silkin & Smith’, *The Glasgow Review*, 1.4 (1964-65), 40-41; Nye, [Review of *Flower Poems*, 1st edn., by Jon Silkin], *Yorkshire Post*, 11 June 1964).

work's avant-texte (to reconstitute its genesis)', and reveal a close relationship between the published text and the way it is produced.⁵ The ways that the act of poetic creativity is related to the organic world in Silkin's creative imagination is the point of departure for this reading of the flower poems.

1.1 Reading Silkin's Manuscripts: 'Organic poetry' and the Genesis of the Text

In a conversation about contemporary poetry with Anthony Thwaite, poet and then editor of *The Listener*, Silkin describes a theory of 'organic poetry'.⁶ Silkin acknowledges that some writers favour 'closed, rather static techniques; whereas I am interested in a writing that is in precess [sic]'.⁷ Thwaite responds, 'You are asking for what you call organic poetry', and in the progressively combative exchange that follows, Silkin articulates details of this poetics.⁸ The discussion gains depth with use of examples from Yeats, Larkin, Hughes and others. In this chapter I identify three related features of 'organic poetry' that function in significant ways in the flower poems and illuminate the relationship between the poetry and Silkin's creative process. The first of these ideas is that some form of change or movement occurs in the organic poem. Silkin identifies a contrast with Larkin's 'Church Going', which is 'not what I would call organic. I think that it tends to have one situation and never leaves it. [...] I don't think that that is what I would really call a poem of exploration' (Thwaite and Silkin, p. 11). The spatial consciousness discernible in Silkin's theory is also traceable in the flexibility of his creative imagination, and examining changes between a draft of the 'Note on 'Flower Poems' and the definitive (published) version suggests that Silkin's creative process

⁵ Pierre-Marc De Biasi, 'Toward a Science of Literature: Manuscript Analysis and the Genesis of the Work', in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, ed. by Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 36-68 (p. 44).

⁶ The conversation was taped and reproduced in *Stand: Anthony Thwaite and Jon Silkin, 'No Politics, No Poetry?'*, *Stand*, 6.2 (1963), pp. 7-24.

⁷ The contexts of the word 'precess', both immediately and in the conversation more generally, suggest that this is a typographical error, which should read 'process'.

⁸ Thwaite and Silkin, pp. 9-10. Jon Glover has told me in conversation that according to Silkin, the conversation became increasingly argumentative until he and Thwaite agreed that the tape recorder should be switched off.

is also subject to movement and exploration.⁹ The draft I am referring to is untitled and consists of four pages, the first two typescript and the second two manuscript (the four pages are numbered consecutively in the top left-hand corners, in a hand that is probably Silkin's).¹⁰ Up to the end of the section on 'The Violet', this version has largely reached the stage of the definitive text, but from this point on, the 'Note' is in much earlier stages of generation. Following the paragraph on 'The Violet', there are brief developmental comments on 'Moss' and 'Milkmaids' and a final paragraph relating to 'White Geranium':

'White Geranium' is a poem about age, or rather, since it is about a plant, whose span is briefer than man's, and can therefore be observed, it is a poem about ageing. It is a poem that comes after 'Milkamids' [*sic*], therefore, and closes the 'flower poems' up [*sic*]. (Silkin, 'Draft, ts and ms, four pages', p. 2)

Silkin has drawn a bracket around these two paragraphs and written beside it the note, 'expand'. In the final version, the commentaries on 'Moss' and 'Milkmaids' are indeed lengthened, but material on 'White Geranium' is not included. I want to suggest that in the use of 'closes', Silkin becomes conscious that this is precisely how he does *not* wish his poems to function. Pierre-Marc De Biasi writes that the 'work's [draft] manuscripts [...] are clearly distinct from the text; although they lead to the text, they also keep reminding us that they are prior and external to it', and that it is often possible to locate not only textual but ideological differences between draft material and the definitive work (p. 38). In the process of drafting the 'Note', it seems, Silkin realises that he does not want to 'close' the poems, but keep their exploratory potential alive: as J.J. Healy writes in a review of *Flower Poems* (1st edn), 'Silkin's poems do not terminate, they do not seal themselves off'.¹¹ This openness is exploratory in that, arguably, the poems do not present a comprehensive account of the flower but a partial image, and the reader is asked to engage

⁹ Pierre-Marc de Biasi's term for the published text (as opposed to draft materials) is 'definitive form' (p. 42). It is arguably never safe to assume that even a published work is 'finished'.

¹⁰ These materials are all held in the collection, 'Leeds Poetry 1950-1980'. As this is an untitled draft, I will hereafter identify it as 'Draft, ts and ms, four pages' (Silkin, [Draft, ts and ms, four pages], Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 20c Silkin/1/4/3/1/5).

¹¹ J.J. Healy, 'Jon Silkin, *Flower Poems*', *Poetry & Audience*, 11.22 (1964) [non-paginated].

creatively with the ambiguities of the text. This is why, in his conversation with Thwaite, Silkin distinguishes between the poet as 'observer' and the poet as 'participator', where participation keeps the poem present and open, with experience at the heart of this active poetics (p. 14).

Exploratory processes form the second group of features and are evident in the flower poems in moments of self-conscious play between physical and conceptual movements. For example, 'The Violet' opens with characteristic scrutiny: 'The lobed petals receive / Each other's nestling shape'.¹² The movement here is related to communication, comparison and convergence, based on physical likeness. However, this shifts dramatically, as, mid-poem, the violet:

Halves itself, pushing apart

In two separate forces;

It divides up itself, it becomes two violet portions. (p. 276)

The single flower splits into two, the physical transformation fuelled by an apparent inclination towards self-mutilation, despite the exchange apparent in the first lines of the poem. The resemblance between the shapes of the petals still stands, but the terms of that relationship have changed. The violet appears to self-create by means of its own oppositional 'forces', which are at once divisive and creative. Writing on D.H. Lawrence, Silkin relates the convergence of oppositional forces in Lawrence's poetry to the idea of 'beauty':

Lawrence thought that strength and delicacy together were the requisites of good or great poetry [...] Perhaps his abundance of response is that genderless praise of and tribute to nature as we find it so often – an interfusion of opposites of which beauty – dare one use the word – is the product.¹³

Silkin tentatively suggests that creativity is generated by difference (in a 'tension of opposites', in Lawrence's words), and the 'interfusion of opposites' provides Silkin with a means of articulating a sensitive 'response' to nature: rational understanding

¹² 'The Violet', *CP*, pp. 276-77 (p. 276).

¹³ Silkin, 'Quick Man: D.H. Lawrence's Poetry', *Stand*, 23.1 (1981-82), 31-34 (p. 33).

is produced *with* creativity.¹⁴ The ‘strength and delicacy *together*’ (my italics) that Silkin attributes to Lawrence’s poetics is a combination also identifiable in ‘The Violet’:

It requires courage, and finds that
In this unclasping of its self-worship: two palms tentatively
Open. Going both ways,
[...]
Created, exposed, powerful. (pp. 276-277)

Here the flower finds ‘courage’ (‘strength’), if ‘tentatively’ (‘delicacy’). Being ‘Created’, it is both ‘exposed’ and ‘powerful’ (‘delicacy’ and ‘strength’). The creative potential of opposing forces in Silkin’s poetic imagination is evident, and what is also revealed here is an interest in relationships that are characterised by *both* similarity and difference. When the violet ‘Halves itself’, something is lost, and what is gained is two bodies that are separate yet fundamentally related, bodies that themselves are both inextricably connected with *and* removed from the violet at the opening of the poem. The use of ‘palms’ rather than petals is less a connection with a larger palm tree, than – in the context of ‘unclasping’ and ‘self’ – with the palms of human hands. In this way, ‘The Violet’ ‘hovers tentatively between’ humans and flowers (‘Note’, p. 285). From this account in the ‘Note’, Silkin continues, ‘I am trying to find some common denominator that will pull together these two kinds of life’, and he finds this in the similarity and difference that emerge in ‘organic’ and exploratory modes of creativity (p. 285). The pattern of variation in repetition *within* the violet mimics the condition of similarity and difference in the relationship between vegetal being and animal being.

Exploratory change, then, is an important aspect of an organic poetics as conceived by Silkin, where movements in ideas develop from processes in the language. Even after the violet’s significant transformation, a sense of the previous whole remains in the subsequent halves, and continuity even within change such as this is the second principle of organic poetry that I am discussing. Silkin explains:

¹⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 348.

In each stage of the poem you don't get the sense of the beginning lost or finished with, as you might in a static poem. Each stage is carried with the new stage, so that at the end of the poem you have an accumulated weight; you have the beginning implied in the end, but not the end in the beginning. (Thwaite and Silkin, pp. 12-13)

The narrative of exploration is continuous, without disjunction or breach: even when significant change takes place, the novelty of the new idea retains a root in its earlier form. Silkin suggests here that the poem enables both the poet and the reader to reach a previously unassumed level of understanding, which may be powerful because of the progressive (and therefore, at least to some extent, logical) route that has taken them there. Both reader and writer participate in this rooted, generative process, because both the definitive 'organic' poem and the process by which it is created are formed by 'accumulated weight'.

A developmental accumulation is evident in the language of 'Moss', a 'creature' that, at first:

[...] shelters on the soil, quilts it.

So persons lie over it; but look closely:

The thick, short green threads quiver like an animal

As a fungoid quivers between that and vegetable¹⁵

The moss's soft appearance attracts human beings, and the proximity of person to plant reveals the similarities *and* the differences between the two. The moss is grounded spatially and temporally, and is not an 'animal', but neither is it fully 'vegetable', at least not in the unfeeling, insentient way that word is often meant to imply. Its movements reveal how, as a living creature, it has senses, a body and an experience of time, albeit a vegetal temporality that is slower than that of animals. Unlike animals, however, it is without language. It creeps slowly into an urban environment, taking root first at the edges:

Quiet, of course, it adheres to

The cracks of waste-pipes, velvets,

¹⁵ 'Moss', *CP*, pp. 278-79 (p. 278).

Velours them (p. 279)

Having become a verb, ‘velvets’ describes the act of covering something with velvet, which develops further into the verb ‘Velours’, which has its etymological root in ‘velvet’. ‘Velours’ is an object, part of a hat: so the language comes to *embody* what at first it *enacts*. In the following line there appears a ‘ruff’, and shortly after an ‘over-knit fiction of stubbed threads’. The language of fabric begins with the agency of the verb ‘quilts’, and in a connective vocabulary of clothing stitches together its created human figure with literary ‘fiction’. The poem is materially rooted in tactile and sensory experiences, such as those produced by fabric or sound, and the changes that take place in the moss’s environment in turn characterise the creature itself. The moss ‘amplifies itself’, the original ‘Quiet’ conquered as the moss ‘overspreads, smears’, and by the end of the poem, the quietness has become deafness. Communication between the poet and the moss is possible through touch, but the moss is indifferent to human language. Correspondences are made, but the moss remains largely alien to the human.

Material transformation is also evident in draft materials relating to the ‘Note on ‘Flower’ Poems’. In the following set of drafts, a significant section of material is initiated, developed and then significantly reduced. However, although this passage is removed, its influence on the final text is notable. Writing is a mode of thinking, it might be argued, and the weight of Silkin’s understanding accumulates throughout the drafting process: the material is not deleted, but rather its meaning is subsumed into the text. Silkin refers to Donald Davie’s critique of Al Alvarez’s introduction to *The New Poetry* (first published 1962) in which Alvarez discusses Hughes’s ‘The Horses’ and Larkin’s ‘At Grass’.¹⁶ The following passage, which it is necessary to quote in full, forms one page of a typescript draft:¹⁷

¹⁶ See Silkin’s *The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 331-32, both for a commentary on ‘what might be called the genetic part of the composition of [Hughes’s] “The Thought-Fox”’ (p. 331), and for an analysis of ‘The Horses’ as a poem with ‘the capacity to mediate between actuality outside the poem and the articulation of that within it’ (p. 332). This account of the poem’s mediation between word and world coheres with Kate Rigby’s argument that ecopoetry ‘urg[es] us to “interrupt” our reading by returning our gaze to what lies forever beyond the page’ (p. 438; see the thesis Introduction). With this insight, ‘The Horses’ might usefully be considered an ecopoem.

¹⁷ I have reproduced these drafts exactly, except for a small number of handwritten marks, and including spelling and grammatical errors. Where Silkin has typed the letter ‘x’ over characters in order to erase them, I represent the erasure with: [xxx]. All of these

One further point occurred to me, provoked partly by Donald Davie's interesting remarks in *Granta* (19 Oct., 1963; Vol. 68 no. 1229):

..to buy sympathy with the human, at the price of alienation from the non-human, is a hard bargain at best..when A.Alvarez introducing the Penguin New Poetry wants to establish that Hughes's poem about horses is better than Larkin's 'At Grass' on the same subject, he does so to his own satisfaction by arguing that Hughes's poem isn't about horses at all; that the horses are 'symbolic' – and symbolic of what? Why, of something in the human psyche, of course. In other words, it's only when what seems to be a nature-poem can be converted into a human-nature-poem that we begin to take it seriously.

In fact, Larkin's poem is not what might narrowly, but precisely, be described as a 'nature-poem'. [xxx] In the first place, it is about a domesticated creature that through breeding and environment bears some of the marks of human beings; and then again, the sophistication with which the horses are treated, the tone of the verse, marks them off from creatures who might have once been wild, but are now tamed. Moreover, some part of Hughes's poem [xxx] firmly resists anthropomorphizing; if that were not so what would be left to re-invigorate [xxx] the humans? And finally, Alvarez does describe Hughes's animals and 'Their brute world' as 'part physical, part state of mind'. It [xxx] depends on what proportions, or emphases, Alvarez is prepared to allot to the 'physical' (nature) and to the 'state of mind' (man). But although I think Davie has partly exaggerated [xxx] Alvarez' view (of Larkin and Hughes) Alvarez tendency is, I think, to symbolize, to see only man as valuable, and nature as man's illustrator, or [xxx] metaphor. But in trying to neutralize Alvarez' version of humanism as Davie sees it, Davie tends to remove nature, to isolate it from human nature, [end page]

Davie's distinction between the 'nature-poem' and the 'human-nature-poem' depends on the assumption that while an environmentally-conscious reader might enjoy a poem about nonhuman animals, for the general reader the subject lacks

following manuscripts relating to the 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' are found in Leeds, Brotherton Library, MS 20c Silkin/1/4/3.

relevance. Alvarez recovers Hughes for the reader who demands that the presence of the nonhuman has some kind of *human* meaning or consequence. Davie's anxiety about the consequences of this thinking for the subjects of those kinds of poems is understandable, as is his wish to liberate Hughes and Larkin from potentially damaging critique. My focus on this ethically charged encounter between three writers specifically falls on the insight that Silkin's engagement with Davie brings to this reading of the 'flower' poems: it is clear that, for Silkin, the presence of the human in the realm of 'nature' or (supposedly) nonhuman worlds is not *by definition* problematic. Rather, it is so only if the 'proportions, or emphases' are weighted unequally that concerns will arise. Crucial for Silkin is the presence of connectivity. If oppressive forms of control are damaging, an egalitarian but divided state is even worse, and if trespassing in others' worlds is permissible, then interaction and communication are of the highest value. Silkin's use of 're-invigorate' is a physical expression of the enlivening potential of dialogic encounters. The irony inherent within any writer's use of language to articulate the experience of a non-speaking creature is not lost on Silkin, but poetry's capacity to make connections in indirect ways gives it potential power to overcome a lack of connection or a breach between humans and flowers.

These insights are developmental for Silkin, and while a subsequent draft is more concise, the progression is clearly visible:

One further point occurred to me, in part, provoked by Donald Davie's interesting remarks in *Granta* (19 Oct., 1963; Vol. 68 no. 1229):

..to buy sympathy with the human, at the price of alienation from the non-human, is a hard bargain at best..when A.Alvarez introducing the Penguin New Poetry wants to establish that Hughes's poem about horses is better than Larkin's 'At Grass' on the same subject, he does so to his own satisfaction by arguing that Hughes's poem isn't about horses at all; that the horses are 'symbolic' – and symbolic of what? Why, of something in the human psyche, of course. In other words, it's only when what seems to be a nature-poem can be converted into a human-nature-poem that we begin to take it seriously.

I'm mostly in sympathy with the assertions here; except that in trying to neutralize Alvarez's version of humanism, I think Davie tends to remove nature, to isolate it, from human nature, an extremity as unproductive as the one which sees all nature as a (symbolic) version of man. Man is a part of nature and to separate the two, or to slide one over the other, is to miss the 'solidity' both of man and of nature. They are contiguous; and this is [xxx] what I'm trying to get at in the 'flower' poems.

I ought to say, even if it's been observed, that the majority of these poems are about wild flowers.

The discussion in the first draft has been refined to a brief comment. Engaging with other poets, Silkin absorbs qualities of Davie's own 'sympathy' which deepens and nuances his own understanding. The term 'contiguous' describes not only proximity but the sharing of edges, implying that flower and human being are each defined by their mutual interactions. The central preoccupation for Silkin is still connectivity: the interactive potential of the human and nonhuman.

By the final version of the 'Note', there is no explicit reference to Davie, Alvarez, Hughes or Larkin. A draft subsequent to those I have quoted, previous to the final version, demonstrates in a combination of typed material and manuscript annotations how the developing ideas are refined further (the italics indicate parts written by hand):¹⁸

One last point. To remove nature ~~by~~, to isolate it from human nature ~~by~~ writing 'nature poetry' and then write about it, is

*an extremity as unproductive as the one which sees all nature as a (symbolic) version of man. Man is a part of nature and to [xxx] isolate one from the other, or to slide the one over the other, is to miss either the (related) complexity of both or the 'solidity' of each. *The two are contiguous; and this is what I'm trying to get at in the 'flower poems'. If seen as contiguous, they can be seen as 2 components capable of mutual enrichment.**

This is identical to the published text, and from analysing these drafts the reader is able to see how Silkin's creative process generates layers that may hide elements

¹⁸ Typescript, with handwritten annotations and alterations. In the top left corner is a manuscript note, 'Type again'.

from view without lessening their influence. If a metaphor were needed, the reader would be moving from observation of a seed under the ground to the view (later on) of a plant's leaves and stem. The extensive quotations and commentaries which form the first two drafts have been refined into the studiously casual, 'One last point'. It is through reading Davie and Alvarez's different ideas that Silkin is able to articulate what it would mean 'To remove nature, to isolate it [...]'. This is an 'accumulated weight' of understanding, in which Silkin's account of inter-creaturely communication becomes more detailed. The concern in the previous draft relating to writing that might 'miss the 'solidity' both of man and of nature' is developed into: 'the (related) complexity of both or the 'solidity' of each'. This is significant because Silkin now articulates a sense not only of the value of each on its own terms, but of the relationship between them, which is characterised by both similarity and difference.¹⁹

We have acquired a sense of the manifestations of 'accumulated weight' in the flower poems, both in the definitive texts and the creative process, and I want to draw attention to a related connection between language and the organic world in Silkin's creative imagination. In a review of *The Complete Poems* of D.H. Lawrence, Silkin focusses on the 'Hebrew form' as a mode that illuminates Lawrence's poetry.²⁰ The idea is that this poetry progresses accumulatively, at every stage maintaining its connections with the beginning even though it has advanced well beyond it. Silkin's understanding of the creative potential of a root in this way is developed from his understanding of Hebrew, through his own command of the language and through his absorption of Erich Auerbach's theories on the Hebrew form in *Mimesis* (to which Silkin refers the reader).²¹ Silkin reads lines from the Bible:

¹⁹ Writing in 1998, Sean O'Brien reflects on the same passage by Alvarez and suggests that 'rather than consider the relative psychic authenticity of Larkin's and Hughes's poems' as Alvarez does, 'at present [...] it may be more useful to consider the versions of England imagined by these two writers' (*The Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary Poetry in Britain and Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 23). A further twenty years on from O'Brien's time of writing, a reading of the two poems from a context of animal studies might be expected, but, writing contemporaneously with Alvarez and O'Brien, Silkin's attention to creaturely life and ecology looks radical.

²⁰ Silkin, 'The Unfolding Repetition', *Poetry Review*, 71.4 (1981), 35-39.

²¹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

The concision of the Hebrew form [...] is interesting. It is a progression by means of which the original germ, or perception, so far from being forgotten, is subsumed in the concluding assertion without any letting-go of the constituents that are used to make the unit. In the last example, above, one sees that the germ of the couplet is 'Foxes have holes'; from this the rest follows. The second half of that line is a restatement of the same idea, and the next line concludes it by antithesis. (p. 36)²²

Gerard Manley Hopkins called the Hebrew form 'parallelism, the 'figure of grammar', with which Biblical poetry is constructed'.²³ There are connections – indeed, parallels – between this and the formulation of inclusive, accumulative linear development in 'organic poetry'. The fragments of text build progressively, each retaining similarity with the previous words and phrases while introducing variation. So 'birds of the air' is a 'restatement of the same idea' in 'Foxes have holes', formulated from a slightly different perspective, while the second line retains its connection with the previous line in its direct opposition. This is not a palimpsest, as the original words are not written out, but rather a propagation of ideas, where each new manifestation retains connections with the original language. This is reminiscent of 'accumulated weight': the reader has seen how Silkin's 'original germ' inspired by Davie is 'subsumed in the concluding assertion without any letting-go'. From his discussion of the verse in Luke (above), Silkin writes of 'the synthetic nature of Hebrew which builds on roots, altering the meaning (emphasis) of the root by means of pre/suffixes without the reader/listener's losing the root-meaning held in the 'new' form' ('The Unfolding Repetition', p. 36). The language of fabric and clothing in 'Moss' may be read as a creative redeployment of the Hebrew form: continuous repetition with variation applies not only to the creative process but to the final text.

Silkin takes the mode of reading used with the verse from Luke, and applies it to Lawrence's 'Phoenix', by means of which he details the poem's progression by parallel repetition and variation. Silkin's analysis develops two key ideas: first, that

²² Directly previous to this passage, Silkin quotes from the *New Testament*, Luke 9:58, as follows:

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests;
but the Son of man ath not where to lay his head.

²³ Silkin, *The Life of Metrical*, p. 17.

the text builds towards a conclusion of ‘accumulated weight’, and, second, that the meanings invoked by a particular word are fully understood only when they are read in context. Connections between words produce further nuanced interpretations. For example, Silkin’s identification of the conceptual connection between ‘nothing’ in line 3 and ‘oblivion’ in line 4 allows him to re-read the first with a heightened understanding of what, exactly, Lawrence means by the third line: ‘Are you willing to be made nothing?’²⁴ Silkin thus identifies ecological connectivity as a feature of Lawrence’s poetry that mimics Hebrew forms, and this drive to reveal connections is the third feature of ‘organic poetry’ that I want to draw attention to. These relationships and correspondences occur between elements of the text itself, between the text and the poet or reader, and between the text and the material world. The poem is produced from imaginative engagement with language and the material world to which it refers, and bringing the two into contact shows each in a fresh light. The reader may learn about the relationships between language and the organic world at the same time as deepening an appreciation of the limits of language. Thus the art of making connections is itself a kind of exploration. Silkin writes that ‘though parallelism is involved in value-making (since it institutes comparisons), it is not intrinsically a hierarchical mode’ (*The Life of Metrical*, p. 17). In conversation with Thwaite, Silkin opposes the organic poem (or ‘poem-in-process’) to the ‘formal’. In the former, the poet begins writing before the poem’s direction has been determined:

The formal poem, and I am very much feeling my way with these definitions – tends to look at the problem like an equation; it has the question – it has the answer. It proceeds to take the poem through this equation so that what tends to be cut out of such a process is the exploratory energy. In this poem-in-process you start off with a concept without knowing where it will lead you. Your concept is a reflection of a certain facet of reality that you feel involved with, but where that reality will lead you you don’t know, but you explore it through the poem. (p. 11)

If demonstrating a formula is the main function of the ‘formal’ poem, the ‘poem-in-process’ is concerned with the creation of something new that is nonetheless firmly

²⁴ ‘The Unfolding Repetition’, p. 37.

rooted in something familiar. The poet learns about relationships in the world by making connections between words, in metaphor and correspondences.

Exploration via connectivity is evident in 'Crowfoot (in water)'. In this 'flower' poem, connections appear through repetition and variation in repetition of a 'root' word. One example is in the development of the word 'leaf'. 'Crowfoot (in water)' opens:

It is found, rooted,
In still water. A leaf,
Shaped like a kidney, floats
Leafing the underside of air, over water,
Taking in both, each side.
Inside the water
Are filaments of flesh-thread
Hair-drifting.²⁵

'A leaf' in line 2 is altered with the suffix '-ing' in line 4, investing the leaf with agency, and with a movement that is passed on to the 'water', which in line 2 was 'still'. The 'leaf' is a kind of negotiator between the air and water, marking the boundary between them, but 'Leafing' also suggests a casual turning through pages: a reading of air and water. This establishes a play between being and understanding, where 'leaf' is both what it *is* and what it *does*. As a verb, the 'leaf' must be leafed *by* someone or something (e.g. animal or wind): so the leaf is what it appears to be, what it does, and what is *done to it*. The leaf comes into being because it is relative to external phenomena. The understanding that objects are defined by their environments is confirmed by the repetition of 'water' in these first lines, which demonstrates a different but related kind of exploration to that of the 'leaf'. Although the word does not develop beyond the root, 'water' manifests itself in a varied but connected set of contexts, appearing in the title followed by three repetitions: '(in water)', 'In still water', 'over water', 'Inside the water'. Common to each of these is a placing of the crowfoot *in relation to* the element. The water is

²⁵ 'Crowfoot (in water)', *CP*, pp. 280-81 (p. 280). Silkin is probably describing the common water crowfoot (*Ranunculus aquatilis*), which is in the buttercup family.

made multi-dimensional to the reader, and in turn it gives the flower both detail and definition.

There is a progression (or accumulation) of language here in physical terms: the 'leaf' starts 'Leafing', its 'underside' becoming 'each side' of air and water, and then coming 'Inside the water'. Water is made material in dimensions and in relation to its external environments. Heidegger writes: 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*'.²⁶ Just as the surfaces that the water touches define its boundaries (and so its existence), the water itself acts on the elements it comes into contact with, as an agent of definition marking out the existence of the air and the leaf as discrete. Similarly, there is more description of the flower's environment than of the flower itself: the crowfoot's world is built out of its relationships with air and water, and the connections between them. We learn about one (world/flower) *by means of its relation to* the other (flower/world). The connections between air and water are similar to those between words in the Hebrew form: proximity and reciprocity tempered by individuality and difference, which also recalls the contiguous relationships between flowers and human beings. It is in this way that an ecology is established; and in its incorporating language (text), imagination (poet and reader) and world (the material) in a connective meshwork of organic processes, it can be defined as a literary ecology. There are many more repetitions in 'Crowfoot (in water)', some of which adapt a single root, and some of which place the same word in different contexts.²⁷ Rather than explore all of these in detail here, I refer the reader to the text with this suggestion of how s/he might continue to read the poem. 'Crowfoot' demonstrates how reading one poetic component in the light of another deepens our understanding of each part on its own terms, as well as the coherent whole. In this way the poetry is not *representing* or describing natural objects, but *embodying* organic form and performing organic processes, revealing the elasticity of the boundaries between text and material world.

²⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 152.

²⁷ For example: 'articulate' (l. 10), 'Articulate' (l. 21), 'articulation' (l. 24); 'smutches' (l. 11), 'smutch' (l. 21); 'parts' (l. 20), 'parts' (l. 27); 'throat' (l. 24), 'throat' (l. 25); 'devoured' (l. 26), 'devoured' (l. 31).

1.2 The ‘Rhymes’ of Flowers: A Theory of Beauty

I am now going to consider the ‘interfusion of opposites’ in the flower poems from a different (but related) perspective, by introducing an essay by experimental evolutionary psychologist Nicholas Humphrey. In ‘The illusion of beauty’, Humphrey formulates a biological explanation to account for the pleasure human beings receive from perceiving beautiful objects.²⁸ Humphrey’s employment of flower metaphors and literary metaphors, concentration on connectivity and relational knowledge, and correspondences with Silkin’s ‘organic poetry’ and ‘Hebrew form’ make interesting parallels within this discussion. Humphrey states his ambitions: ‘to define the particular quality which things of beauty have in common, and then to suggest a possible reason why men – and, for that matter, animals – should be attracted to the presence of that quality’.²⁹ Acknowledging the difficulties presented by such an enquiry, not least because what is considered beautiful may change between perceivers, Humphrey offers a thought-provoking argument to explain the evolutionary advantage that humans and animals gain from engaging with beautiful objects, both artificially created and naturally occurring. Reading Claude Lévi-Strauss, Humphrey observes, ‘To understand the message we must make an equation between the *relations* among the signs and the *relations* among the things signified’ (p. 431). This privileging of relational knowledge is foundational to Humphrey’s investigation into the structure of ‘relations which are *aesthetically* satisfying’, rather than those that are merely instructive (p. 431). For this, Humphrey invokes Hopkins’s ‘On the Origin of Beauty’ (1865), a philosophical fictional dialogue between a university professor and his student in which a chestnut leaf is used to demonstrate that beauty in an object (either natural or artistic) is produced by a *compound* of various individual characteristics rather than any single quality alone. The professor gradually prompts the student’s

²⁸ ‘The illusion of beauty’ later appeared as a chapter in Humphrey’s *Consciousness Regained: Chapters in the Development of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). In the introduction to that collection Humphrey writes: ‘Human beings are as they are because their history – I mean their history for at least the last five million years – has been (so we may guess) as it has been’ (vii). The historical sense of humans’ social and environmental development suggests another way Silkin’s ‘accumulated weight’ may be explored.

²⁹ Nicholas Humphrey, ‘The illusion of beauty’, *Perception*, 2 (1973), 429-39 (p. 430). All references to Humphrey are taken from this version.

understanding that the leaf (which, it is agreed, is beautiful) is composed of an integrated combination of similarity and difference: within the leaf's form, in the leaf's relation to the tree, and the tree's relation to other trees. The fronds of the chestnut leaf are similar in shape, yet they vary in size; the leaves are largely alike, but closer inspection reveals irregularities; the leaf's veins constitute a small-scale version of the pattern of branches, and while two chestnut trees are very much alike (when compared with a birch tree or an elephant), the individuality of each tree's form (height, texture of bark, density of leaves) is nonetheless most apparent when it stands beside a sibling chestnut. This 'mixture of likeness and difference or agreement and disagreement or consistency and variety or symmetry and change' is directly related to the idea of beauty.³⁰ Hopkins parallels these qualities of the leaf with poetic language, specifically rhythm and rhyme: 'What is rhyme? Is it not an agreement of sound – with a slight disagreement? [...] All beauty may by a metaphor be called rhyme, may it not?'.³¹ Humphrey suggests that the pleasure received when encountering objects that 'rhyme' (in Hopkins's sense) is a product of 'our hunger for classification' (p. 437), suggesting that it is biologically advantageous (and therefore desirable) for people to 'seek out experiences through which they may *learn to classify* the objects in the world about them' (p. 432). Rhyme (which we may usefully consider a metaphor for other relational structures) perfectly captures the condition of similarity and difference – repetition with slight alteration; change while retaining a fundamental connection to the previous form – that, Humphrey argues, 'present[s] evidence of the 'taxonomic' relations between things', by which the perceiver is able to learn about the world, and his own participation in it (p. 432). He or she thus develops an intuitive capacity to predict the potential outcomes of previously unforeseen situations, and thus increases the chances of reacting most effectively. 'The role of classification in this context is to help organise sensory experience and to introduce an essential economy into the description of the world' ('The illusion of beauty', p. 433): developing these skills allows the subject to manage vast quantities of sensory data in a highly selective way, gaining a rational, experiential knowledge that may be applied practically. In

³⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue', *Oxford Essays and Notes*, Vol. 4, ed. by Lesley Higgins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 136-72 (p. 141).

³¹ Hopkins, qtd. in 'The illusion of beauty', p. 432.

the case of Silkin's reader, the kind of understanding that he or she develops from reading the poems is not a definitive or even explanatory mode, but rather a deepened understanding of the potential for various contradictory viewpoints to co-exist, and of the pervasiveness of uncertainty. There is a parallel between Humphrey's appeal for 'essential economy [in] description' and Silkin's interest in the 'concision' of the Hebrew form: in both cases, there is an understanding that the most effective modes of expression privilege clarity over excess. Humphrey develops a metaphor in order to explain how this targeted classification works:

The zoologist needs to prove that his criteria serve both to *group* different animals together and to *separate* one group from another. Accordingly he looks for two kinds of examples: (i) sets of animals which share a particular distinctive feature, and (ii) other sets of animals which share a contrasting feature. Thus he looks in effect for 'likeness tempered with difference', 'rhyme', and for *contrast* between sets of rhyming elements. But he is not interested in seeing repetitive examples of the same animal, nor in seeing an animal which is altogether different from the others and thus lies beyond the scope of his classification – 'a mere recurrence kills rhyme, as does a mere confusion of differences'.

Pursuing this metaphor of the taxonomic 'poem':

horse 'rhymes' with dog',
hen 'rhymes' with parrot,
horse and dog contrast with hen and parrot,
horse does not rhyme with horse, not hen with hen,
neither horse nor dog nor hen nor parrot rhyme or
contrast in a relevant way with octopus. (p. 434)

Humphrey identifies the delicate balance by which 'rhyme' operates: the relational elements must not be *too* alike, nor *too unlike* the others. The reader will identify another inexact but significant correspondence – a 'rhyme', perhaps – with the Hebrew form. In the latter case, variation in repetition is evidenced in successive transformations, while the former produces these relationships between independently existing elements, but both are concerned with similarity and difference. Humphrey's is a game of logic with a particular set of parameters, which

if widened or tightened would change the status of the connections. If we knew that the parrot was a Cape parrot we might expect it to rhyme with a Red-bellied parrot or a Spix's macaw rather than a hen; similarly, if the group under investigation included tractors and bicycles then the parrot may well rhyme (or contrast) with octopus. The potential for redrawing the terms of Humphrey's relationships is endless, but this is precisely the point. The 'taxonomic poem' is intended to teach us about 'the *relations* among the signs and the *relations* among the things signified', not the things themselves. It is not a nature poem: it is not about the animals, but about the human tendency to order and categorise and gain understanding of one thing by 'reading' it in the light of another. Interestingly, it would be more appropriate to class the 'taxonomic poem' as an ecopoem than a nature poem, since it is concerned with the ways we perceive the more-than-human world in terms of connections, and the capacity of poetic language to articulate or alter those perceptions. What Humphrey's 'poem' presents is a system of relationships which may be analogous to the ways we think about chestnut trees, violets or poems, and so teaches us that we might find the pattern of similarity tempered by difference in other places. This is not identical to Silkin's treatment of flowers and human beings as contiguous creatures, but reading Humphrey alongside the flower poems allows us to see that poetry (with its condensed mode of expression and predilection for metaphor) is not *incidentally* the mode of expression that allows Silkin to 'find some common denominator that will pull together these two kinds of life', but the only, and the essential, articulation.

The latter part of Humphrey's discussion comprises a detailed account of beauty that uses flowers as the mode of articulation: 'I want first to consider not 'works of art' but certain natural phenomena which men call beautiful and yet which have no 'natural' value to us' (p. 436). I will suggest that the comparison with Silkin's 'organic poetry' is, while unexpected, significant. In the flower poems, the focus on sensory experience, interaction and physical process produces poems (and flowers) that are not traditionally beautiful, but may be considered beautiful because of their rootedness in the earth, the precision of observation and their 'rhymes'. Like Hopkins, Humphrey's metaphors are botanical, with attention to components of the physical form:

Petals, stamens, and leaves form three sets of contrasting rhyming elements: each petal differs in detail from the other members of its class yet shares

their distinctive shape and colour, and the same is true for the stamens and the leaves; the features that serve to unite each set serve at the same time to separate one set from another. (p. 437)

The petals ‘rhyme’ with each other, each following the same pattern with slight variations, but the petals ‘contrast’ with the stamens and leaves. Similarity and difference are two sides of the same coin. In ‘Given a Flower’ (*The Ship’s Pasture*, 1986), Silkin identifies a related combination of similarity and difference in the flower’s form:

In this tarnished leaf printed in the overside
of the smaller of two petals,
matched and different,
the violet’s life flickers.³²

The use of ‘printed’ produces a metaphor that is related to the ‘leaf’ in ‘Crowfoot (in water)’, suggesting that a page of text and the ‘page’ of a leaf are both surfaces inscribed with meaning, which may be interpreted by a perceiver. Both the pair of petals and the leaf and smaller petal are ‘matched and different’: the syntax allows one line to refer to two relationships, and so embodies the connection between the pairs as well as within each pairing. The violet both thrives and is vulnerable as it ‘flickers’ between states. From the poet’s perspective, the flower’s vital existence is formed out of this play of identification and contrast.

Silkin’s ‘Iris’ also demonstrates an interest in the constituents of the flower. The poem opens with a description of the flower’s three large petals, and then:

[...] Where the joins
Of those three start
Are three smaller shapes,
Not striped like the first three.
Above these a further three,
As if a mimic of the second,

³² ‘Given a Flower’, *CP*, pp. 576-78 (p. 577).

Suggesting consciousness.³³

Here the flower is an assembly of ‘rhymes’: the second group of petals is very like the first set, but differs in size and in absence of colour pattern. In this play of similarity and difference, Silkin’s flower may support Humphrey’s theory, but for the poet this repetition with variation does more than determine the flower’s beauty: it is evidence of the particular vitality that Silkin’s flowers hold. The third group is an exact ‘mimic’ or echo of the second group, varying only in their relative positions. Writing in the early 1960s, Silkin’s attribution of consciousness to the iris is radical: it is only recently that botanists have begun to seriously research plant being. On the one hand, the idea that a plant’s organic growth is done with self-awareness makes this iris a particularly animal-like flower. On the other hand, Silkin describes ‘consciousness’ as a condition of deliberate, creative interaction with an external world, where responses to material and sensory stimuli repeat the information received with some variation. This is one way of describing the minute workings, or experiential conditions, of *both* human beings and flowers. This redefinition of ‘consciousness’ from an ecocentric perspective acknowledges the flora-like characteristics of fauna, the fauna-like characteristics of flora, and identifies all living creatures as members of one community, who relate to each other not despite their differences but because of them. It may be the case that Silkin and his contemporary commentators were not aware of the appeal to scientific modes of understanding the flower poems would make. Not to exclude tentative insights offered by prominent scientists over the centuries, it is largely since the 1970s that ‘the idea that plants are sentient organisms which can communicate, have a social life, and solve problems by using elegant strategies – that they are, in a word, *intelligent*’ has become the focus of some botanists.³⁴ The field of plant intelligence does not seek to show that plants are *similar* to animals, but to demonstrate that they, too, are evolved, complex living ‘beings’. At times this does reveal comparisons with animals, or animal-based metaphors are used to explain processes in plants; at times the explanation for the plant world being overlooked by human beings is as a result of the (perceived) contrary natures of animals and plants.

³³ ‘Iris’, *CP*, pp. 283-84.

³⁴ Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Brilliant Green: The Surprising History and Science of Plant Intelligence*, trans. by Joan Benham (Washington: Island Press, 2015), p. 2.

Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola propose that ‘arguments for denying plants’ intelligence rely less on scientific data than on cultural prejudices and influences that have persisted for millennia’, suggesting that a poet is well-placed to bring about some kind of change in cultural norms (p. 2). A single mode of knowledge (scientific or artistic) is unlikely to prove enough to engender real change in understanding, but two modes more than double the potential. I would argue that, more broadly, this is true of the contribution art makes to an environmentalist re-thinking of human/nonhuman relations. However, I do not mean to imply that Mancuso and Viola’s theses are incontestable (or indeed uncontested), but I am taking one example of theorising plants in order to reveal connections between Silkin’s poetry and later botanical research. Similarly, this exploration of Silkin’s flower poems is not primarily intended to describe the contribution the poetry might make to critical plant studies, and much less plant intelligence, but an awareness of turns in related scientific fields demonstrates just how radical, and indeed ‘*avant la lettre*’, Silkin’s creative and philosophical engagements with the plant world are. Silkin goes some way towards reasserting the value of plants as sensing, evolved, complex living beings, not to write out the (many, significant) differences between plants and animals but to understand their relatedness as well as their differences. So the relationship between creature and world resembles the relationship between creatures (‘contiguous’), which in turn is like the inner patterns of creatures’ forms (the ‘petals, / matched and different’). At all three stages, the foundational relationship is rhyme. The flower poems are ‘organic’ poems not because their subjects are flowers, but because their structure (which includes their genesis) is organic, and they are ecopoems not as an assumed consequence of their subject matter but on account of their embodiment of ecological form and their self-conscious confrontation with the complexities and limitations to creative renderings of flora. In return, the subject appears in a way that – sensitive to repetition and variation within the creature’s form – is both poetic and beautiful, and therefore engaging, strange and powerfully communicative.

1.3 Communities and Ecologies: Flowers, Humans, Language

The similarity and difference in the relationship between elements of a flower’s form appears in a related way in terms of time, which is the subject of Humphrey’s second account of flowers’ rhyming properties:

Secondly, consider the flower's *kinetic* form. The living flower is in a continual state of growth, changing its form from day to day. The transformations which occur as the flower buds, blossoms, and decays give rise to a temporal structure in which each successive form rhymes with the preceding one. (p. 437)

This describes a process of 'accumulated weight', and also recalls the evolution of language in Silkin's Hebrew form. The reader can identify the 'kinetic form' in Silkin's drafting of the 'Note', the moss's stealthy movements and the violet's self-division. The example of 'kinetic form' that I now wish to refer to demonstrates the reader's active role in Silkin's literary ecology. I have already noted that the poet is a 'participator' in organic poetry, and the following examples demonstrate a transference of a kind of kinetics to the participating reader. Silkin avoids traditional symbolism and motifs relating to flowers, and the 'Lilies of the Valley' are predatory towards the reader in visceral description of the encounter:

A fingering odour, clutches the senses,
Fills the creases and tightens the wind's seams,
As noise does.³⁵

This metaphor hinges on the tension between our expectations of how the flower's scent might be experienced and the synesthetic version here, where we are touched by, and listen to, the odour. If poetry deals in physical senses and the aural, then the odour's being refracted in this way, in this context, is understandable. But the metaphor goes further. The lines before those just quoted read:

What have these to do with beauty?
They must take you with
A fingering odour [...] (p. 272)

The condensed syntax here is characteristic of Silkin's style. The case is not only that the reader's imagination is engaged with the scent of the smell of the lilies of the valley, sensory experience that generates a fresh and surprising meaning, but that, ideologically, Silkin overturns his reader's assumptions that flowers are unconditionally lovely to encounter, or that they always represent what is beautiful.

³⁵ 'Lilies of the Valley', *CP*, pp. 272-73 (p. 272).

This tension is replicated at a further level in comparison with the flower and human's 'contiguous' relationship, where similarity and difference are both maintained. The generation of something fresh and unexpected is a version of the poem's 'kinetic form'. The reader participates in the poem by feeding his or her expectations into the reading experience, which are not merely reflected back, but distorted, injecting the poem with radical energy. Ideologically, what is produced is the condition Silkin describes in the 'Note': although the poems make 'correspondences with human types', they 'never lose sight of the flower' (p. 285). The poem is true to (certain aspects of) the flowers' natures, but by making the reader's response active, human beings are brought into community with flowers.

Parallels between the way a text asks to be read and the material of the text itself are revealed in one way through the shared struggle of flowers and human beings. In 'Milkmaids (Lady's Smock)', the flowers are 'creatures' sympathetic to human suffering, and express the horror they feel at witnessing atrocity:

[...] Their eyes wide,

They halt at the wire. This is the camp.

In silent shock a multitude of violet faces

Their aghast petals stiff³⁶

The flowers watch the prisoners from the other side of a fence, and a connection opens between them, the 'Pale violet' flowers indistinguishable from the faces of the starving prisoners. Witnessing leads to identification and exchange. The implication is that acts of evil of this magnitude – such as the industrial genocide of concentration camps – are a crime against *all* nature, and that *all* life suffers by this violation of creaturely rights. In this case, the milkmaids 'absorb' some of the prisoners' suffering, which is then 'compounded into their children' ('Note', p. 287): like human beings, these flowers pass down the memory of trauma from generation to generation. In this way, human beings and flowers are connected as both observers of, and participators in, the experience of endurance that is common to all living things.

³⁶ 'Milkmaids (Lady's Smock)', *CP*, pp. 277-78.

Silkin is concerned not only with the experience of the victims, but also with the activity of evil itself. Referring to 'Dandelion' and 'A Bluebell' in the 'Note', Silkin describes 'nature's being a 'preying upon'', again focussing on the potential for destruction (p. 286). There is a similar formulation in 'Defence' (*Nature with Man*), in the context of the poet's anxiety about the threat of nuclear war: 'The whole of nature / Is a preying upon'.³⁷ When Fiona Becket describes these lines as 'syntactically counter-intuitive', the reader understands that what is 'counter-intuitive' is not only Silkin's grammar, which folds back in on itself, but the cognitive and political impulses towards destruction that the poem argues against.³⁸ Syntax, like rhyme, can be both itself and a metaphor.³⁹ Parallels with human beings may be made through the beautiful, but, as 'Defence' demonstrates, those similarities may also be identified in what is terrible or disturbing. When the reader looks 'Closer' at 'A Bluebell', s/he sees that they are, 'in all their sweetness, malevolent': the creative potential of oxymoron eliminates any interpretations of suffering in nature as unfortunate but necessary, and introduces an ambiguous moral code.⁴⁰ In the 'Note', Silkin comments on the relationship between man and nature in a way that recalls various patterns of similarity and difference: 'man grows from Nature and remains a part of it yet by virtue of his intelligence grows apart from it'. The use of 'virtue' here may well be ironic: the capacity for destruction (of self and other) that humans have developed with 'intelligence' is frightening for Silkin. He touches on this paradox in the final lines of the 'Note', observing in a discussion about Nazi Germany, 'Not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged' (p. 288). Here the assertion is made, uneasily, that what is 'natural' is not necessarily good, and that a 'natural root' may develop into something that not only is not good, but that transcends the boundaries of what we consider to be natural. The extent to which human atrocities may push their perpetrators beyond the very idea of nature is indirectly questioned in 'A Bluebell':

For there is

³⁷ 'Defence', *CP*, pp. 254-56 (pp. 255-56).

³⁸ Fiona Becket, 'Ecopoetics and Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 214-27 (p. 220).

³⁹ I am thinking here of the previously invoked [Review of Jon Silkin's *Amana Grass*], *Jewish Chronicle*, 25 June 1971.

⁴⁰ 'A Bluebell', *CP*, p. 272.

In the closed, blue flower, gas-coloured,

A seed-like dark green eye.

A visceral manifestation of annihilation is produced by the 'seed-like' potential of the 'eye'. The reference to 'gas' with the blue flower may be read as a reference to the Nazi death camps, and the eye is an observer or a participator in that atrocity. Perhaps this is one 'natural root' that Silkin would not encourage. Threat and struggle are human experiences as much as they are nonhuman, and while 'Lilies of the Valley' makes an appeal to the reader through imaginative knowledge and sensory experience, 'A Bluebell' locates the reader in the space of the poem in a way that has moral or ethical implications. The 'eye' of the reader is guilty by association, and there is no easy way back to innocence.

Having looked at rhyme in a flower's form, and that form's development over time, the third way in which Humphrey shows that 'flowers are the embodiment of 'visual rhyme'' concerns 'a variety of related blooms on show together' (p. 437). A flowering meadow is considered beautiful in terms of the 'likeness tempered with difference' of one species with another: 'while the flowers of one species rhyme with each other the rhyme is given added poignancy by the contrasting rhymes of different species' (p. 437). The rhyme and contrast of petals, stamens and leaves is replicated on a larger scale. Peonies rhyme with peonies, geraniums rhyme with other geraniums, while peonies and geraniums contrast. 'A Daisy' produces the condition of rhyme between members of the same species:

The unwearying, small sunflower

Fills the grass

With versions of one eye.⁴¹

The flowers are 'versions' of a single pattern, both related to and distinct from each of the others. Introducing animal features to the flowers articulates the contiguous nature of the relationship between the daisies and the human perceiver, which seem to take on each other's characteristics. 'A Daisy' presents flowers that are complex and rich for the observer, challenging the low cultural value generally afforded to such 'wild, undomestic' weeds ('Note', p. 285). The inexact mirroring between

⁴¹ 'A Daisy', *CP*, pp. 275-76 (p. 275).

flower and human manifests itself, at various points, as both forms of 'rhyme' and expressions of 'contrast'.

Humphrey suggests that if flowers of the same species rhyme with one other, there is a comparable pattern of similarity and difference in the relationships between flowers of different species. The way a daisy rhymes with another daisy is a relationship that itself rhymes with the way an iris rhymes with another iris, but the individual daisy and iris contrast (which, we remember from the parrot and the horse, is proof of a level of relatedness). In the flower poems, when one type of flower intrudes on another's poem it is usually as a point of contrast. The 'Harebell', for example, is 'related by name to the Bluebell', but the harebell is 'one flower' rather than several, and is 'not blue / Nor violet, hovering between, precisely'.⁴² The similarity in the names brings to light the way the species are different: daisies rhyme with other daisies, but the harebell and bluebell contrast. The 'Lilies of the Valley' also become more clearly defined in relation to another flower. The lilies rhyme with each other, 'white as babies' teeth', but their 'predatory scent' is:

[...] more than

The protected rose creating

A sculptured distant adulation

For itself. (p. 273)

The dismissal of the rose, a deeply rooted popular cultural symbol of love, is a manifestation of Silkin's pervading interest in the aspects of flowering plants that are complex, animalistic and vibrant, but not traditionally beautiful. The unpleasantness of the lilies of the valley is produced by interfusions of opposites on three levels: first, the 'rhyme' of flower petals with 'babies' teeth', a simile grounded on the resemblances in size, shape and colour of these otherwise very different parts of floral and animal bodies; second, in the rhyme of the reader's expectations with the actual poetic encounter ('Even then you don't like it'); and third, in the contrast of the lily with the rose.

The metaphors of rhyme function in Humphrey's system on three levels, and there are also three ways of identifying 'rhyme' in 'organic poetry' and the flower

⁴² 'Harebell', *CP*, pp. 284-85 (p. 284).

poems. The first of these is between words in a poem. The second is as we move through the poem, temporally: the ‘accumulated weight’ and ‘Hebrew form’ exemplify this. The third is between poems. Humphrey’s ‘daisies and buttercups beside each other in the field, violets and primroses together in the hedgerow’ are also a kind of rhyming ‘poem’ (p. 437), and just as Silkin’s flowers ‘rhyme’ with each other, so do the poems. There are extensive thematic repetitions and connections between the poems, where Silkin deploys variations of images in different poems, which speak to each other. Eyes, machines, scent, predatory nature, sexual appetite and suffering are only a few of the characteristics Silkin draws out in multiple flower poems. So the connections, theorised as ‘rhymes’, appear on three levels in the flowers and in the poems, in an original rendering of ‘organic poetry’. Extending this thinking, the flower and the poem might be seen to rhyme, as the poems are intended to get as close to the flowers’ natures as possible, but they are of course made from different materials. The flower and human being ‘rhyme’ in that they are ‘contiguous’: despite their differences, they share physical space and sensory stimulants. The human and the poem ‘rhyme’, in that the poem’s language speaks of, but is unable to *fully* speak of, the physical or psychological contexts it refers to; and in that the poem is never an exact representation of the poet’s perspective because the writing process is subject to external influences. The reader’s experience relates in different ways to the flower, the poem, and to human/poet/language. The reader engages with a group of poems as s/he also engages with a group of flowers, able to perceive difference and likeness between them; s/he experiences both poems and flowers temporally, with alteration in the reader’s own responses over time, thus subject to the changes that external engagements – whether sensory or artistic – have on the self.

Humphrey’s belief in the human ‘hunger for classification’, the view that we have ‘evolved to respond to the relation of beauty which rhyme epitomises’, might account to some extent for the success of Silkin’s flower poems (p. 434). With their significant relationships, the flower poems engage the reader in ecological ‘rhyme’ on different levels, and thus offer material for learning via various modes of being and experience, and the relationships between them (e.g. individual flower and its community). What they also do is allow the reader to understand his or her relation to the world a little better: ‘through the experience of beauty in works of art we *learn to learn*’ (p. 438). The ethical capacity of art has one origin in the potential for

drawing connections between things – to see if they ‘rhyme’, and see the gaps if they do not. Humphrey is clear that ‘classification should be important to biological survival’ (p. 432). He is also clear that the appeal to the human tendency to classify is what makes art beautiful. The third step is to deem an engagement with art to be biologically advantageous, given that the reader and writer of poetry learns about the world as a complex system of relations between beings, species and things, and may therefore function better in it. Creativity produces a *particular* mode of knowledge that emerges in the meeting of rhyming forms and which constitutes, from one perspective, an ethical education. Silkin’s economy with rhyme (in its traditional sense) must be acknowledged – the reader will find no examples of full rhyme in the flower poems – but Hopkins and Humphrey both use ‘rhyme’ as a metaphor for various relational structures. Metaphor itself may be seen as a kind of ‘rhyme’ in its concurrent articulation of the similarities and differences between two things. Compelling similarities bring them together and as metaphor makes them contiguous the variations between them become more prominent. Metaphor expresses this rhyming relationship in its form as well as its content.

Before I move to the next section, in which I consider what the ‘flower’ poems can teach us about literary ecology, I wish to return briefly to ‘Crowfoot (in water)’, to explain the particular potential that the metaphors in Silkin’s flower poems have to ‘redescribe reality’ (recalling Ricoeur).⁴³ As quoted above, lines 7-8 of ‘Crowfoot (in water)’ read: ‘filaments of flesh-thread / Hair-drifting’. By invoking a drowned body, Silkin implies death, trauma and organic decay, complicating the reader’s impression of generation and growth. The visceral comparison between ‘flesh’ and ‘Hair’ of a human being and the body of the plant brings to light the ways the two creatures are both alike and different. ‘Hair-drifting’ prompts the reader to imagine the plant’s tendrils gently floating in the current, and acknowledges that fronds of a plant and human hair behave in similar ways in this environment. The relationship between plant and animal bodies is already established in the previous line, where the plant is not similar to flesh, but *is* ‘flesh’. The metaphor progresses (or accumulates) line by line, where each introduces a new idea that depends on the previous line or image. A similar justification may be offered for the ‘filaments of flesh-thread / Hair-drifting’ metaphor as a whole. This

⁴³ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 5.

metaphor is possible because the 'leaf' began 'Leafing' in the 'still water', taking the reader 'underside of air, over water' and then 'Inside the water', and so we already understand, without needing explanation, that the roots are drifting in the current, like human hair might. There is also no need to name the roots as roots in the 'flesh-thread', as we have followed them from their literal roots in the 'rooted' of the first line (and before that in the water in the title). In this way, the identification that Silkin is making between the body of the plant and the human body is not *described* but is *embodied* in the fabric of the poem, as a happening, taking place or 'hovering between'. Thus the individual natures of plant and human being are maintained, but their differences are only *part* of what characterises the relationship between them, which otherwise is formed from comparable features and correspondence. It follows that a more considerate treatment of plants will result from the realisation that, while different in many respects, the flowers and human beings are creatures in the same community, and that like animals, plants are sensing, intelligent beings. The poetry does not tell the reader, but reveals a situation and lets readers come to their own conclusions. In this way, the beauty of Silkin's poems – their power manifested in the play of similarity and difference – teaches the reader how to learn. Metaphor can radically destabilise long-conceived boundaries between human and flower, man and nature, self and other, by a sensitive exploration of the ways they are contiguous. Poetry, then (and indeed all art forms that employ metaphor), can demonstrate another proximity, of experience to empathy.

1.4 Notes Towards a Literary Ecology

What, then, can we learn about literary ecology, in the light of the connections between writer, text and reader revealed by this discussion of Silkin's 'flower' poems? Insights are provided by the ethics of learning as proposed by Humphrey. William Rueckert writes:

Reading, teaching, and critical discourse are enactments of the poem which release the stored energy so that it can flow into the reader [...] Coming together in the classroom, in the lecture hall, in the seminar room (anywhere, really) to discuss or read or study literature, is to gather energy centers around a matrix of stored poetic/verbal energy. In some ways, this is the true

interactive field because the energy flow is not just a two-way flow from poem to person as it would be in reading; the flow is along many energy pathways from poem to person, from person to person. The process is triangulated, quadrangulated, multiangulated; and there is, ideally, a raising of the energy levels which makes it possible for the highest motives of literature to accomplish themselves. These motives are not pleasure and truth, but creativity and community.⁴⁴

The metaphor of energy exchange is relevant to the 'flower' poems and Silkin's poetry more generally for two key reasons. The first of these is the properly ecological way in which Rueckert establishes the poems and people as relative beings in a dynamic community. This mirrors the encounters Silkin stages between flowers and human beings. The milkmaids have the 'capacity [...] to absorb this distress' from the humans, a form of interaction that is understood as an 'exchange' ('Note on 'flower' poems'). Rueckert's thought might encourage Silkin's reader to pay attention to processes of exchange in which the poem is an agent along with the person and the flower. Reading Silkin in dialogue with Rueckert also influences an understanding of 'organic poetry', which builds to an 'accumulated weight' without loss from the system. One limitation of Rueckert's model is that the energy is apparently the same whoever is transmitting and receiving it. Rueckert imagines the process of energy transfer as a smooth, unbroken, progressive exchange, in which the material's nature does not change as it is transferred. He implies that each reader's response to a poem is similar, and that a single reader's repeated readings of a particular poem would transmit the same energy as the ones previous and subsequent. Yet in the first case, the suggestion of an egalitarian network of responses to the text, while ethically sound, is unrealistic due to its failure to take into account variation in taste, education and reading experience. In the latter case, where a reader returns to a text on numerous occasions, the dynamic engagement between reader and text does not take the same form each time, but alters accumulatively, where the nature of one reading experience is dependent on the existence and nature of the former, as well as on environmental factors unique to the

⁴⁴ William Rueckert, 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism', in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 105-23 (pp. 110-11).

time of each reading. There is a direct comparison between this accumulative reading trajectory and the Hebrew form's progression of increasing complexity from one fragment of text to the next (as observed in Silkin's reading of Luke, for example). The text is generated organically in the building and revisions I have identified in the drafts above. The progress of the poem from line to line as it develops on the page (and in the reader's immediate experience of it) is organic in terms of the accumulative, networked language (see above analysis of 'Crowfoot (in water)'). The reader's experience over a more significant period of time is also organic, building an 'accumulated weight' (or, more accurately, since the reader does not experience a 'definitive' form like a printed poem, an 'accumulating weight') through reading and reflection.

Thus, process is of central importance to the kind of connectivity at work in literary ecology. Genetic criticism is therefore clearly pertinent to this study. In the context of genetic analysis, Louis Hay remarks on:

the deep relation between writing and reading in all texts, the relation between the textualization of a writer's private representation and what one might call the verbal simulacrum, that is, the textual simulation that is later operative in the reader's representations.⁴⁵

The relationship between the mode of writing and the experience of the reader is central to this discussion of Silkin's poetry. Hay's usage of the word 'relation' here rather than 'relationship' allows for the perspective of a third party, which may observe an interaction between two entities encountering each other with similarity and difference and notice how one appears in *relation* to the other. Rueckert's model, focussing only on positive energy, does not easily allow for difference and tension – the forces needed for ethics which are so prevalent in Silkin's poetry. Hay questions the extent to which truth and reality can be sustained in a text once it has been disseminated and engaged in a fresh context. The transferral of poetry is necessarily unpredictable and unfixd, and it is impossible to calculate how it might be interpreted: each reading is always new, taking place in the immediate moment. I have suggested above that taking the text as a form of energy suggests that this

⁴⁵ Louis Hay, 'Genetic Criticism: Origins and Perspectives', in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-Textes*, ed. by Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 17-27 (p. 22).

energy *changes* to some degree each time it is passed on, due to the creativity, preoccupations and relationships of the new reader on his or her own terms, which does not factor in Rueckert's theory. The text must also necessarily be altered by the manner in which it is presented: while Rueckert writes freely of the possibilities of pedagogy, he does not suggest what the consequences of bad (or unsatisfactory) teaching might be on a student's experience and/or the text itself. In his critique of Rueckert, Dana Phillips writes:

we have to think about what poems mean, and luckily for us, they remain stable no matter how many times we peruse them: titles are fixed, word order and rhyme schemes do not change, stanza breaks occur in the same places, and so on. (*The Truth of Ecology*, p. 141)

Generally speaking, the language itself is fixed, and it is the myriad engagements that occur on and around it that might alter, significantly, what kind of text it is perceived to be. However, genetic analysis offers a significant challenge to the idea of the fixed text.

Silkin's published writing, in presenting tensions and oppositions – differences and productive difficulties – might first of all form, if not an absolute challenge to Rueckert, then certainly a more sophisticated imagining of the energy exchange model. Engaging with Silkin's draft materials further opens this up. We might achieve a clearer understanding by considering Hay's use of the term 'simulacrum', by which he suggests a misrepresentation or untruthful portrayal. Hay is clear about the counter-divisive potential of genetic criticism, which 'allows us to glimpse a transcendence of the contradictions that have sometimes divided modern criticism' (p. 22). First arguing for a relationship, rather than contradiction, between genre and structure, Hay then 'question[s] another type of binarism – the opposition between text and context, between the study of writings and of cultures' (p. 23). Deleuze writes that 'by simulacrum we should not understand a simple imitation but rather the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is challenged and overturned. The simulacrum is the instance which includes a difference within itself'.⁴⁶ We recall Hopkins and Humphrey, and 'rhyme' as 'an agreement of sound – with a slight disagreement' (quoted above). In the 'Note', Silkin is clear that the

⁴⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 82.

differences between humans and flowers are equally important to the likenesses. The distance between beings is what they use to communicate. The processes of breaking down binaries implicit in methods of reading definitive works (as opposed to draft materials) might be supported by this understanding of difference not as something that divides, but as a gap that can be traversed or connected, whether through Lawrence (and Silkin's) 'tension of opposites', Hopkins and Humphrey's interest in 'symmetry and change', Hay's abolished binarisms, or Deleuze's difference and repetition. Rueckert speaks of a kind of creativity where 'creation' is 'the raising of matter from lower to higher order' (a definition taken from ecologist Ian McHarg, here p. 111). This conception of creativity is expressed in a different way by Silkin: 'But aren't we writing to communicate? Communicating means the raising of consciousness. Now if you raise someone's consciousness, what are you doing but implying the need for change?' (Thwaite and Silkin, p. 16). Here Silkin writes without the commitment to hierarchy that characterises McHarg's definition, where Silkin's 'raising' is not in reference to a movement from one thing to something of higher value, but an increase in complexity. Silkin elaborates on the importance of 'process' in discussion with Thwaite:

I would start off by looking at that society and saying, here are certain things I dislike. I don't want to start reforming from within, but changing the whole thing, so that 'process' stands by a kind of analogy for revolution. [...] [W]riting draws the readers' attention to certain contradictions and anomalies in society and says, Do you like these things [?] [...] [I]f we don't want to destroy ourselves we have to change society; so that to say it again, when I talk about process, I don't mean process in the abstract. I mean process in relation to the kind of society we have and the kind of changes we may or may not be able to foresee. For example, I do see society moving towards a proletariat state. I think it ought to be helped towards this. (p. 14)

Silkin argues for the power of writing in revolutionary politics. Clearly he wants to foster challenges to injustices in social power structures. Yet until his mention of the 'proletariat state' he is theoretical rather than specific. Nevertheless, he is right in refuting charges of abstraction in relation to his explanation of the processes by which 'revolution' and 'destruction' might come about – the process of dismantling society in order to build it up again is clearly radical. His belief in the writer's role in bringing about transformation and reform is clear. That 'process' is at the heart of

this, and process that clearly works to expose ‘contradictions’, creates an explicit link between the *function* of poetry (and writing), and its internal processes such as I have described above. In simplest terms, the way Silkin’s poetry forms itself in the tension of opposites allows it to articulate a sense of, and to speak to, such complicated oppositions in the fabric of society as identified by Silkin. Further, there is a concentrated parallel between this relationship between world and text, and that relationship between the text and the world in terms of plant life and ecosystem as described above. For this critic and reader, the poetry generates literal and metaphorical connections between social and natural concerns, by means of the similar and comparative identification between text and world in both cases. One consequence of this is a more nuanced understanding of the correspondences between different kinds of creaturely life, and more particularly in terms of concerns that appeal to both epistemological categories. What is further implied is that our capacities for response to such problems may work in complementary ways.

In the context of ‘A Bluebell’, I suggested that Silkin’s enquiry into the meaning of the term ‘nature’ challenges the reader to consider the idea that the most heinous human behaviour falls outside the realm of what is ‘natural’:

Some state practice, or sanction, like that of Nazi Germany, seems to have resulted from a political ordering that exacerbated certain forces it either permitted or deliberately brought into prominence. Not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged. I suppose I should add that I anticipate a time when the state will wither away. (‘Note’, p. 288)

This might be interpreted as, ‘not everything with a natural root *should* be encouraged’, acknowledging that, however difficult it might be to accept, the ideological structures of the politics of Nazi Germany developed out of a civilised society and coherent political structure, and out of things – ‘a natural root’ – that might in other contexts be considered normal, or even beautiful. Silkin asks whether oppressive regimes and a desire for power, manifested in concentration camps and organised murder, racism and hatred, can be taken as ‘natural’? Can we (and should we) consider such appalling extremes of human behaviour to be ‘natural’? Can anything that happens within these physical or political structures, no matter how unusual or destructive, actually be considered outside them? Silkin does not offer much in terms of solutions to these problems, except in the following, studiously

throwaway comment: 'I suppose I should add that I anticipate a time when the state will wither away'. In 'wither', there is of course a connection to the 'natural root' in the previous sentence, and thus a suggestion that the state will 'wither' as a result of the bad 'natural root', or if not a bad root, then a bad trunk, branch or leaf that has grown from the 'natural root'. The metaphor here is broad, leaping beyond analysis of Nazi history to an unspecific 'state' which may be representative of any power structure. If this represents a form of anarchy, however, it is a particularly passive form: even in 'anticipate', the tone implies acceptance more than desire. This may be quite a pessimistic perspective on human nature, which is not impossible to accept in the context of Silkin's writing more generally, but nonetheless there is more going on here, underneath the deliberately obscure and unconcerned exterior. Silkin's target has been aggressive regimes, and his passivity in the face of that may be an assertion of strength; and the quietness may be a confidence. The withering of the state – when that state is the root and theatre of human brutality – could be foolishly optimistic. The final paragraph of the 'Note' opens:

I ought to repeat that the majority of these poems are about *wild* flowers. The state, or monopoly capitalism controlling the individual's environment, this, I suppose, would make the (apparent) choice of the *wild* flower seem an acceptable symbol to some – if that were my meaning. But I don't see it like this [...] (p. 288)

This is an important example of the way the experiences of the beings in this community – humans and flowers – might be thought of as subject to the same systems of control. In terms of identification, this is valid; it may also have real value in thinking about how policy-making at a national or international level might not only need to take into account the existence of both human and nonhuman, but will then affect them both too. This provides a gloss on Silkin's use of nature towards the end of the paragraph, but only to a certain extent. Throughout this paragraph, Silkin moves between the overtly political (that includes reference to the 'environment'), to moments where the focus may appear to be on one more than the other, but nonetheless both are included: 'wild flowers have a strength and tenacity that sometimes contrasts with the domestic plants; [and] the former's vigorous contribution to the domestic land, their proximity to, not their symbolizing of, human beings and their activity' (p. 288). In parenthesis in the middle of this paragraph is an important comment on human/more-than-human relationships: 'man

grows from Nature and remains a part of it yet by virtue of his intelligence grows apart from it', recalling 'Nature with Man' (to which I referred in the thesis Introduction). By the conclusion of the 'Note' the reader is engaged in assessing ways in which the 'state [of] monopoly capitalism' and the 'state' of nature are interrelated and interdependent. As the non-specificity of 'state' invokes the 'state of nature', he admits the negative in both human and nonhuman nature.

From a different perspective, Silkin's comment, 'Not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged', might be understood to mean that encouragement is not always necessary because sometimes growth or expansion will happen regardless of human interference. On the one hand this could be an assertion of the persistence of life, whether human beings are aware of it or otherwise, or a suggestion that an individual cannot necessarily influence community. But while the poems do not deny the logic of this, they are not themselves concerned with what a flower might be beyond the human observer's experience. On the other hand, we might see another example of the studiously casual tone of the conclusion discussed previously, this time as a kind of defensive pretence at not caring (and we might remember the importance of 'care' in environmentalist thought). The tone is balanced between terror and acceptance; in the more specific context, this complexity perhaps indicates attempts to come to terms with the past, in terms of previous (Nazi) systems. The ability of the poet and reader to think of themselves as historical creatures is of crucial importance to this debate. Silkin's ecological poetics suggests that demands for humans to return to previous forms of existence (in terms of technologies, travel, food consumption, and so on) are unrealistic and unethical. This is not to say that Silkin does not consider man's interaction with nature to be problematic on many levels, but rather to suggest that the changes needed in technology, travel, food consumption and so on are better thought of as developments with a new consciousness about where that development will go, rather than an unthinking movement. In Silkin's poetry, to deny human nature is as irresponsible and oppressive as the disregarding or subjugation of plants, domestic or wild. History's demonstration of *continuity* in human social, cultural and political developments show us that it would be ineffective to attempt a return.

Further, the sense of history here necessitates the reader's thinking about the future. In these terms, the final sentence of the 'Note' – again, in studiously casual rhetoric – is the most revelatory of all: 'In the meantime I'm continuing to write

about, among other creatures, wild flowers'. Thus, Silkin continues, and will continue, to write about 'wild flowers' and 'other creatures' in a way that may be passed on to others, creating a shared consciousness that will have an impact on future events (by working to prevent there being another Nazi uprising, or hindering human destruction of natural habitats). This is an indirect assertion that the poem is active, and can effect change. It is also an acute demonstration of the power of poetic language in that aim: the syntax itself momentarily integrates the reader, the poet, the nonhuman animal, and plants, identifying the extent to which language is a material flexible enough to achieve this degree of integration and co-operation. Silkin is writing among as well as *about* 'other creatures'. Silkin's writing is profoundly self-reflexive. The indirect nature of the writing means that the reader has to work it out in solitude, which might make her/him more amenable to listening. While this logic is initially put forward in Silkin's terms, and it remains Silkin's language, it *also* becomes the reader's language in a process where energy (language) is shared. Here we have identified the reason that, despite moments of openness and direct advocacy, in the 'Note' there are moments of supposed resistance to understanding and pleasure taken in complexity and qualification – which make the reading of this 'Note' in some senses more like poetry than didactic prose. We have seen how the self is formed in interaction with the other (just as the other is formed in interaction with the self, or another external being, in a series of creative encounters), and now we see that Silkin's thinking about the human is filtered through the lens of wild flowers, and thinking about flowers through a human perspective, has, in each case, engendered a complex relationship between creativity and ethics. Silkin maintains his position as an outsider, despite the self-formation that necessarily occurs in his perceiving and engaging with the wild flowers – as an individual.

In the 'Note', Silkin writes:

The tenacity, the lack of uniform performance of the petals, which are the whole flower, visually speaking, characterize the Violet; just as what characterizes the activity of any person who makes something – an object, or a child – is the tenacity and the variety, not the consistency of the total activity. (p. 287)

In this statement on the dynamism of difference the attention, again, is on process. In the tone of ‘tenacity and variety’ there is also a suggestion that ‘what characterizes the activity of any person’ is something that (like ‘visually speaking’) is *seen by other people*: the responses of others contribute to the formation of the self. Thus, it is an externalising force followed by a return that develops selfhood: the external is not just a blank wall or reflective surface, but something with its own agency and character. Rather than only a static necessity of there being something ‘other’, the self also exerts an influence on the other. I am created, and I create another. Silkin creates the flower just as the flower creates him – or he ‘re-creat[e]s’ it in the poem, and acknowledges the difference that his presence makes. Silkin explores the journey to, and implications of, ethical responsibility in this idea in his notes on ‘Milkmaids’, which:

tends to assert that the plant and the human are two separate but confronting parts of one society. The confrontation joins the creatures – what joins them even more is the total distress of the one and the capacity of the other to absorb this distress. The exchange is made more thoroughly because of the brutalized conditions of the inmates of the camp. (p. 287)

The concentration camp prepares the reader for the explicit political rhetoric with reference to Nazi Germany in the final paragraph. The suggestion here is that shared experiences and habitats place separate beings in a shared community. But the focus here is on the ethical implication of pain, which not only acts as a connective device, but also permits a powerful exchange and mutual affectivity: so we see, ‘one creature’s mind changed by the condition of another, so deeply, that this change is inherited by their children’. This process implies a connection between the individual and the community and that each ‘mind’ is a conception subject to change over time. That the exchange is set up in terms of political power arrangements is significant, and articulates the continual taking and relinquishing of power that characterises the formation of selfhood and self-other relationships in the ‘flower’ poems. We see throughout the ‘Note’ patterns of reciprocity that are threatening: for example, ‘whereas the Lily-of-the-valley means business, the aim of the Peony is to subjugate and enslave the admirer, and devour not only his attention but that of the whole bestiary’. We also see that the sensory and sensuality are central to the formation of being, but are also expressed in the rhetoric of power: the flower

‘triumphs’ or ‘traps’. The flowers’ body parts and predatory natures collapse rigid boundaries between plant and animal life.

1.5 Power, Sexuality and Selfhood: A More-Than-Human Ecology

The visual is the poet’s primary sense used to explore the flowers, as is indicated by phrases such as, ‘look at the flower quite closely’ and ‘concentrate closely’ (‘Note’). The poet, the flower and the poem are all identified as perceiving beings: for example, ‘The Violet is seen at first..’; in ‘A Daisy’, there are ‘versions of one eye’; and, Silkin writes in the ‘Note’, ‘The first poem [...] sees’. The reader is implicated in this attention to minute visual detail. Silkin writes that the poems ‘never lose sight of the flower’, suggesting not just poems with vision, but the poem’s being read. Vision is thus a mode of both knowledge and communication. The significance of these flowers resides in their individuality. The poems attempt to uncover not what *flowers* reveal, reflect, or connect to, but what *these individual flowers* each do, and, further, what these *individual flower poems* can do. In ‘A Bluebell’, the visual is consciously invoked, and the nature to which our attention is drawn is darkly menacing. The poem opens:

Most of them in the first tryings
Of nature, hang at angles,
Like lamps. These though
Look round, like young birds,
Poised on their stems. (p. 272)

Silkin suggests that while ‘Most’ bluebells are ‘Like lamps’, with the power to illuminate, ‘These’ are different, and once one looks ‘Closer, / In all their sweetness, malevolent’. The individuality of the flowers observed by the poet is described, rather than general characteristics of the species. The second sentence, from ‘These though’, offers two contrasting interpretations. The grammatical structure and punctuation permits both readings, and in their tension reveal one of the key functions of the visual in Silkin’s poetry. The first establishes a comparison between bluebells and birds in terms of body or physical form, where the flower is a ‘round’ shape similar to that of a bird. However, these lines also suggest an act of seeing on the part of the flower, through the analogous description of a bird’s apparently

inquisitive nature due to their moving head rather than eye to glance around, or the lateral vision and wide visual field this manner of looking brings about. In this reading, 'Look' is a verb, and 'round' also indicates the flower's movement as the flower-birds turn to fix their eyes on the observer, establishing the presence and otherness of the surrounding physical environment, which marks, by relationship, the place of the flower itself. Thus the flower is identified on its own terms and in its relationship to external bodies. Further, a connection is established between being and seeing, in terms of the self's experience of itself, and the self's experience of the world.

Sight is suggested to offer *insight* relating to the negative or repellent:

And watching; it is always there,

Fibrous, alerted,

Coarse grained enough to print

Out all your false delight

In 'sweet nature'. This is struggle.

In 'print', Silkin suggests a link with the textual and the visual. This is an unexpected representation of a bluebell, where nature is not benign: 'the bee / Grapples the reluctant nectar' indicates an ecosystem where there is no clear dominant force, and suffering and 'struggle' are universal and indiscriminate. This perception is dark but egalitarian. At the same time, vision is a mode of threat or menace which carries agency, while the poet is scornful of another delighting in 'sweet nature'. It might recall Eve's eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, which develops into a suggestion of pastoral excess, where pleasure has been overdone, become sickeningly sweet, and turned bad: now, in 'A Bluebell', 'The beetle exudes rot' and the nectar is 'suppurating'. By identifying 'your false delight', the poet may be trying to separate himself from others who experience or express pleasure – 'delight' – in this way, though equally the criticism may be directed at those who suppose nature to be pleasant and benign in the manner of the pastoral retreat. (This does not allow for the possibility of delight in a 'post-pastoral' engagement with the negative aspects of an environment.) An alternative reading is possible: that thinking of the bluebell as representative of all nature is destructive, and it is this that Silkin argues against in this poem. He is writing about a particular small group of

bluebells, and is attentive to their individual characteristics, at this particular time. Thus the 'delight' in 'sweet nature' is offensive to *both* the understanding of the more-than-human world – his wanting to liberate it from human subjugation that marks it as a pastoralized or Edenic space – and to the nature of the flower itself. The 'flower' poems negate readers' conceptions of flowers as benign or attractive, for example, by attributing qualities to them that are comparative with politically and environmentally imperialistic policies or ideologies. 'The first poem – *Dandelion*, for example – sees its subject as a seizer of space, and asks for political parallels to be made'. The experiences of the flowers are characterised by physical struggles for control. 'The Violet', for example, sees the flowers making gains not against other plants, but against the air itself:

They absorb a huge circle
Of violeted air, an intent
Movement of embrace;
Created, exposed, powerful.

The air is coloured somewhat violet. (p. 277)

Yet despite the violets seeming to violate (presumably, pun intended) the space around them, their existence is acutely painful: simply in being, the violet 'costs itself much'. These flowers are clearly not traditional: not only are they not (always) aesthetically pleasing, they seem to occupy a liminal space between vegetable and animal. The flowers have experiences, attention is paid to their bodies and Silkin is fascinated by the ways they engage with their environments. Indeed, in the 'flower' poems, appetites are often the means by which the flowers seek to understand their environments. In 'White Geranium', the poet reveals animalistic qualities:

The haired surface protects
The thickening stem, which hardens
On its replenishing sap;
The leaves' smell
Is nearly incontinent.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 'White Geranium', *CP*, pp. 279-80 (p. 280).

The suggestions of pastoral excess in the ‘suppurating’ bluebell has, in the geranium, degenerated to a point close to incontinence where the body is unable to control its processes and clearly determine the boundary between inside and outside. Otherwise, bodily processes are reminiscent of an animal sexuality. In ‘Small Celandine’, too, allusions to body parts are sexual:

When open, they shoot from
That part large with organs,
Hips and face merged
In a thick, capable frame.
Its high crutched head is genitalled
For survival by display.⁴⁸

The image produced is at once illustrative of the flower’s form and reminiscent of human sexuality: like animals, the flowers are corporeal. Part of the ‘Iris’ is ‘like / One furred lip of the vulva’ (p. 284). In Chapter 3 I will explore an example of Silkin’s using a bird as a metaphor for a flower; here one part of an animal stands in for one part of the flower, as the ‘babies’ teeth’ do for the lily of the valley petals. Elsewhere, the comparison between human body and plant body is implied rather than explicit. ‘Crocus’ evokes several phalluses:

It opens six spearheads
In cautious sunlight, thinly veined
Through their erect soft flesh.⁴⁹

The description of the plant’s response to light becomes a form of sexual response in which the poet identifies with the flower. This gentle process of flowering is expressed with more vigour in ‘The Violet’:

[...] but as it feels
The sun’s heat, that puberty
Pushes out from its earlier self-clasping

⁴⁸ ‘Small Celandine’, *CP*, pp. 281-82 (p. 281).

⁴⁹ ‘Crocus’, *CP*, pp. 238-40 (p. 238). This poem was written in the early 1960s but was not included in *Flower Poems* or *Nature with Man*.

Two distinct, clenched halves. Stiffens them. (p. 276)

While the violet seems to respond to external stimuli at its own pace, in other poems, flowers are devoured by the appetites of small invertebrates. In 'Goat's Beard and Daisy' the insect is in the position of power and the flower suffers 'as the bee nectars'.⁵⁰ The machinations of growth and reproduction are difficult, indifferent and relentless. The bee's role in the fertilisation of the plant is figured as an abuse, where the flower is a helpless victim and the bee is aggressive: 'Conception achieved [...] A plunderer / Covers the rooted creature's face' (p. 282). In a related way, the small celandine is subjected to a form of violence that is nevertheless creative:

Insect life feeds on
Not it but its ripe seed,
Excreting over it; shard, rind, and succulence
Pinched by the sharp, smooth jaws.
A flower survives this. (pp. 281-282)

Like the Goat's Beard, the celandine suffers in a way that evokes Original Sin. In 'The Strawberry Plant', slugs eat the fruit: 'Propagation through the devouring / Appetite of another'.⁵¹ Yet the strawberry plant 'survives even them', as, rootless, it moves across the soil (p. 275). This plant seems to do just enough to ensure the continuation of its species, without either being oppressed or luxuriating in fertility: 'As if the business of flowering / Were to be got over. Their period is brief' (p. 274). In other 'flower' poems, sexuality is predatory on the part of the flower. In 'Peonies', sexuality appears to be primarily about dominance:

They must draw
To them, the male ardours,
Enthusiasms; are predatory
In seeking them. Obliterate the garden
In flickerless ease, gouging out

⁵⁰ 'Goat's Beard and Daisy', *CP*, pp. 282-83 (p. 283).

⁵¹ 'The Strawberry Plant', *CP*, pp. 274-75 (p. 275).

The reluctant desires.

[...]

By nature a devourer. Cannot give,

Gives nothing.⁵²

The flowers embody Silkin's sense of nature as a sexualised 'preying upon'. Writing in the 'Note', Silkin comments on the lilies of the valley:

Their scent forces itself upon us with a meanness, and with something near to vulgarity. We succumb, and they conquer through being predatory.

[...]

And whereas the Lily-of-the-valley means business, the aim of the Peony is to subjugate and enslave the admirer, and devour not only his attention but that of the whole bestiary. (p. 286)

Clearly, sex is associated with power. The 'hungry' lilies have a 'predatory scent', animalistic and sexualised:

You cannot destroy that conquering amorousness

Drenches the glands, and starts

The belled memory. Glows there, with odour.

Memorable as the skin

Of a fierce animal. (p. 273)

The flowers in these poems commonly have points of contiguity with human beings. This speaks to Silkin's interest in creaturely communities comprised of flora and fauna with inter-relationships characterised by both similarity and difference. Nonetheless, it might be argued that the flowers' natures are concealed behind these animal comparisons, but I would argue that Silkin's choice to neither 'give' the flowers a voice nor speak for them is central to the ethical argument for this project. The animal and the human are announced loudly which at times makes the poems complex and difficult but Silkin refuses to try to conceal the human creativity that

⁵² 'Peonies', *CP*, pp. 273-74.

has engaged the creatures and produced the poems. A poem that purely speaks of the flower would also have human influence, of course, but might be in danger of a kind of oppression in its conceived pretence of the poem speaking *only* of the flower. So Silkin's assertion of the presence of the human animal is an acknowledgement that however hard he tries to look closely at the flower, what is produced is neither human nor flower, but an interplay of both. Thus the reader experiences a close encounter with the flower in which s/he identifies similarities and feels part of a community without ever falling prey to the illusion that the flower's being can ever be fully grasped by the human observer.

1.6 Conclusion: Flowers, History and Scripture: 'Arum Lily'

'Arum Lily' was written shortly before Silkin's death in November 1997 and was published posthumously in *Testament Without Breath* (1998). This is a different kind of flower poem from those written in the 1960s, but Silkin's commitment to imagining and revealing the ways vegetal beings participate in a complex world retains its strength. While proposing ideas relating to those that have been developed in this chapter, such as the flowers' ecological, social and creaturely lives, the focus here is not on the form of the flower, but on the flower as a narrator and witness.

'Arum Lily' will introduce to this discussion the biblical (scriptural) and spiritual elements in Silkin's eco-poetics, connecting this chapter's exploration of the organic (material), the 'organic' (poetry), and literary ecology (which implicates both kinds of organicity) with the investigation into religious ecologies in Silkin's later poetry which follows in Chapter 2. The arum lily takes control of its poem in a way that the 1964 flowers do not: the lily both speaks and thinks, and the poem is dialogic (though it is not made apparent with whom the flower is conversing). The flower narrates a story previously told by Josephus, the Jewish historian who defected to the Romans in the 1st century, about Mary, daughter of Eleazar (which Silkin misspells as 'Eleazor').⁵³ Mary had fled her home town of Bethzub for Jerusalem and was besieged in the city by the Romans under Titus. During the siege, Mary's (considerable) wealth, as well as her food and remaining possessions, was looted from her by the soldiers. The story goes that, starving and trapped in Jerusalem, Mary's suffering and terror led her to kill and cook her baby, before eating half and

⁵³ 'Arum Lily', *CP*, pp. 719-20.

hiding the remainder. In his version of this horrific story, Josephus is not sympathetic to Mary: before the killing, ‘while the famine pierced through her very bowels and marrow’, and ‘in great passion’ against the soldiers, ‘she had provoked them to anger against her; but none of them [...] would take away her life’.⁵⁴ For Josephus, her guilt pre-dates the particular events retold. In Silkin’s words:

And Mary Eleazor, not inactive, in
hunger, with fury, kills, or is it knives,
her child, and eats a half of him. (p. 719)

The horror is evident, though whereas Josephus’s condemnation of this woman who ‘attempted a most unnatural thing’ is decided, Silkin’s judgement is less easily cast. The confused syntax and anxiety about the details – ‘or is it knives’ – is indicative of his more open-minded position. However, the extended, reflective syntax, indicative of a verbal consciousness, is characteristic of Silkin’s style, and in particular his late style, and so it is not, or is not only, expressive of this particular ideological position. Here our treatment of the poem should rhyme (in Humphrey’s sense) with our treatment of the flower: we must be careful not to suppose the poem to be an illustrator of human character, just as we resist the same for the flower.

There is further evidence in ‘Arum Lily’ of a political critique or resistance to oppression, in contrast with Josephus’s telling. In the latter, following Mary’s sacrifice and the discovery made by a group of soldiers, we do not hear either of her or from her. Her ‘most unnatural thing’ transforms into cultural capital for debate by her fellow Jews, and censure by her opponents who in a few cases offer sympathy but generally are ‘induced to a more bitter hatred than ordinary against’ the Jews (Josephus, p. 266). Silkin may be drawing a link between Roman ideology as redolent of modern fascism and activity in the poem, and recent Jewish experience at the hands of the Nazis. What Silkin’s poem does, then, is restore a certain agency to Mary, via the lily, and by extension offer a critique of fascistic behaviour.

In ‘Arum Lily’, language is charged with a power, which can be aggressive:

Like Josephus,
Jewish Roman, scribe with a light sword

⁵⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* (Ebook: Digireads.com Publishing, 2010), p. 266.

of deference (p. 719)

The lily's voice is self-consciously oppositional to Josephus: 'He writes (I speak)' (p. 719). Later the poem is ironical about the conceived threat of the Jews, which here is clearly considered a false idea, and seems a precursor to the idea of the Jewish 'problem' in twentieth-century Europe:

[...] The historian
is a Jew picturing for the brain of Rome,
Rome in its electric power,
the Jews of Jerusalem starving Rome,
beat these Jews; you must. (p. 719)

The repetition of 'Jew' and connected forms here in the plurals and city name, exploiting the potential of the 'Hebrew root', are almost maniacal against the sustained threat of 'Rome': there is some ecological connectivity (or 'rhyme') in 'Jews'/'Jerusalem' that is not evident in the static 'Rome'. Josephus's defection to the Roman side is narrated in terms of the capacities of the imagination. The poem continues: 'Josephus flutters his light sword, / his swift-footed infantry, talent' (p. 719). There is a link forged here not only between writing and war, but specifically between the writing of history, and fascistic or oppressive politics. 'Arum Lily' continues:

[...] I,
witness, not historian
flower, not journalist. (p. 719)

Earlier, the arum lily makes the distinction between writing and speech, with the implied message that such an inscription might be fascistic, while speech (or thought) is not. Later, that witnessing puts the flower in a strange state of melancholic immortality:

I, arum lily, by this dry water,
who am filled with witnessing, unable to die. (p. 720)

The pain of having experienced the other's suffering here has elemental consequence, just as the 'Milkmaids' are so affected by what they witnessed at the

concentration camp that 'the change is inherited by their children' ('Note', p. 287). 'Arum lily' continues: 'Josephus, apostate, touch me with your darkness' (p. 720). The dialogue between flower and Josephus is sustained. The 'Jews, 'lily-like spinner and weepers, / you, flowers of the forest' flourish in the midst of horror (p. 719). The poet's moral approbation of Josephus is evident.

How might we think about 'Arum Lily' from an ecological perspective? It is important to consider the political ramifications of Silkin retrieving the story to be told in the voice of a flower. This is both in terms of the poem's anti-fascistic potential and in the fact that the arum lily is inedible and potentially harmful, though readers not knowledgeable about botany might think of the lily as signifier of death, or the flower as an object of beauty. Is, then, the arum lily a mere 'illustrator of human character'? The flower is an individual being: is the flower a replacement for Josephus (as a narrator, who is more sympathetic to the Jews, or merely more sympathetic to human suffering)? Or is it a figure to represent Mary – to speak for her, or retrieve her voice, and, therefore, her moral dilemma? If either of these, what are the overt political implications? The flower as a means of recovering Mary's voice might reduce the lily to a mere 'illustrator of human character'. Yet this poem demonstrates a commitment to non-hierarchical and non-oppressive relationships in terms of the human and nonhuman, as well as in human political terms. It may initially seem that the lily, whose voice (though unmarked) opens the poem, is a figure representative of Mary:

Arum lily, white petal peeling
in a scroll off my thin ochrish pistil,
am speaking of Titus's acts, his dust. (p. 719)

The 'pistil' implies a female speaker, though there is no suggestion that this is a metaphor for Mary. Already the connection between the body of the flower and the body of the text is established. There follows an explicit comparison of the victim of Titus and the vulnerable plant:

[...] 'Beat me down (I think)
like a nettle, if you must'. (p. 719)

In the early 'flower' poems, with the exception of 'Milkmaids', the parallels between human and nonhuman (i.e. flower) are personal and individual, or, if they

do make political or ideological comment or comparison, it relates more-than-human ecologies; take, for example, the dandelions, which ‘certainly want to / Devour the earth’, and are a threat to the ‘Grass. They infest its weak land’.⁵⁵ Silkin is clear in this way that the *natural* is very much *political*. ‘Milkmaids’, with its invocation of ‘the camp’, is the most explicit of the 1964 flower poems in referencing *specific* human political events or experiences, but ‘Arum Lily’ fully engages with both historical event, and literary text. The analogy of the vulnerable nettle might in one way appear to be invoking that plant in order to strengthen the reader’s image of Titus’s victim, but the analogy, and influence, works both ways: what we are also told is a story of human engagement – in a hierarchical, or oppressive fashion – with flora. The nettle might be beaten down, but it can also sting. In the ‘Note’, Silkin is ironic on the differentiation that is made between weeds and other plants, suggesting that the distinction is arbitrary: ‘if they are weeds, and are also insignificant, they may be allowed room. Such an action would flatter a man’s vanity’. While Silkin highlights the injustice done to the victims of the Roman army (and other fascist regimes) through the image of the nettle, he also highlights harm done by people to nonhuman communities.

The lily does not take the place of Mary, or attempt to speak for her (just as, in the earlier ‘flower’ poems, the poet did not attempt to speak for the flowers). In ‘Milkmaids’, the flowers witness and absorb human experience, in ways that suggest ecological connectivity. The arum lily also experiences events, though unlike the ‘Milkmaids’, it is able to speak for itself. There are few quotation marks in the poem, and we understand that the lily is speaking, but its voice is not clearly attributed. The poem tells of Mary’s deed: ‘and eats a half of him’. It continues: ‘Arum, be fair. Yet how? How be just in a desolate place?’ (p. 719). This appears to take the form of a dialogue, where the lily tells the narrative of Mary’s experience, and then is interrupted: ‘Arum, be fair’. Whether this interruption is by Josephus, or by the poet, or by another voice, is unclear. It is also impossible to know who speaks the rest of the line, or whether it is one voice – ‘Yet how?’ – followed by another. The conclusion of this line is surely a central question of Silkin’s poetry, or elsewhere, the question of ‘how endure’: how does life endure in the face of the oppressive, the terrible, the disturbing – states that we might consider unnatural?

⁵⁵ ‘Dandelion’, *CP*, p. 271.

The question of the root of human nature I discussed in terms of Silkin's commentary on 'Milkmaids' is addressed from a different perspective. Here justice is aligned with endurance; experience is implicated in ethics. 'Arum Lily' ends:

One summer's evening fills with history's long spokes.

Mary, in the recall of all, hurtles like a message from God,

through my rooted being,

God of limits. (p. 720)

Here the body of the plant and the spiritual are integrated and mutually reformative. It is this creative intra-action between religion (both scripture and the spiritual), the human experience (both body and language), and more-than-human life, particularly vegetal beings, that I will explore in the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 2: The Self, the More-Than-Human and the Divine: Jon Silkin's Spiritual Ecologies

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I began to explore the ways in which Jon Silkin's poetry articulates encounters between creaturely life and spirituality, and between the more-than-human world and the question of evil. While Silkin's religious experiences consistently provide him with poetic material, the nature of those experiences and nature of the deity itself take various forms. At times Silkin's God is powerfully present, but at others seems remote or beyond reach. The religious sense in this poetry is conflicted, ambiguous, and frequently changing. While being a Jew is fundamental to Silkin's self-identity, as a poet he is not a traditional theist. Not long before his death, he wrote: 'I had better say now that I am a Jew, though not a religious, orthodox one; but neither Hitler nor Stalin was fastidious in this respect: any Jew would do'.¹ Being Jewish, for Silkin, always means living in a post-Holocaust world. My readings develop from a conviction of the centrality of religion to his poetic consciousness, both as historical and cultural poetic material, and as shifting, highly personal, transcendental spiritual experience. The lack of orthodoxy in his versions of Judaism produces a rich and complex array of encounters with the divine. This runs at the heart of his work with a passionate commitment to nature and his nonhuman environments.

Roger Gottlieb connects religion, politics, history and ecology as he writes that the 'environmental crisis [...] is, among other things, a spiritual problem, affecting [...] religious life'.² The nature of Gottlieb's explanation is deeply relevant to a study of Silkin's poetry. He argues that the environmental crisis affects religious life in the following way:

by raising in a particularly compelling form the problem of evil. If one believes in a transcendent God we can ask – as the twentieth century has compelled us to do in increasingly urgent ways after its historically unprecedented world wars and genocides – where God is in a world filled

¹ Jon Silkin, *The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-Century Poetry*, p. 52.

² Roger S. Gottlieb, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. by Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 3-21 (p. 11).

with so much pain and loss. Of course, there is no purely logical reason why familiar solutions to the problem of evil – that suffering is produced by human freedom, that God is a mystery, that later on all will be made clear – cannot be applied in this context as well. Yet (as Hegel observed) sometimes a change in quantity leads to a change in quality. And in this case – irreversible damage permeating the fabric of the earth's life-forms – we have a scope of destruction which is so great that the problem of evil may threaten us anew. (p. 11)

As Gottlieb rightly acknowledges, the horrors of twentieth-century history have not been consigned unproblematically to the past, given the potential for refugee crises and resource wars (such as those over fresh water) as a result of climate change.

Gottlieb continues:

In a way this spiritual quandary is less an issue of arguments about how God can coexist with evil than it is about our sense of God's own limits and vulnerability and about our own (in)ability to feel God's presence. (p. 11)

Silkin's varied encounters with god in his poetry demonstrate an individual urgently seeking to explore, question and account for a deeply personal religious life.

In this chapter I will examine the spirituality of poems in which Silkin explores the 'limits and vulnerability' of God, and the his own 'inability to feel God's presence'. By 'spiritual poetics', I mean not merely a poetry that describes or addresses deities or divine experiences, but rather a vibrant, various, loose collection of poetries, particular to Silkin, that are defined in two key ways. The first is the element of exploration I have just described which depends on the poet's doubts about the nature of, and even presence of, God, as well as his convictions. Self-expression in poetry allows Silkin to ask questions and make discoveries about the potential of his own spirituality that may not be possible in non-metaphorical forms of expression. The second aspect of the poetics of spirituality that I identify in Silkin relates to the ecological framework in which the more-than-human world, the self and language are connected, related and mutually creative. Thus, I propose the idea of a 'spiritual ecology' (or spiritual ecologies) in Silkin's poetry, which speaks to Silkin's articulation of the unity of creation: the poet develops a network across living, material and non-material entities.

Silkin's understanding that everything is connected with everything else, including the divine, means that his God is not simply a benevolent, transcendental figure, but often is involved with the material world, and with all the suffering and evil that is played out within it. Gottlieb addresses this idea as he writes: 'If God is, as some say, everywhere, then she must be found in the toxic-waste dumps, the clear-cut forests, and your aunt dying of breast cancer as easily as in a majestic mountain peak or a meadow filled with wildflowers' (p. 12). If God is in the toxic-waste dumps, he (or indeed she) is also, presumably, in the gas chambers and Little Boy. Silkin seems to be well-tuned to this idea; or, rather, he is alert to the difficult, paradoxical moral consequences produced by the logical conclusion that if God is in everything, godliness is present in atrocity as it is also to be found in love. Silkin does not seek answers to metaphysical questions, but rather, in his poetry, he explores the spiritual power of these debates and the difficulties they provide for his personal connection with a godhead. This chapter explores Silkin's poetic response to catastrophe, specifically in three main areas of experience: the Holocaust, personal tragedy and the atomic explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In all three cases, part of the trauma of remembrance is the fear of recurrence. How can one live in a world where death and destruction always seem nightmarishly close? Silkin grapples with this question in his poetry while he also asks how one can love a God who has not only allowed horrors of these magnitudes to take place, but who has created a world in which the threat of future suffering is always in mind. Silkin's encounters with God almost always account for his own experience as a living, organic being, through the body and the senses, through creativity, and through his 'intra-actions' with other (animal, vegetal, human) beings. With Chapter 1's insights into Silkin's poetics of creaturely encounters kept in mind, it is to the idea of co-existence of living beings that I now turn.

2.1 The Politics of Silkin's Religious Poetry: Rights, Co-existence and Community

In 1994, Silkin published 'Watersmeet' (which would later appear in *Making a Republic*, 2002) with an accompanying prose commentary, in which he writes of 'having gratitude to water (and rivers) whatever their differing natures, and of perceiving how these rivers are the creation of God, not made for our especial

benefit'.³ While some readings of Genesis might conclude that the rivers' being 'the creation of God' gives man a right or duty to control them, Silkin refuses to claim the rivers as physical or intellectual property. His view is that if there is power to be held over the rivers, God as creator retains them (or gives them to others). Silkin's poetry is informed by a degree of theological education and by a felt experience of the divine that is personal to him. It is true that the God invoked here might be, to some extent, distant or unattainable. Often alienation from the divine seems to be painful for the poet, but just as Silkin confronts suffering in nature, he embraces (poetically at least) difficulties in his relationship with God. This is not a god whose love is clearly demonstrated, perhaps, but by refusing to assign one part of his creation dominion over another part, it *is* an egalitarian god. A distant god may be the price Silkin pays for the ethical understanding that emerges when that god is entered into an encounter with the natural world in the creative consciousness. Silkin was committed to liberal politics and a desire for social equality (a proletariat state) for his whole life. The reader might ask if the poet's social conscience developed as a result of his encounters with an egalitarian deity – or whether, with an already-formed commitment to ecojustice and principles of social justice, he has created a god in his own image. The poet's religious sense is exploratory and multi-faceted. Often the God he invokes is not the God of the Torah but a quite different form of deity, but his deeply-felt Jewish identity and knowledge of Hebrew and scripture suggest that an awareness of environmentalism in Jewish dogma and culture is useful in our reading of his spiritual poetics.

Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan identifies a number of Jewish thinkers, writers and public figures whose work demonstrates both steadfast religious faith and a committed environmental consciousness, while she acknowledges the limitations to a theory of 'green' Judaism. One such 'significant ecological thinker' she recognises is Arthur Waskow who, in parallel with some theorists in the ecofeminist and eco-justice movements, 'popularized the concept "ecokosher" to highlight the connection between human mistreatment of the natural world and social mistreatment of the marginal and the weak in the society'.⁴ Silkin, of course, is another such Jewish thinker who contributes to discourses relating to Jewish

³ Silkin, *Watersmeet* (Whitley Bay: The Bay Press, 1994), non-paginated.

⁴ Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan, 'Judaism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, pp. 25-64 (p. 53).

experience and environmental ethics. Like Waskow, Silkin understands that the relationship between politics and ecology is significant and may be drawn out within discourses of power. Silkin demonstrates a progressive environmental ethics in arguments made in relation to the rights of the individual, crucially, without discrimination between human and nonhuman. Silkin was fascinated by the biblical idea of a ‘peaceable kingdom’, in which creatures co-exist in harmony without violence and war, and maintained a longstanding interest in work of Edward Hicks who produced a series of paintings depicting such a utopia. In an essay for *Stand* in 1978 Silkin provides a critique of Hicks’s work, which suggests to this reader the effects that creativity, social politics and individual experience might have on his religious poetics. Silkin describes social structures in the ‘peaceable kingdom’:

There is no freedom possible in a “society” of one because there is no possibility of oppression. [...] Each creature has the right, not to existence because this is axiomatic, and axioms are not rights; each has the right to co-existence, which implicates obligation.⁵

Freedom can only be understood as such when it is set against its opposite. I will explore a related conception of selfhood in Chapter 4 of this thesis: the self is not a fully autonomous, clearly defined entity, but is physically and psychologically enmeshed with other beings, elements, forces and material realities. For Silkin, here, the individual and the community have a different but related kind of relationship. A creature that is alone is not free, and neither is a creature that is oppressed by other creatures; freedom is only experienced when a creature’s peers do not choose to be abusive and, crucially, that the creature, in ‘reciprocal’ fashion, does not choose to oppress others either. By this understanding, loners are no freer than slaves, but neither are tyrants. Silkin’s interest in the peaceable kingdom is in close alignment with the arguments made in the ‘flower’ poems for the rights of all beings.

Analysing Hicks’s representations of the Delaware Water Gap in the series of paintings, Silkin notes that the river acts as ‘a window out from the enclosure containing animals and humans’ (‘Edward Hicks’, pp. 51-52). Visually, the ‘enclosure’ refers to the edges of the painting, within which a community of creatures are assembled, but Silkin’s chosen symbol of entrapment suggests that

⁵ Silkin, ‘Edward Hicks (1780-1849): The Peaceable Kingdom’, *Stand*, original series 19.2 (1978), 36-62 (p. 39).

‘obligation’ and ‘co-existence’ have not yet been achieved. Silkin proposes that Hicks’s engagement of the audience’s imagination has ethical potential:

It’s also worth noting that although there is a strong resemblance between the actual Water Gap and its presence in the middle Kingdom paintings, the landscape in the late Kingdoms, although still recognizable, has been considerably re-modelled. Both kinds of Kingdoms however share this “window” quality, allowing the viewer a sense of emotional journeying over water. I take this to be the paradisaal element of the Kingdoms; it is what they promise if their prediction is fulfilled. (p. 43)

Silkin’s use of ‘paradisaal’ invokes not a pastoral mode of retreat to an Edenic, ‘golden’ or pre-Lapsarian age, but futurity. He draws his understanding of the creativity in the process of ‘emotional journeying over water’ from two key areas. The first, as he outlines directly above, is the engagement of consciousness with external objects, both in perception and in the memory and imagination. The second is demonstrated in Silkin’s narrative more broadly. He progresses through the painter’s artistic journey in order to outline how Hicks’s ‘obsession’ with creating one Kingdom after another accumulates the weight of his own creative and, possibly, emotional input (p. 43). Objectivity is subsumed in the representations of the landscapes to a more profound kind of understanding that is rooted in, and actively engaged with, the material world. Thus creativity is the means by which a new ‘paradisaal element’ can be formed. The agency of this ‘element’ re-imagines both mind and world, and in doing so it presents a possible future in which beings peacefully co-exist in free communities.

What, then, does such insight into creaturely co-existence offer the reader of Silkin’s spiritual poetics? One answer is presented by his critique of Edna Pullinger, a commentator on Hicks, from which we gain insight into the religious content in his poetry. Silkin argues that Pullinger prioritises biographical detail over analysis of the paintings to the detriment of her account, or, put differently, that she does not allow Hicks’s creativity to come to the fore: ‘when the correlation between principle and works (painting) is insisted on, however, we get a sense of Hicks, as painter, being minted into the service of evangelical Quakerism. And this enthusiasm is disturbing’ (p. 43). Silkin engages with Quaker influences on Hicks’s art but with an inflection that is rather different from Pullinger’s. While, according to Silkin, Pullinger locates

elements of Quakerism in the paintings, Silkin identifies Hicks's Quaker background in some, but not all, elements of the organic creative process: '[t]he Quaker experience of fraternal dissension gave to the Kingdoms a deeper sense of sharing the earth – with the animals, and a less theoretical sense of possible inclusive harmony' (p. 45). Silkin understands that the artist's religious experiences make an important contribution to creativity, but the artwork is not produced *in order to* reflect pre-conceived dogma or beliefs. If art is created in this way, any representation of religion will be refracted through the artist's creative consciousness and thus be highly individual, however much themes, images and ideology have their roots in religious communities and religious histories. The insight gained from Silkin's argument demonstrates three key ideas that are of crucial importance for the reader exploring the nature of religion and the divine in his poetry. The first is the conviction, which coheres with his theory of 'organic poetry', that the creative process will accumulate material but always be headed somewhere previously uncharted. The second is in Silkin's qualification of 'evangelical Quakerism' (my emphasis): organic creativity will change the perspectives of the artist at the beginning of the process, to which rigid adherence to fixed doctrine is antagonistic. The third insight relates to the creativity of the individual, which, for this poet, is always modulating between different versions of religiosity just as it is open to the unexplored paths the creative mind may decide to pass through. A multiplicity of encounters with religion and the divine are produced by this unique, mutable and personal creativity.

2.2 Manifestations of Godliness: Love, Suffering and Alienation

Silkin's God, god or gods take on a diversity of forms in his poetry and the poet's relationship with the divine is also subject to change. Silkin looks for his God in a number of different places and has varying success at finding a connection with the divine. 'A Room in the Moorish Kingdom' (previously unpublished, c. 1992-1997), for example, identifies a divine presence in intellectual pursuits. Comparing his own Jewish cultural heritage with that of the Moors of Spain, the poet writes:

Our God

we Jews kept on a leash, candlelight

and alpine gentian, while you, the Moors,

made algebra, medicine, Averroes
clothing Aristotle in comprehension
again.⁶

Jewish culture has traditionally privileged study of the Torah over other forms of learning and discipline on the understanding that the best way to learn about the world is through the word of God. However, for medieval Jews, ‘The study of nature was a religious activity that enabled the philosopher-scientist to imitate God, an intellect engaged in eternal self-contemplation, and to understand the mind of God’ (Tirosh-Samuelson, p. 38). Thus we see that the primitive (lit only by ‘candlelight’) enquiry into nature (‘alpine gentian’) is also a search for God. As Silkin points out, Islamic cultures are responsible for many great discoveries and advances in knowledge and culture, and he frames this in an interesting way. Rather than suggesting that the stuff of the physical world itself is a manifestation of God, it is *the enquiry into the physical world* that is godly. While one is ‘kept on a leash’, the other power is released in order to develop modes of understanding which are also, as revelations, forms of connection. In this way, the God in this poem appears in the world that is being explored (the discoveries that are yielded), in the mind and its intellect, and also in community: scholars sharing knowledge. For Silkin, the mode of knowledge produced by connections forged between lovers are also part of that godliness. Speaking again to the Moors, the poet writes:

You were the *Mensch*
of Hispania, and your deep-breasted
women, with maths, science
and dark skin, philosophy and sex – (p. 835)

The ‘dark skin’ and ‘sex’ are addressed with the academic subjects, all figured as relative modes of enquiry. Just as bookish learning is a form of discovery, so is corporeal and carnal knowledge. In the article on Hicks, Silkin criticises Pullinger’s making an opposition out of ‘seriousness’ and ‘joy’: ‘[t]o be serious apparently means to fulfil the explicit moral injunctions and this seems to necessitate the exclusion of what is joyful, and sensuous. Seriousness is not programmatic and not

⁶ ‘A Room in the Moorish Kingdom’, *CP*, pp. 834-35 (p. 834).

Hasidic' (p. 43). This rejection of Hasidism coheres with Silkin's highly individual spirituality, which, complex and fluctuating, is certainly not 'programmatically'. For this poet, morality is taken seriously, but he stridently rejects the idea that religious identity excludes physical and emotional pleasure. Ultra-Orthodox traditions relating to modesty or sexual self-denial have little bearing on Silkin as a poet. 'A Room in the Moorish Kingdom' suggests a positive integration of the divine and the sensual: sex and God are part of the 'same moral universe' (to recall Dana Phillips).⁷

Sexuality, for Silkin, seems to offer the potential for accessing the divine, and elsewhere it appears as a manifestation of God. In 'Beings' (from 'Four Related Poems', *The Lens-Breakers*, 1992), Silkin explores the idea of a connection between sex and god through a mode of knowledge that is not scholarly like that of 'A Room in the Moorish Kingdom', but emergent from natural observation. The poet watches insects mating, 'Two minute flies, beings back to back / join with a long black particle', their dark bodies clearly outlined against a piece of paper.⁸ In 'Moses Harris and the butterflies' and the 'flower' poems Silkin identifies correspondences between human and nonhuman beings through which he develops his political consciousness. In 'Beings', a parallel process produces an understanding that is deeply personal:

Their long completion

on white stirs

a single memory, of how

I, too, being with you and by Him

imagined, yet imaging, left

to be, in dire amazed

double shared control

⁷ Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology*, p. 211.

⁸ 'Beings', *CP*, p. 648-49 (p. 648).

were, on the eiderdown, a feathery creation

of us, palm to palm,

the wings flighted as with joy. (pp. 648-49)

The poet's meditation on the flies prompts a memory in which the divine is the Creator of love and sexual pleasure, the feathers and wings reminiscent less of insects than of angels. Silkin avoids using the word 'sheet', but the connection between a sheet of paper and bedsheets is unambiguous, creating a parallel between the creativity of sex and art.

The connections between sexual love and the divine are powerful in Silkin's poetics, and the same can be said for other kinds of love. Silkin explores the relationship between God and sexuality in a different (though related) way in 'To Come Out Singing' (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1954):

Supposing time came out first from the belly of God

Our celebration of each new year

Or event, or endurance of the holy event

Would be a celebration of him.

And a love, like a new year

Would be of him also, a celebration,

A wind travelling from feast to feast

With the smell of wine and bread on it.

We must be always celebrating love as we celebrate God.⁹

This God is a 'him', and yet the invocation of the 'belly' as the site of gestation implies femininity. This contradiction suggests that the identities of Silkin's gods are fluid and changing. In these lines, love leads irretrievably to God, and the two forces, love and God, apparently co-create each other. God gives the poet the means to feel and share love, yet, also, love is a way of accessing the divine. This manifestation of God appears also in time, the 'wind travelling from feast to feast',

⁹ 'To Come Out Singing', *CP*, pp. 49-51 (p. 51).

in space, the elements and the senses. However, this poem is also a creation story of the self, indirectly invoking the Garden of Eden, the 'green world', in the voice of Adam. This creation story is also a way for the poet to think about relationships between men and women more generally. The tenderness in the metaphor of a 'new year' for the beginnings of a new relationship recognises romantic love as a journey through time and space, in which the self is re-made. Divine presence appears to catalyse and intensify romantic love, and the poet's sensitivity to God's presence on earth opens him up to earthly love.

In 'For David Emmanuel' (also from *The Peaceable Kingdom*), the godly is revealed through the poet's love as a parent. The poet describes looking in on his young son, entering 'Softly into the small sleeping / Of the room of his dreaming':¹⁰

It was my son. Half Jew

And wholly human sleeping in the curved eyes

Of his future. And I

Alone with the great sun

Of the morning, I with two

Large eyes looking into his god's eyes:

He was half mine, half

That woman buried

In the hot raiments of her sleep. (p. 48)

These lines demonstrate a co-existence of various kinds of gods, which differ yet are not mutually exclusive. The poet's connection with his son is explored through the eyes. The 'great sun', in giving the light that allows the poet to see, is a creator, and perhaps divine. The baby's eyes, like the sun, are materially-embodied signs of potential. On the one hand, eyes are highly revealing of emotion and personality, so the 'curved eyes' are the baby's eyes, closed as he sleeps, figured as points from

¹⁰ 'For David Emmanuel', *CP*, pp. 47-48.

which his experience and self-determining actions will shape his future life. On the other hand, he is 'sleeping in' the gaze of the godhead that determines his future. Both ideas are found in the same space, and each allows for the other: it seems god is found both within and without the child. In a related way, the poet looks 'into his god's eyes': so is the child's god, which is unique to him, a separate entity that nonetheless exists inside him, peering out? Alternatively, does the child have the eyes of a god, in which case the child *is* godly? In either case, the idea of god is closely bound to the individual, and not only with selfhood but with the *formation* of selfhood. Otherwise, the nature of god here is amorphous, and exists in the poet as much as it does in the son. Often in Silkin's poetry, the idea of god is seemingly interchangeable with a highly individual form of selfhood. The poet might appear dismissive of his partner, 'That woman', as he enjoys the intimacy of this tender moment alone with their son, though it is perhaps more likely that his intimacy with the mother of his child negates the use of names. In this poem sex is very naturally linked with the child and the domestic life, as well as with godliness, in an ecology made from different kinds of love. Maternal, paternal, marital and infant love, transmitted differently from each family member to each other, interlace in a powerful web. The poet describes the event of his son's birth as a day when 'we ran into the laughing brass / Bold light, alive to holy life' (p. 48). Love and joy allow the poet and his partner to access a divinity who can alter the elements, turning light into brass and sex into a foetus and ultimately a child; or perhaps god *is* the ecstatic, element-altering power of human love. Not defined to one manifestation, holiness and the godly in this poem is a gentle but formidable elemental force that binds together its creations in experience and love.

The speaker's Jewishness is a central aspect to his identity that becomes a powerful line of connection with his son. Yet the pride at seeing his child, 'half Jew', is underwritten by knowledge of the historical burden that he bequeaths by means of his own survivors' guilt. Tirosh-Samuelsan writes:

To some extent, all late-twentieth-century Jewish ecological thinking can be viewed as a belated response to the catastrophe of the Holocaust, a determination of the Jewish people to renew themselves so as "not to give Hitler a posthumous victory," to use the famous formulation of Emil Fackenheim. (*Oxford Handbook*, p. 53)

As one such ‘late twentieth century Jewish ecological think[er]’, Silkin’s poetry in response to the Holocaust might be seen as a contribution to this ‘renewal’, in its production of discourse that mourns Jewish victims, attempts to account for personal suffering and experience, and establishes a Jewish consciousness in the post-Holocaust world. Sections of the previous chapter of this thesis discussed Silkin’s writing on the Holocaust in relation to nature (both material and human). His assertion that ‘not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged’ acknowledges the thought that evil has its origins in the ‘natural’ order of things. Whether the Holocaust was a crime against what is natural or a genuine, if terrifying, manifestation of nature, raises questions for Silkin regarding the nature of a God who would create a world in which such horrifying brutality could occur on such a scale. Tirosh-Samuelsan notes that ‘there is a rabbinic teaching that animals not only observe the moral laws, but all of nature is perceived as fulfilling the will of God in the performance of its normal functions’ (p. 37). This is not an image of a benevolent God, whose divinity is manifested only in the good, the pure and the beautiful; rather, God’s ‘will’ directs death and suffering as much as it does love and harmony. If ‘The whole of nature / Is a preying upon’ (‘Defence’, *Nature with Man*, 1965), then God not only witnesses and wills destruction, but embodies it, himself a predatory deity. This is something Silkin grapples with in his poetry.

In ‘The Fireflies of Minsk’ (*Making a Republic*), the poet asserts his ethical consciousness as a means of making up for God’s perceived participation in the Nazi death camps. The exact nature of that role is unclear, but whether it is active or passive, Silkin’s vitriol is clear: ‘this spattered stinking weeping god is insane’.¹¹ Yet in Silkin’s religious consciousness there is very little capacity for escape from God, no matter the level of anger that is felt. One way in which he tries to come to terms with this is by focussing on the uneasy moral status of the prisoners who were charged with day-to-day running of the gas chambers:

Spectral collaborative chums, gassers

maybe forced to it, but they work

Ukrainian, Lithuanian

¹¹ ‘The Fireflies of Minsk’, *CP*, pp. 743-44 (p. 744).

specking mortuary counters with these gassed fireflies (p. 744)

Silkin is not without sympathy for these prisoners who, 'spectral', are suffering their own kind of abuse at the hands of the Nazis. Yet the irony in figuring these camp inmates as 'collaborative chums' does not absolve their crossing what Silkin perceives to be a non-negotiable line. The fireflies, material metaphors for victims who perished in the gas chambers, are vulnerable, countless and provoke empathy:

[...] Oh, crash crash
the beams of gas fall. 'But child,'
God says, 'your mind is clothing itself
against me.' 'Me, too,' the firefly stings darkness.
And the gassers beg, 'Come, with your adult mind
and do not judge us.' And the firefly
pierces my brain with mercy. Still I would refuse. (p. 744)

The assertion that the poet would have made a different choice from the unnamed gassers is a reasonable one, and Silkin avoids becoming sanctimonious because what he is really setting himself in contrast with is not the 'Ukrainian, Lithuanian' prisoners but the God who failed to save his Creation from a terrible, needless fate. The human being still has the capacity, after all this earthly terror and divine failure, to strive for better.

Silkin approaches the role of God in the Holocaust again in 'A Woman from Giannedes' (previously unpublished, c. 1986-1992).¹² The poem's speaker is a Holocaust survivor who describes her parents' experiences of the Nazi occupation:

War: my father

fled the mediterranean's width

like a Jew, leaving my mother

to a German soldier they shot as fighting

¹² Giannedes is a village on Corfu that was occupied by the Nazis during the Second World War. Almost the entire Jewish population of Corfu was deported to Auschwitz.

ceased. They shaved her head, each
week.¹³

Her father becomes a refugee, her mother, a concentration camp prisoner. The long history of Jews being exiled is invoked in the same coolly dispassionate tone that relates details of concentration camp life. The speaker's sister lights a candle, ostensibly for remembrance, and the flame provides the poet with a better memorial for the dead than a figure of Christ does: 'Christ stares / past her, his luster silvery / and mute', while the candle's 'plume', by contrast, makes a gesture towards Holocaust victims, 'touching sins / like numbered friends' (p. 622). The silent, unresponsive and inaccessible Christ figure is not interchangeable with God (in keeping with Judaism) but the poet finds the candlelight to be a means of communicating with the divine. The candle then evokes something sinister in a blue flame:

God, what is
this, but to say I bring
my evil to you, in words you pass
into the flame, blue potassium
harsh homely blue, quickening with
sin, wax, oil, those portions
of life I replenish. (p. 622)

As a member of the global human community, the speaker takes responsibility for Nazi atrocities, in a general rather than an individual way. In this context, the blue might evoke the blue Star of David or the blue eyes of the purported Aryan race, but even more so the blue-coloured residue found in the gas chambers after liberation of the camps, which constitutes proof of the use of cyanide. Silkin hints at the possibility of godly redemption, when it is asked for, as God takes the offered 'evil' and burns it. Perhaps the poet expects that God will destroy evil. Yet the blue flame is also strongly suggestive of the gas chambers and crematoria of the Nazi camps, and given that the blue residue has commonly been deployed as a refutation of

¹³ 'A Woman from Giannedes', *CP*, pp. 621-23 (p. 622).

Holocaust denial, the poem's burning of evil by God implicates the deity not only in the original act of evil but in the successive refusal by some to acknowledge what happened. Here, not only are evil and redemption impossible to separate, but we see that for Silkin this God is in *both* recovery and atrocity. Human beings, too, are defined by participation in both evil and redemption: humbly, the speaker brings 'my evil to you', but this fuel for the flame ('sin, wax, oil') is to be 'replenished' by further transgression, cruelty and sin. Both human being and God, then, are to be found in both goodness and evil.

God's relationship to apparently human-perpetrated catastrophe in this poem is seen a little more clearly still when our speaker, who has become a maid for T.S. Eliot, makes a discovery about her employer: 'I never knew // Mister Eliot was a Jew-hater' (p. 622).¹⁴ In a scene of quiet domestic servitude, the maid describes ironing Eliot's clothes, followed by an ambiguous image:

And what is not in any contract,
I tender his sadness as he crouches
over the gas-fire at night. (p. 622)

The insinuation of the anti-Semite's post-Holocaust regret is made more complex by 'tender', the meaning of which in this context is creatively ambiguous. Perhaps she is merely learning to sympathise despite her moral disgust. On the one hand, the maid is gently sympathetic to his melancholy; on the other hand, she offers 'his sadness' to the flame. In so doing she casts powerful censure and blame on Eliot's complicity by offering him to God, as 'evil' personified that will then be passed into the fire. The last two lines of this stanza seem to confirm this reading: 'Smile Christ in / humanity, if we will let you' (p. 622). The self-destructive impulses of societies that inflict genocide on themselves (I am talking here of such a society as the whole race of human beings) is frustrating to Silkin, but he also demonstrates a committed belief in free will. Christ is not God (to the Jew), so although Christ is not all-

¹⁴ For a thoughtful account of Eliot's antisemitism and its illustration in his poetry, see Silkin's *The Life of Metrical and Free Verse*, particularly pp. 52-57. See also p. 349, where Silkin writes that 'Eliot and Pound, both of whose writing is disfigured by racism, and, in particular, by anti-Semitism, failed, after the Second World War, to register in their work the existence of the holocaust and the concentration camps of Europe and the East'. Quiet omission and outright denial of the Holocaust are, to Silkin, not meaningfully distinct.

powerful, God still is. While humanity can push Christ away, God is always there, but he is not in a position to stop human atrocities: even terrible things have God in them, because God and humanity are images of each other. Love is God, but so is evil. Or, put differently, perhaps love is not only benevolent: maybe the kind of love that God *is*, is a form of connectivity. This God is ecological: it is connected with all things material and with the self, as well as being the potential through which an individual can learn to connect with creaturely life.

As poems such as ‘A Woman from Giannedes’ reveal, the God Silkin addresses in his poetry can be found everywhere, and an explanation for evil derives from there being an omnipresent deity despite human atrocity. Elsewhere, Silkin’s relationship with God is often defined not by communication but by distance, and Silkin’s accounts of suffering often take place in a world that the poet perceives to have been abandoned by God. The poem ‘To My Friends’ (from ‘Dedications’, *The Re-Ordering of the Stones*, 1961) asks if the Creator is indifferent to earthly suffering, or has disassociated himself completely:

And for Man,
Men matter, whether that God
Who made us, and the stones,
Is watching us, or bored
With human agony
Lies in immortal sleep
Terribly locked, not witnessing
The outrages of human hunger
Bearable only because
They must be, even these uptorn
Grains of love that are burned
In complex and primitive agonies
In concentration camps.¹⁵

¹⁵ ‘To My Friends’, *CP*, pp. 183-84 (p. 184).

Silkin asserts a belief in the ethical co-existence of human beings with one another but cannot find evidence of God's care as he considers twentieth-century human atrocities. Despite the focus on suffering inflicted by human beings on other human beings, the poet's anger is directed not at war criminals but at his Creator. The impression is of a poet distressed by feelings of abandonment and disappointment in God's failure to intervene to alleviate suffering. If in 'A Woman from Giannedes', the divine is present in evil as well as goodness, in 'To My Friends' God is simply unreachable. Whether the deity has died or the poet's attempts at detecting his presence are failing, the speaker's inability to understand the relationship between godliness and atrocity and the feeling of distance this produces provides the narrative arc of the poem.

'A Kind of Nature' (*Nature with Man*) explores a similar tension between kinds of absences of the godhead. Silkin blames 'an indifferent God / Swollen with pulps of man' for the failures of societies to create the harmonious, loving communities of the peaceable kingdom.¹⁶ The poet depicts human beings as helpless creatures in need of guidance:

For if He cared more
We might, like children
Put on trust, treat one
Another with more care. (p. 249)

The poet perceives his community as 'children', desperate for the attention of an apparently unconcerned deity, and is regretful and frustrated at how easy it might be – like putting on a costume – for these people to make a choice and change their behaviour for mutual benefit. Silkin describes a power dynamic in which earthly creatures are not less complex than divinities but are no match for their brute strength: 'He is our carnivore / And we, His feeling plants' (p. 249). The suggestion is that God is enriching himself by feeding on the 'pulps of man'. Made animal, at this point in the poem, God has vitality and presence despite feigning little interest in human beings. Silkin's profound disappointment comes from a sense of loss at what could have been, and the poem performs an elegy for wasted potential:

¹⁶ 'A Kind of Nature', *CP*, pp. 248-50 (p. 249).

But if we are alone

Like stones in a huge field

Stupidly brutal,

Where is the trust, that fine

Sharpness of moral care (pp. 249-50)

God's abandonment of the poet and his community creates a material lack which is given as the cause of an insufficient moral code, recalling 'Arum Lily': 'How be just in a desolate place?' (p. 719). Such a definition of 'trust' suggests that trusting, when it is not individual but communal, is an enlivened mode of existence, and this reveals something important about Silkin's poetic voice. For all his tortured, horrified explorations of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and the worst manifestations of human evil yet perpetrated, Silkin does not become cynical. Despite – or perhaps because of – the extent of these terrors, he maintains a committed belief in the goodness of human beings, not as a universal quality but nonetheless inherent in some earthly creatures and their behaviours. In 'To My Friends', victims are 'Grains of love that are burned': physically destroyed, they nonetheless retain their goodness, defined by love. In 'A Kind of Nature', the poet demonstrates profound disappointment that nevertheless reveals a level of optimism about creaturely life, reflecting his commitment to the peaceable kingdom. Silkin refuses to homogenise the natures of things, but maintains nuances and difference: in his poetry, life contains as much diversity as it does cohesion. As far as the divine is a kind of life in his poetry – and I argue that it is – God is subject to the same contradictions.

The poet explores a related experience of co-currently struggling to access the divine and being unable to fully reject God in 'The silence' (*The Lens-Breakers*). Silkin describes walking around a city's deserted streets, where he finds:

No grass, or tree

through which a bee treads

its shadow, counterfeit

of self, over the leaf-blades.¹⁷

¹⁷ 'The silence', *CP*, pp. 692-93 (p. 692).

This is an example of what, after George Lakoff, we might call negative framing. A frame can be any word, group of words or idea, which, in the *unconscious* minds of people who hear it, connects with related words or concepts, both intellectual and emotional. Lakoff has written: ‘of course, negating a frame just activates the frame, as when Nixon said, “I am not a crook” and everyone thought of him as crook. When President Obama said that he had no intention of a “government takeover,” he was activating the government-takeover frame’.¹⁸ In ‘The silence’, there is no grass, tree or bee until the creative consciousness brings them into being. There were no such things in the original street (whether experienced by the poet physically or imaginatively) but the poet produces an image, by means of the negative formulation, that is nevertheless quite as powerful for the reader as a simple expression would be. Reading the poem organically – where each line emerges from the previous and nothing is lost as the poem develops – helps us understand the poem’s closing lines:

Lord God,

I am a bit of the sea:

I don’t believe in you. (p. 693)

In ‘Lord’, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is invoked, but the poet’s relationship with this deity is highly individual and the religious mode not dogmatic. The poet appears to refer to the generally-accepted theory of evolutionary science that determines that *Homo sapiens* has evolved from sea-dwelling ancestors. It might also suggest a belief that modern science is mutually exclusive with a belief in god and that the poet aligns himself with ecology, not religion. But in Silkin’s poetry, seemingly oppositional forces are more likely to generate creative tensions than fixed binaries. The supposed tension here, in which the poet’s spirituality appears to be subverted by the conviction of scientific knowledge, exemplifies the complexity of Silkin’s poetic thought. The reader gains an understanding of this from the last lines of ‘The silence’ in which the poet’s supposed dismissal of God function by negative framing like those of the grass, tree and bee. By negating God’s

¹⁸ George Lakoff, ‘Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment’, *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 4 (2010), 70-81 (p. 72).

existence, the poet in fact brings that god into being. A poem that does not mention God might indeed be a world without a god. But a poem that does invoke a god, even in the negative, cannot be without one. That an experience of the divine that is negatively expressed might necessarily be complex and challenging is no counter to this argument, as 'A Woman from Giannedes' demonstrates, and indeed it is precisely this difficulty that the negative frame of 'I don't believe in you' communicates to the reader. The angry, almost petulant poet of 'To My Friends' is confrontational here, perhaps hoping to provoke a reply from an apparently distant God. This example demonstrates to the reader that the unique function of metaphor, with its capacity to articulate conflicting ideas in the same space, is central to this spiritual ecology. Silkin enters science and theology into a dialogue, and by exploring them co-currently he benefits from the creative possibilities of each without subscribing fully to either. That ambiguity is hugely productive.

2.3 The Human, the More-Than-Human and the More-Than-Earthly

I wish to show the reader that in Silkin's poetics, the self, the creaturely and the divine are contiguous, intra-acting and, ultimately, difficult to completely tease apart. The poet challenges an earth/divinity hierarchy that, crucially, avoids homogenisation, in 'To a lighthouse' (*The Lens-Breakers*), a lyrical and moving account of severe psychological distress and emotional recovery. Silkin examines the legacies of the Holocaust as both a collective and an individual disaster: in this poem, the catastrophe starts as a personal one but reaches out to reveal a damaged mode of transcendence. The poet explores different facets of his identity, which variously present the qualities of plants, human beings and horses. Thinking about the self as mutable allows him to confront his past with similar openness and resulting self-analysis, as the opening of the poem demonstrates:

After years I turned home, self-hatred
shredding my leaves, my feet huge
as horse-chestnut's leaf, dray, Clydesdale
useless for loads. How I forfeited self
with hatred, how I stabbed it over

and planned death;

for to have deceived
the self, was to make a shyster
of the body's innocence. So I tricked
my mind to accept murder
from me. 'If you wish,' the mild being's
shy smile shook the spine-pole of messages.¹⁹

The poet presents two versions of his own voice, demonstrating both self-destructiveness and, inversely, the ability to self-reflect on an experience of self-hatred and isolation before a form of rejuvenation and return. The nature of God changes within the poem. In angst, the poet addresses a God that coheres with the Jewish creator-figure:

Lord, you should have inserted
your ghostly hand between sperm and egg
in the sanctuary of a woman's body, to prevent
me. (p. 709)

Yet this is not as traditional an interpretation of the godhead as it may first seem. This Lord is, apparently, merely a bystander to the biological act of procreation, with an omnipotence that he or she may or may not choose to use. Silkin is not echoing Adam's tortured (and somewhat immature) question in *Paradise Lost*: 'Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me man [...]?'²⁰ The connection between Adam and God is a physical one, the latter literally forming the former with the tactile engagement of moulding clay with his hands. For Silkin in this poem, God is insubstantial, 'ghostly', and while divine intervention can drastically alter conception, God disinterestedly allows the process to happen without needing to be

¹⁹ 'To a lighthouse', *CP*, pp. 707-10 (p. 707).

²⁰ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2000), Book X, ll. 743-44 (p. 237).

much engaged. Elsewhere, the idea of God becomes entangled with the poet's sense of self. 'To a lighthouse' ends:

Decent God, you need our love, as all
need, helping you through bleak necessities
of love's exchange. Or else, a lonely smashed God
a gull's ambiguous death, in rigging
a feathery casualty; a broken angel: one of yours. (p. 710)

The final image demonstrates a turn away from God, whose divinity is called into question both its destruction and in its being made creaturely in 'a gull's ambiguous death', which is in tension with the 'Decent God' of the previous lines. At the same time, the split between the forms of selfhood, which can address each other as 'you', suggests that this God is merely another version of the poet himself. This demonstrates the contradictions at the heart of Silkin's experiences of God, which approach him variously as love, as catastrophe and as unreachable. Yet it also suggests to the reader a coherence, on one level at least, between these different forms of godhead. In these two vastly different accounts of God, there is a consistent (if differently expressed) element of the earthly and the creaturely, whether in the exchange of God for a gull or in the 'need [for] love'. Neither is intended as a *complete* challenge to the divinity of God, but both bring the divine into the more-than-human world as simply another species – one with its own characteristics and one that, like flowers, will always remain somewhat alien to the human mind that approaches it.

The tension between a turn from God and a poetic internalisation of the divine can be explored through genetic or organic criticism of draft materials relating to 'A Noiseless Place' (*Making a Republic*). Explicit references to godliness and spirituality are reduced in prominence throughout the drafting process. In a draft, the poet writes that he will 'wake the foetal creature in unused wings / folded in unheavenly stiffness to his flesh'.²¹ On the one hand, this sets corporeality and sexuality against the spiritual; on the other, what is considered 'unheavenly' is not

²¹ All of the drafts of 'A Noiseless Place' that I refer to are found in the Jon Silkin Archive, Leeds, Brotherton Library, BC MS 20c Silkin/1/15/1/3.

the 'flesh' itself but its stagnation and lack of use, in parallel with the positive identification of the divine in carnal pleasure in 'A Room in the Moorish Kingdom' and 'Beings'. Thus, what is suggested is that the way to access a kind of heaven is not an escape from the physical but to gain a deeper understanding of one's own physicality and one's integration with the material world and other beings. Nature, then, with all its fleshy realities, gives access to the divine. In a later draft, 'Bridge', Silkin writes that the smoking man experiences,

[...] The brief
erasure of his habitual, clinging life [...]
touching the limited god in each of us, our energy breaks earth's
gravitational field.

The spiritual is a catalyst for the poet's imagination. While 'unheavenly stiffness' suggests that heightened receptivity to one's physical environment produces a co-current sensitivity to the divine, 'limited god' implies, inversely, that acceptance of God increases sensitivity to the material world. From this perspective, the 'limited god' indicates not the shortcomings of the human mind but a seed of potential.

In the definitive form of 'A Noiseless Place', the poet seems less willing to admit the divine into his experience of more-than-human nature. Grief for a 'wounded child' which the poet lays to rest develops into an anxiety to assert his own bodily vitality in relation to the physical world.²² He does this by creating a network of physical senses, forces, elements and beings that are connected by the poet's creative consciousness, in material metaphors and wordplay. Silkin describes what he can see, 'the sun's heat having racemes and fingers', linking light beams, flowers and the hands of the poet. The sun's rays gain definition as the smoke drifts across the poet's vision, an image that is evoked for the reader by the associations made. In places, material metaphors depend on synecdoche: 'a leaf's featheriness' draws implicit comparisons between flora and birds, a mode of encountering the more-than-human world that I will identify in Silkin's 'South Africa's Bird of Paradise Flower' in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Opening the flower's petals, the poet goes on to 'disturb there the foetal man, his unused wings, / shrouding the papilionaceous being', identifying in the stamens of the flower a resemblance with

²² 'A Noiseless Place', *CP*, p. 743.

human procreation. The poet's use of 'papilionaceous' is playful, but it also draws a line of signification in which the movement from feathers to 'wings' outlines a bird, which shifts via those 'wings' to a *papillon* (French for butterfly), which modulates in turn to the flower in 'fritillary'. The movement from one to the next follows the logic of 'organic poetry' in terms of accumulated weight: when the butterfly modulates into a flower, the former is not lost. Rather than one negating the other, they co-exist, their difference maintained while they intra-act. A reader with an interest in botany might recall that wisteria flowers are particularly attractive to butterflies, so in this space two kinds of physical relationships interact. The ecology in 'A Noiseless Place' is, by the final lines of the definitive version, an organic one that does not accommodate the divine. Silkin searches the flower and either does not find God, or, in terror of the frailty of earthly life, emphasised to him in his grief for the child, resists it and instead grounds himself firmly in the physical world. The poem ends with an ominous reminder of the limits of consciousness and bodily life: 'The wings lash / in metrical air'. Powerfully conscious of his mortality, the poet's resistance to God does not seem to offer him much relief.

The poet's turn away from God is explored in a different way in *Making a Republic* in 'Snow Flies (the Yuki Mushi)'. The poem opens with an irreverent image: 'God rolls a smoke [...] And leans to watch / girls stepping against a bus-lit pool'.²³ The poet seemingly attempts to distance himself from God: 'He is not physical, and we are flesh that he makes' (p. 756). Silkin pushes God away in favour of the material:

In your plunging atmospheres, God, you transfix me,
but it's the human I love. When you made us,
gracious intrusion, lilac rubbed into our gene,
so that we cannot say what we are, but know
we are not all human (p. 757)

While explicitly rejecting the transcendental, Silkin acknowledges that part of himself is mysterious and 'not all human', just like the God of the 'plunging atmospheres'. Being made by God has, it seems, brought a fragment of divinity into

²³ 'Snow Flies (the Yuki Mushi)', *CP*, pp. 756-57 (p. 756).

the poet. The limits to self-knowledge frustrate Silkin here, yet they also challenge his attempt to reject God. In turning from the divine to the human, Silkin nevertheless finds elements of the fantastic and the mysterious in the self and in science, right down to the gene. The invocations of lilac and snow-flies are not incidental: working on the assumed knowledge that all life on Earth shares genetic material, the poet finds that God is as present in the most immediate, physical life as well as in what cannot be grasped. God can be found in sex (as I discuss above), God is to be found in creatures everywhere, whether human, insect or plant, and God may be found in the self. Yet the God Silkin addresses is so like the poet that they seem to be fellow beings, characterised by similarity and difference, in the way that Silkin and his community of flowers are contiguous and are defined by likenesses and contrasts. In 'To a lighthouse', we have seen a different but related parallel between the poet and God. This and 'Snow Flies' suggest to the reader that, to Silkin, God is a creature, a divine species, in a community with flowers, animals and poets.

Silkin finds that imaginative and physical encounters with the more-than-human world allow him to, first, be introspective, and then to look beyond the self. 'Six Stanzas' (*The Portrait and Other Poems*, 1950) is a meditation on the material world that produces insights into the self which in turn lead to god. The third stanza reads:

The sea is in the blood
The stone is in the bones

The tree is in the spine
The grass is in the skin

The wind is in the ear
The rain is in the eyes

The moor is in the brain
The sky is in the spirit

God is in the seed.²⁴

The first couplet describes the body's deepest foundations; the second couplet, the neurological and sensory activity that make us individuals. The third couplet integrates the body with a material, elemental ecology, while the fourth speaks to the imagination and the human yearning for transcendence. The final line reminds the reader that the physical world from which the individual self is produced was first created by God. 'As the prophet Isaiah intuited before biophysical science confirmed it to be literally so, "All flesh is grass." Plants are the source of all life on earth', and in Silkin's spiritual experience we might add that 'all grass is God'.²⁵ Yet the 'seed' is produced by the tree or grass, moved to an appropriate location by wind and watered by rain, and grows in a world of sea, stone, moor and sky: the seed surely cannot pre-exist landscapes and the elements. The seed is the producer of the plant, but also the product, and so while God is part of everything, there is commitment to an ecological, rather than temporal, logic. The self, nature and God are inextricably connected, and the individual is produced by the other forces. But whether nature or God came first is not made clear: instead, the poet emphasises a dynamic, co-creative, interconnected nature-divine, the limits of which are always beyond human conception.

The material boundaries of the self are thus revealed by Silkin's exploration of his organic and spiritual environments. Being an earthly, mortal creature means that it is precisely the poet's physicality that ensures his transience on earth, an irony that is probably not lost on Silkin. As in 'A Noiseless Place', anxiety about mortality heightens his responsiveness to the more-than-human world. He describes his interaction with the organic world in this way in 'Veining' (previously unpublished, c. 1986-1992):

I love you, earth: I shall be unhappy
to not know how you go on
after my filaments, their membraneous sticky thread,

²⁴ 'Six Stanzas', *CP*, pp. 4-6 (p. 5).

²⁵ Randy Laist, 'Introduction', p. 10.

like a snail's track, have dried out.²⁶

Here the poet is viscous, a creature that crosses boundaries between mammal, mollusc and plant (in a configuration that mirrors, perhaps, that of the 'Filaments of flesh-thread' in 'Crowfoot (in water)'). Ecological thinking allows the poet to challenge the known limitations of the bodily self that the science of ecology might teach him. Silkin explores the possibility of transcending the self in a related way in 'Tree' (*The Principle of Water*, 1973). The poet is a gardener who is gentle with the plants he nurtures:

I made boxes
and grow mint, rhubarb, parsley
and seedlings that lift a furl of leaves, slightly
aside an unwavering stem.²⁷

Botany aside, this is a domestic scene in which metaphors such as 'putting down roots' and 'nesting' might be appropriate. This prepares the reader for another, larger, responsibility: 'A friend dragged a barrel off rocks, we took it home; / I chose a tree for it'. While Silkin is conscious that the tree is entrenched in an ecology, it being 'dark green / in earth mixed with peat dug by a lake / and dung I crumbled in', it is also a figure on its own terms: 'The whole tree / can glisten or die'. The 'you' only addressed in the poem's final sentence remains mysterious, yet the implication is that this not the 'friend' who rescued the barrel, but a lover:

I can't fudge up a relationship, but it gladdens
you, as the sun concentrates it, and I
want the creature for what it is
to live beyond me.

The poet's nurture of the tree becomes an offering or token, a means of connecting with his partner. If nature can give access to the divine, perhaps it, too, can give access to romantic love, even if the act of giving connects but also emphasises the separation between two creatures. The poet's experiences of the divine and of

²⁶ 'Veining', *CP*, pp. 626-27 (p. 627).

²⁷ 'Tree', *CP*, p. 360.

romance are also revealing about his self-understanding. 'Tree' is a poem about a tree but it is also a poem about the self (as we have seen in the *Flower Poems*, two such narratives can productively co-exist). The tree is a creature in a community with Silkin, and it offers the poet a kind of longevity, the lack of which is lamented in 'Veining'. In 'Tree', the afterlife, if we can call it such, is organic, not transcendental. Yet there is a sense of frustration at the end of 'Tree', an inability to reach whatever is beyond the immediate, beyond 'me'. This might be a case of the poet longing for escape from emotional suffering, or it might be a spiritual search for the Creator or the afterlife (again, one narrative does not negate the existence of the other). Either way, the poet is looking for experiences that are not subject to the trappings and solidity of the here and now, like the tree's 'branches that may stretch across / the wall'. The tree is the vehicle for exploration, even if the results it yields are uncertain (the poem ends with the poet's assertion of desire, but is silent on whether that is satisfied). Silkin searches for transcendence in a way that is highly focussed on the phenomenal world. The poet of 'Tree' discovers a hazy, incomplete kind of organic spirituality. Nature has the potential to offer access to the divine, though it does not always deliver in full.

I am now going to discuss poetry that demonstrates the richness of Silkin's poetic engagement with what is 'beyond', and the different ways in which the poet's conception of the divine is closely integrated with his experience of plants, land and his physical senses. First, for comparison and contrast, I want to look at the relationship between the organic world and the transcendent realm in an early poem by Geoffrey Hill, a greatly influential colleague of Silkin's. 'Flower and No Flower' (1952) takes the form of 'A Dialogue between the Soul and Body', recalling Marvell, though, inversely to Marvell, Hill's 'Body' speaks first.²⁸ The poem constructs dialogic encounters between organic and non-organic materialities, with an anatomical account of the body of the flower. 'Flower and No Flower' opens with a metaphor that blurs the boundaries between static rock and dynamic flower:

Body: The flint's grey stamens keep

The shadow of a spark

²⁸ Geoffrey Hill, 'Flower and No Flower', *New Poems*, 1.2, ed. by Donald Hall (Oxford: Fantasy Press, 1952). I refer the reader to the text of this short poem.

Deep in the crabbed rock.

The flint is not only the shape of a flower, it has reproductive potential; the 'spark' (which we might associate with life or inspiration) has a 'shadow' which at once compromises its purity and asserts its physicality. Similarly, the depth of the rock is both supportive of crustacean life and negatively incomprehensible. Both potential and prohibition are possible. The 'Soul' enters with:

Soul: The flint that stays unfound

May rock its quiet seed

Unkindled and unshed

The middle line again presents both a lost opportunity, a seed that will not grow but remain in 'barren ground', and the quiet potential of a seed being gently rocked, like a baby. Burial implies both planting a seed and mourning rites. The reference to original sin, 'And staggering from birth / Re-opens the old scars', suggests a perspective that life is a repetitive and painful process of ageing; the life of the individual is also necessarily tied to other people's histories, the stories of 'old scars'. Hill invokes the biblical elsewhere in the poem, for example in 'the long drought to come'. His nature in the poem is, like Silkin's, subject to pain, and particularly human kinds of suffering: it 'wages with its growth / Inevitable wars'. Adrian Poole writes that in the opening image, 'The shadow of a spark', we find an 'abysmal complicity of mineral and spiritual':²⁹ a religious sense (or sensibility) that is connected to, and integrated with, the organic and elemental in ways that are not comforting but are suggestive of hazardous futures and even an impending apocalypse. Running concurrently with these themes is an exposition about the dialogic worlds of the organic and the transcendental. The body speaks, and then the soul addresses the same subject in its inherently different way. The body is contained and finite, while the soul speaks of possibility, potential, growth and generation. The body sees a 'shadow', the soul sees a 'seed'. The body is in the organic world, with the stamens and the crabbed rock, but it apparently does not understand the potential to move beyond the self in the way the soul does. The body (shadow) is always dying, whereas the soul (seed), immortal, is always going on to

²⁹ Adrian Poole, 'Hill's 'version' of *Brand*', in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), pp. 86-99 (p. 88).

new life. Thus 'Flower and No Flower' offers the reader a different but related encounter with the divine from the religious experiences in Silkin's poetry. As Silkin remarks: 'however painful it may be, for the poet a continuing vitality seems to depend, as it has with Geoffrey Hill, on the conflict between irreconcilables or opposites being retained in interplay. It is not good for the poet to reconcile these oppositions'.³⁰ Like Silkin's own encounter, Hill's account of God accommodates suffering and pain on the one hand and verdant promise on the other. Both are understood to be integrated with the material reality of the more-than-human world.

Silkin explores the organic potential of the divine in a different way in 'Shaping a Republic' (*Making a Republic*). I explore this poem at some length since it integrates a number of key ideas at work in his spiritual poetics that have been proposed in this chapter so far: the rights of the individual, consciousness of atrocity, privilege of individual experience, sex and love, the conviction that the more-than-human world gives access to the divine, and the rich poetic ecology that is produced when these insights are explored in the same space. While a close relationship between creation stories and violence is demonstrated in this poem, he nevertheless articulates a positive and regenerative spiritual experience that is not completely defined, but is 'paradisaal', focussed on the future, and shows the reader how, for Silkin, the more-than-human world can give access to the divine. With reference to Jewish dogma, Tirosh-Samuelsan writes:

The doctrine of creation, which recognizes the gulf between the creator and the created world, facilitates an interest in the natural world that God created. The more one observes the natural world, the more one comes to revere the creator, because the world manifests the presence of order and wise design in which nothing is superfluous. (*Oxford Handbook*, p. 35)

Such a 'gulf' might be identifiable in Silkin's poetry where he seems to struggle to locate or connect with a deity. Yet this perspective is clearly problematic in this case, as it still depends on there being a division between human beings and the rest of nature, which is not compatible with Silkin's more-than-human philosophy (or indeed current understandings of ecological science). Respectful admiration from afar is clearly not going to be enough to alter the trajectory of climate change and

³⁰ *The Life of Metrical*, p. 61.

species extinction, and as work such as the ‘flower’ poems and ‘A Noiseless Place’ demonstrate, Silkin’s interest in nonhuman creatures is defined by an impulse towards material involvement. From this perspective, Silkin’s nonconformity to Jewish ideology is striking. Tirosh-Samuelsan continues: ‘In the Psalms, however, awareness of nature’s orderliness, regularity, and beauty never leads to revelling in nature for its own sake. Nature is never an end, but always points to the divine creator who governs and sustains nature’ (p. 35). Silkin’s poetry frequently reflects this conviction that nature gives access to the divine. In some ways, his spirituality coheres with Jewish tradition. In ‘Shaping a Republic’, the poet uses a material simile to articulate his perception of flowers’ vitality:

Seeing one flower, solitary and regarded,
flowers I see, caracolling, reared up like horses
menacing, but soft swollen belly of vulnerable energy.³¹

The double meaning of ‘reared’ – as both physically alert and fertile – challenges rigid boundaries between animal and vegetal beings. The flowers might be rooted in the earth, but in their abilities to move, grow and intra-act are quite equal to the formidable strength of the horse rearing on its hind legs. The insight into the experiences of the flowers provided by this form of metaphor suggests two further ideas that are relevant to this discussion, relating to ethics and to the divine.

‘Shaping a Republic’ continues:

Flowers are rearing like horses, like prayers made
each year, impressed in each other’s shapes, in floral communities
of flower-like assemblies, aspiring and restrained,
flowers imploring we see and not uproot them. (p. 778)

Silkin identifies elements of the spiritual in the organic creatures, which in turn invokes a commitment to a ‘peaceable kingdom’ community of non-violent co-existence. The flowers appear to have achieved something resembling this in their ‘assemblies’; the nonhuman animal also co-exists in dynamic harmony; and so does the divine, which engages in both mutual respect and mutual physical creativity with the flowers. It is only the human being that threatens the ecological ‘communities’.

³¹ ‘Shaping a Republic’ *CP*, pp. 776-78 (p. 778).

The image of flowers, horses and prayers being ‘impressed in each other’s shapes’ demonstrates a divinity that is fundamentally intra-connected with the organic world. Silkin’s God, when the poet is able to communicate with him, is not an inhabitant of a distant, transcendent realm. Judaism teaches that ‘nature is not inherently sacred and that only when humans act in accord with divine commands can nature become holy’ – Silkin explicitly departs from this interpretation of godliness.³² In this poetry it is not the case that a separate God infuses the more-than-human world with divinity. Rather, it is the case that God is found in the poet’s experience of connection, brokered through metaphor, with fellow beings. At least in part, Silkin’s God inhabits the organic world.

In ‘Shaping a Republic’, Silkin addresses religious doctrine in parallel with an engagement with Milton that demonstrates the poet’s capacity to accumulate material and render it in new forms. This presents a vital assertion of poetry’s contribution to a re-visioning of the individual’s relationship to the natural world and the divine. It is worth noting that Silkin invokes a poet who is so well-known for his religious commitment; it is certainly significant that in the final stanza of ‘Shaping a Republic’, the more-than-human and the spiritual are self-consciously addressed as a network:

Sometimes I speak and you do not hear
sometimes you don’t then do speak, I unhearing.
These flowers always hearing and silent,
the pansie freakt with jeat, Milton wrote, listening.
And as he listened they grew
and as they grow he hears
a magisterial dance
an insisting meek energy (p. 778)

‘These flowers’ are necessary to both poets’ interactions with poetry and God. Invoking specific qualities of Miltonic language, Silkin identifies with the flowers. Silkin stages an encounter with Milton: the indentation at the opening of the line

³² Tirosh-Samuelson, *Oxford Handbook*, p. 54.

‘and as they grow [...]’ formulates spatially the distancing of this idea from the previous one, opening the possibility that in the last lines Silkin is speaking as much about his own poetics as he is about Milton’s. Thus, a new poetic consciousness emerges from Silkin’s engagement with cultural material, which goes some way towards demonstrating how the spirituality in the poem is comparably ‘born’ from the rendering in poetic language of religious motifs.

Silkin’s experience of the divine is rarely straightforward, and if the spiritual experience in ‘Shaping a Republic’ is difficult to define, there is nonetheless evidence of a profound encounter with the more-than-earthly in the final lines. Punctuation is supplanted by visual movement that demonstrates Hebrew ‘parallelism’. In the penultimate couplet, the second line follows the first by advancing into the page with the movement from the past to the immediate present (‘they grew’, ‘they grow’; ‘he listened’, ‘he hears’). Small alterations at the level of the language re-focus the poetic experience on the individual. In the final couplet, a subsequent form of parallelism moves from the earthly present to a form of transcendence which might invoke God: from the assonance of the move from ‘a magisterial’ to ‘an insisting meek’, and from the bodily ‘dance’ to the insubstantial, sublime ‘energy’. The abrupt ‘k’ sound creates a brief pause to accentuate ‘energy’, but ‘meek’ also invokes Matthew 5:5: ‘Blessed are the meek: / for they shall inherit the earth’. Struggling with establishing a satisfactory earthly dwelling, a problem produced for the couple by Tosco’s alienation from English cultural history, the poet finds a different form of dwelling in his communication with God. The verse from Matthew suggests that faith in God will lead to material fulfilment; Silkin’s inflection is rather different. Despite the complexities within the couple’s search for a cultural home, the poet clearly experiences a different form of physical dwelling in the sensory intra-action with the flowers, and it is through this engagement with materiality that he is able to access God.

The reader is told that the flowers are ‘like prayers’, before the modulation to the pattern of speech and hearing in the final stanza. The awkward syntax in the first two lines suggests frustration in the denial of connection. The second line is essentially a redrafting of the words in the first, and the disappointment in ‘I unhearing’ articulates the poet’s inability to escape this closed circularity. It is in the following lines, where Silkin opens himself up to external influence, artistically and physically, that his experience is enhanced both poetically and spiritually. The

flowers are once more central to the progression of his creativity, but their place is as more than visual stimulation or poetic raw material. Rather, there takes place in the poetry an opening up of interactive experience between self and world where the point of origin is hidden from view. 'As he listened they grew' shows the heightened sensitivity of the poet's connection to the earth, and equates the writing of poetry with listening – suggesting that the speech of the first two lines is a kind of deafness – in a sensitivity to the natural world that functions by interaction but privileges reception over utterance. However, the previous line has described the flowers as 'silent', and thus Milton's writing the flowers in poetry seems to invoke a reaction out of them: then, 'as he listened they grew', and so it seems that both Milton and the flowers are inspired into fruitful production. This is not supposed to be a literal or scientific model of natural process, of course, and the suggestion that the poet has physical effect on the natural world in 'as he listened they grew' gives way in the following line to a moment of heightened intensity: 'and as they grow he hears'. The poet is thus subject again to his capacity for identification with the external world, and his powers of creative reinterpretation of poetic raw material.

The productive confusion of senses in the suggestion of hearing a dance further clarifies the focus here on the self, though this is not a display of an eschewing of responsibility towards the natural world via an imaginative escape from consequence. Rather, Silkin asserts a powerful form of spirituality in these final lines in a highly personal manner that equates familiarity with the flowers with a religious understanding that is particular to this unique experience. It is not the implication that the flowers, which are growing with the sound of 'an insisting meek energy', may be inhabited or defined by this spiritual energy, thus inspiring reverence and compassion. The last stanza suggests that the profound experience of the final two lines, which is both spiritual and emotional, occurs as an element of a fuller reality. The desire to consider justice due to other beings is out of affection and respect for the flowers, but even more so it is born from an understanding of the profound connection between the life of the mind and its external environments. The reader follows Milton and Silkin to absorb a fragment of poetic language and exert a creative pressure on it. He or she is invited into a particular cultural legacy and is implicated in a compassion for nature, where *compassion* signifies both benevolence and shared experience.

The progression from the 'flowers imploring' in the previous stanza develops the environmental ethics in two key ways. In the last moments of the poem, the interaction with flowers is not by seeing but by hearing: thus, by invoking poetry and creation mythology, the imagination is privileged over a more objective mode of knowledge. Even more crucially, however, the integrative processes in the final stanza speak to the complex nature of the relationship between self and other, or mind with flower. In language, poetic consciousness is enmeshed with experiences of other creative beings, and sound is significant in the development of creative spirituality. From 'the energy, which clapped / our world into being', Silkin moves through the questioning of the 'vulnerable energy', to the final 'meek energy'. This expression, 'insisting', has a conviction about it, though the poem ends unstopped to remind us that the sincerity of this final image is necessarily transient. In identifying the origin of the world as a clap, Silkin tells his own creation myth in both religious and personal terms. The biblical creation story begins with a sound in the form of the 'Word', which situates language at the centre of the divine creative impulse and the materiality of the Earth. But the poem is presented to the reader in a way that obscures the process of generation: the revisions are hidden under the surface of the poem that has now achieved the poet's idea. In this way, the poem itself may be seen as a kind of creation myth in that there appears to be nothing before its beginning. The fact that this is a delusion is irrelevant because it satisfies the human instinct to suppose external reality follows a similar pattern to human consciousness, and is thus subject to notions of linear time. Silence lingers around the poem, which demonstrates how Silkin's poetry roots the reader in this discourse, just as he or she was drawn into a compassionate relationship with the flowers.

The poet's engagement with Miltonic language roots the reader in a particular cultural legacy in which he or she is brought to identification with the flowers as I outlined above, and on from this to the creation of a poetic form that is connected to the reader's mind by lineage. The relationship between conscious experience and poetry here is even more powerful, however, located in the comparison between the understanding of the creative mind and the particular kind of knowledge in art. The edges of the poem silence what went before and what comes after, and the only way the poem can reach beyond its spatial and temporal confines is by a redeployment or creative remembering of historical moments, people and landscapes. These limits are what define human consciousness, too, in

terms of ignorance about what happens after death, and the value-laden nature of attempts to articulate a relationship with objects of association, memory or perception. The reader might think of Blake's belief that '[i]f the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite' (Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). 'Shaping a Republic' takes the form of an external body to which the poet's and reader's minds are connected, however briefly. By identifying itself as both related to and resembling the poem, consciousness experiences a temporary but powerful illusion of really escaping its own confines and looking in on itself from the outside.

In 'Shaping a Republic', the flowers' assertion of their rights to unthreatened existence resonates with the reader, not just because his or her sympathies for the flowers have already been stirred, but because the lives of humans and flowers are contiguous. The reader is implicated in a commitment to an egalitarian community where the flowers are not to be physically harmed and human interests are not to be privileged over those of the nonhuman. In this way the poem creates a 'peaceable kingdom'. A commitment to ideology is manifested in the appeal to dialogue in 'imploring'. The language deepens the connection between thought and action and involves the reader in the poetic ecology. The movement from the singular 'one flower, solitary and regarded' to the plural 'floral communities / of flower-like assemblies' suggests that the context in which flowers may be free is one that accounts for all other life-forms, presumably both human and nonhuman. By articulating this in a highly metaphorical register, Silkin establishes the imagination – and thus the reader – as part of this network of 'obligation'. The close network of influences affecting both human and more-than-human domains demonstrates a certain insight into some of the difficulties contemporary politicians, for instance, face in terms of balancing business and environmental interests, or the combined movement against social and ecological injustices taken up in postcolonial ecocriticism.³³ Silkin's poetic interaction with the natural world gives his project social resonance: he engages imaginatively with the flowers, and thereby deepens his understanding of both environmental and political subjects. In this act he

³³ See in particular Graham Huggan, 'Greening Postcolonialism', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50 (2004), pp. 701-33; and Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's introduction to their edited collection of essays, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

articulates something of the complexities of designing progressive environmental policy that, in caring for one group, does not subvert another. The new ways of thinking that emerge from this imaginative questioning necessarily not only permit community concerns, but also expand and intensify the space made for them. The agency of the imagination means that individuals and groups are accounted for in Silkin's call for fresh ways of entering into political-environmental discourses. Co-existence is enabled in a liberal community that, 'aspiring and restrained', does not subjugate one group on behalf of another.

'Shaping a Republic' reveals connections between religious experience, language and the intellectual and emotional life of the mind. This ecology also includes sexuality and romantic love. The poet addresses his lover, Tosco, a Japanese woman who has moved to England to live with him. She struggles with culture shock and they both struggle with limited command of the other's mother tongue. Yet their connection is clearly powerful, and the poet seeks to make up for lack of shared language by using the 'languages' of plants and of sex:

Beautiful, as if you stood in shade,
and the leaf's chlorophyll, with the light it occluded
made your colour.
I have so little of your language, 'O-hayo gozaimasu,'
before rising, many times. You write and speak English.

To busse, to kiss its meanings, the tongue doing both. (p. 776)

Here Silkin aligns Tosco with plant life and integrates her into his environment. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I focussed on examples of animal sexuality in the 'flower' poems. This passage from 'Shaping a Republic' demonstrates another of Silkin's often-employed modes of writing about sex. While he pays close attention to the human body – the playful allusion to 'the tongue doing both' suggests a sexual connection that is made all the more exciting for the language barrier – plant life is also central to the way he writes about sexualised human bodies. 'All flesh is grass', indeed, and the poet locates himself in a community that includes vegetal beings.

Silkin's attempts to overcome the problem of alienation in 'Shaping a Republic' direct him to consider the materiality of language, as the focus on the physicality of writing and speaking English suggests. Linguistic estrangement

becomes geographical displacement and transfers the status of 'alien' from the Jewish-English poet in post-war Japan to the Japanese woman in post-War England. The connection between language and place is clearly under scrutiny, and by this measure Tosco might appear to be at a disadvantage. However, what is overtly 'alien' forms a crucial part of the couple's bond. Both cultural affiliations signify a degree of victimisation in relation to the decimation of populations in the Second World War – the experience of European Jews in the Nazi death camps on the one hand and the nuclear bombs detonated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the other. The poet and Tosco are both born into post-atrocity cultures, and their search for common ground and for a shared home in which Tosco does not feel alienated reflects on the uneasy status of Jews in post-War England and the Japanese attempting to rebuild during post-War US occupation:

We try England, but you
won't forsake the car, darling vehicle,
rigid love outside, puffy with it within.
I suggest, 'this little parish church'
 cruciform
 miniature planned precious one
that constellates a few houses, sparse mild universe;
in the spaces of that Other is the energy, which clapped
our world into being. 'I don't want,
church smells of death.' (p. 777)

The church is 'one / that constellates a few houses', speaking to the connections between physical, social and religious structures at the heart of the village community which are symbolised in visual form in the manipulation of the shape of the cross. The attempts of the poet and his partner to find a suitable home take us a significant stage further towards understanding the relationship between different kinds of dwelling in the poem. Tosco resists the poet's suggestion that the couple try 'this little parish church', a resistance that underpins the ambiguous confusion that develops in the stanza at a grammatical level. The first issue is the question of whose voice speaks the rejection, 'I don't want, / church smells of death'. Initially, it is

unclear whether it is Tosco responding to the poet's suggestion of 'this little parish church', as it may be another directly transcribed speech of the poet's. Taking the 'smells' as a noun, the comma after 'want' is merely an intake of breath, or a poetic convention, however awkward that may make the syntax. More likely, this is a conversation between the poet and Tosco, who speaks with somewhat stilted, non-native English, which makes it unclear whether her refusal stems from ideological dissatisfaction or personal distaste. The inarticulacy of 'church' (without the definite article) equally suggests a dissolution of the distinction between imaginative process and sensory experience on an immediate level, and an unwillingness on her part to integrate with Christian culture. The poet's rejoinder, 'Even ornate Bethlehem's [...]?', implies the latter, while silence in response to his questions, 'Tosco? / Answer me' could be interpreted as failed communication on both sides (p. 777). Unsuccessful speech integrates with the couple's failed attempt to find dwelling, physically and culturally. Crucially, it is the image of the 'church' that first introduces a mode of thought that reaches beyond the earthly 'intense snow-packed winter' or 'silent Newcastle night' (p. 777). Thus we see that the spiritual is a key aspect of the search for both personal and cultural belonging.

In 'Shaping a Republic', by illuminating and intensifying self-knowledge, the poet comes closer to an appreciation of his ecological connection with his environments, and experiences something of a divine contact. However, while the poetic 'I' is strong in this poem, it is made plain to the reader from the first lines that the attempt to establish an egalitarian community, as suggested in the title, will be through a democratic process of 'active sharing'. I have said already that there is a marked change between the frustrated emotional and spiritual challenge in the space of the 'little parish church' and the delicate evocation of a mind divinely interfused with its material surroundings at the end of the poem. What permits this development is the strengthening of the bond between the poet and his lover in the second half of the poem. Ultimately, the reader appreciates the non-causal, intra-active nature of the relationship between romantic love and divine experience: God is found in sexual connections, and neither pre-dates the other.

Despite the conversation around the 'little parish church', the stanza narrates the failure of dwelling and then closes with a silence, which in the invocation of Bethlehem and the repeated calls to Tosco widens the empty space that surrounds it.

The poem then describes another uncomfortable residence, which is more particular in its referring to the nation. This time Tosco's voice is not heard:

You can stay, the Home Office admits.
What's it like, Alien? In
Japan, my agit was for, not England – it was: for
a suburb's mildness in bronchial evenings;
but I missed English, being my speech,
what else for a Jew, but another's language? (p. 778)

The self-conscious political rhetoric here does more than indicate the irony of the fact that finally completing the difficult process of obtaining the legal right to dwell in England is only the beginning of a longer and more deeply complex course of cultural assimilation. The 'agit [...] for, not England [but] for / a suburb's mildness' anticipates – albeit in indirect terms – the nature of the relationship between the landscape and the political and social affairs that take place on it. The poem continues:

Tosco, some make of us aliens, ash
die, die, no, we are safe fleas in UK.
Back to United K, we're not to be lulled – how
might that occur? All's changed. Borne
on the rapid transit,
this intricate fuselage of wood-lice circling
our root-system: terror. (p. 778)

These lines are dense and complex, but having engaged the political in the first half of the stanza, it is through this struggle with 'speech' and 'language' that Silkin can address the place the Holocaust has in his psychological history, and voice something of the ways he is able to think about himself in the present. Perhaps the convoluted indirectness of this reference belies an embarrassment at his mind's drawing connections across the gulf between the experience of the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and the difficulties faced by a post-war English Jew in a free and mutually loving relationship with a woman who happens to be Japanese.

Nevertheless, it is not astonishing to see the Holocaust push a powerful poet to the limits of his articulacy. I earlier suggested that the practicalities of a Japanese immigrant taking up residence in England are likely to be succeeded by a disruptive period of cultural integration, and the line following the introduction of the ‘Jew’ acknowledges a similar problem in the wartime and post-war Jewish diaspora. ‘Tosco, some make of us aliens, ash / die die, no, we are safe fleas in UK’ addresses the illogical racism directed at Jewish refugees in England: having fled the fate of being incinerated to ‘ash’ in the extermination camps and having made it to the relative safe haven within UK borders, many European Jews experienced a subtler and less violent form of the hostility and dehumanisation they had faced under the Nazi regime. The reference to ‘fleas’ invokes Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Louse Hunting’, in which the poet speaks of the method of burning the seams of clothes to remove lice infestations, an experience shared by concentration camp inmates and soldiers alike.³⁴ In this way Silkin goes some way to alleviating himself of the survivor’s guilt produced by his drawing comparisons between different experiences of geographical displacement and linguistic alienation. He does this by establishing an emotional association between those who have reached a kind of salvation, and those who may not have done. The metaphorical connection keeps those who have been lost within reach of empathetic identification and cultural memory. Silkin not only turns to the security of language in order to work towards an understanding of his specific personal and historical situations, but, by engaging with Rosenberg, he also gives his own poetry a connective assurance beyond its own space on the page. As in his engagement with Milton’s ‘Lycidas’, here reference to an external text establishes a comprehensible connection between personal and cultural history.

‘[W]hat else for a Jew, but another’s language?’ is self-conscious in relation to the silence on the subject of language in much Holocaust literature: with the focus on the very physical realities of gas chambers and flight across borders, the effects of mainland European Jews’ loss of native tongue after taking up refugee status in England are often overlooked. Despite moments where it seems as if Silkin may be suggesting that some terrors might be more disturbing than others, what he is ultimately doing is presenting an ecology of mind, material world and language.

³⁴ Isaac Rosenberg, ‘Louse Hunting’, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 108.

Crucially, it is in articulating the interwoven nature of these different fabrics of experience that the poet establishes the space of the poem as one in which he can attempt to resolve the difficulties presented by his and his partner's mutual foreignness. It is in poetic expression of their attempt to make a home in England that permits Silkin to speak not only of his own experience of isolation but events of historical significance. In a related way, he finds in his confrontation of the Holocaust a space in which he deepens his understanding of the ways in which he and his lover share cultural understanding despite their cultural differences. The pain and 'terror' of personal alienation and segregation is apparent on an individual level in the reluctance of the Home Office to 'admit' her a visa, and the pressures on their relationship of their relocation to England. The figure of the Holocaust victim in the poem highlights the post-war racial frictions experienced by a Jewish-English man in Japan, and then a Japanese woman in England. In this way, paradoxically, it seems that if Silkin and Tosco do not exactly cancel out the other's alien-ness, then their contrary but comparable experiences create a new blank stage on which the cultural barrier between them is challenged. This is the first point in the poem that the two are not in 'amiable / opposed passions'. Indeed, earlier on, even lines of powerful tenderness function on the basis of there being a difference to resolve:

If I could source my aggressions'
crystal caustic arisal, I'd bathe
it in your shade. (p. 777)

But 'Tosco, some make of us aliens' describes a shared experience in a manner that suggests, for the first time in the poem, that the categories of 'Japanese' and 'Jew' have been put under pressure to reveal that the boundaries between them are not clearly defined. The reader will identify a parallel with Silkin's challenges to species boundaries in the 'flower' poems, and spiritual ecologies discussed in this chapter. The line progresses: 'we are safe fleas in UK', recalling comparisons between victims and insects in 'The Fireflies of Minsk'. While it is the poet's voice that opens the sentence by addressing his partner, at some point in 'ash / die, die, no', it has become Tosco herself who is speaking. This integration of speech is an important stage in the development of their bond, and it is suggestive of the way their relationship is crystallised. The softness of 'suburb's mildness' suggests both satisfaction in terms of physical dwelling as well as less easily definable sensory

experience, and placing this alongside the strangeness of 'bronchial evenings' once more brings their voices and their experiences of the country together. But more than this, 'bronchial' evokes breathing, and the physicality of breath in speech: the lovers' shared understanding is written into poetic language and physical place.

Tosco's silence following her refusal of the church, as the poet talks to her about 'its recesses of fearful unending beyond', can thus be seen less in terms of her being obscured, and more as a sign of Silkin's gradual process of assimilating her into the poetry. The 'ash' is both the remains of victims of the Holocaust and the atom bombs, and a tree: the word is afforded real qualities of ash as a fertiliser for new life, and is a regenerative space for Silkin. The re-imagination of that terrible knowledge, via a mode of poetic language that constructs a support system out of physical nature, permits him to destabilise the boundaries between his partner and himself, and re-establish their union in an egalitarian framework. By tracing the pattern of the poet's depiction of his lover throughout the poem, it becomes apparent that this use of plant life to articulate his feelings and desires about her is one instance of a wider poetic project. This description of a feminised plant world that identifies Tosco with the trees develops throughout the poem. In the opening, when Silkin sees her 'as if you stood in shade', his attention is on the scientific processes of 'the leaf's chlorophyll,' 'the light' and the 'colour' of her skin, 'dark / like your mother' (p. 776). Here she is distinguishable from the tree, but the attention to the sensory and intellectual impressions engendered by the poet's sharp vision is an important indication of the imagination's contribution to this development. The next instance of the poet's identification of Tosco with a tree occurs in the third stanza:

I feel your intent steely complicit
smiling silence. A sweet smirking.
And dark, yes, tree-shade
and heat. (p. 777)

This image is a connective stage to the end of the fourth stanza, where instead of an unspecified 'tree-shade', he openly addresses 'your shade'. In these three uses of 'shade', Silkin has gradually integrated Tosco with plant life in the fabric of the poem. She is joined both to nature and to language in the same movements, a key progression in the poem that is a crucial foundation for the next stages in this process. Having established Tosco's connection to the plants, Silkin now works to

establish his own relationship with them. The meaning of ‘you, feelings’ gardener’ is made clear in the context of the stanza, in which he writes that, ‘our poems will, in amiable / opposed passions, discuss each other’. By invoking the lovers’ reciprocal exchange of poetic practice in the context of ‘passions’, the idea of poems ‘made once, talked / about, again’ suggests a parallel between the excitement at language demanding that poems are read and re-read, and the slow, repetitive tenderness of gardening. In this way it appears that the ‘feelings’ she is caring for include, but are more than, the poet’s raw emotions. By identifying himself with the plant life that the gardener is responsible for, Silkin integrates himself in the poem in much the same way he did her. In this way the lovers have a common ground in terms of both linguistic experience and physical place, which is a subtle but highly important promise underpinning the pain and disjunction of their ‘try[ing] England’ in the next stanzas.

I have suggested that the poetic representation of cultural trauma inflicted by the Holocaust generates a redemptive mode that establishes connections in material and psychological spaces. Addressing both personal conflict and historical pain as the poet protests how ‘some make of us aliens’ crystallises distress, which takes on agency, like the ‘ash’, and enables a further organic progression. Once more, just as I demonstrated earlier in the flowers ‘rearing’, pain is a precursor to growth. The fifth instance of direct parallel between human and plant bodies is ‘[b]orne’ of the poet’s realisation that his return to England will be no easier than his partner’s relocation: ‘Back to United K, we’re not to be lulled’. By the end of the stanza, not only are both poet and lover identified by a vegetal comparison, they are implicated in the same organic experience by the power of progressive metaphor, and by their uniting their pain in the creative stability of poetic language and natural world. Silkin now speaks of the physical body in terms of ‘this intricate fuselage of woodlice circling / our root-system: terror’. That the shared ‘root-system’ is bookended by the mechanical structure of the aeroplane and the boldness of ‘terror’ is significant in describing the plant in which the lovers now find themselves joined – the couple are united, but united under attack. Rather than the intellectual and sensory leaves and ‘shade’ in the first half of the poem, the emotional and more particularly temporal quality of the ‘feelings’ gardener’ have been absorbed to produce a ‘root-system’ that, both metaphorically and literally, encompasses the personal and social histories, as well as the mechanism for continuing life. Thus, at

this stage in the poem, oppositions in language and speech, sexual love and cultural conflict have, through creative interactions with the structures of poetry and the material world, been processed, and an idea of reconciliation has been suggested.

In this light, the final two stanzas of the poem can be read as an expression of the necessity of sexual and emotional fulfilment to the achievement of an experience of the divine. Silkin is highly sensitive to the vegetal beings, and the deftness with which he moves between 'sometimes you don't then do speak, I unhearing' and 'These flowers always hearing and silent', when read in the context of the gradual progression of assimilating person and plant that I have outlined, proposes that the poet and his partner have both taken on the values of flowers and, in the space of the poem, have become them. 'Seeing one flower' is opened up, and as 'flower' is read as verb as well as noun, the reader engages with a multi-dimensional image where process and achievement are simultaneously represented. Crucially, the poet now seems to be speaking of a human being's own flourishing. Human beings and vegetal beings can, on some level, share experiences, as Silkin's 'Milkmaids' also told us, and it is metaphor that provides access to this understanding.

The use of Milton in the final stanza identifies the centrality of poetic language in the poet's attempts to reach not only beyond the human, but beyond the earthly. If the more-than-human world can give access to the divine, so can poetry. The uncertainty as to whether this ecstatic 'dance' is triggered by sublime appreciation of the natural world, inspired artistic creativity or a genuine sense of the divine is not just immaterial, it is precisely the point. The engagement on multiple levels of artistic and intellectual creativity with different materials and structures of experience, whether felt to the touch or inscribed on the page, is what liberates the poet. But the strange, almost abrasive quality of the line, 'in the spaces of that Other is the energy, which clapped / our world into being' reveals itself as a half-achievement and a paradox. Despite this clear dependence on the 'Other', at this point in the poem, Silkin's relationship with Tosco is underwritten by unease, and his connection with the physical world is not yet fully established. By the end of the poem, Silkin has harnessed this 'energy, which clapped / our world into being', and deployed it on his own terms, opening them both up to 'vulnerable energy' and, master of his imagination, he has established an exciting, spiritually and emotionally fulfilling 'insisting meek energy' that promises longevity. At the end of the poem,

the lovers are so close in their natures that even their voices and hearing are confused together, and there are certainly no more speech-marked phrases. The pair have not cancelled each other out, but have *both* integrated with the more-than-human world and the world of the poem, and yet retained fundamental points of difference.

2.4 Catastrophe, Re-Creation and the Nuclear Sublime

In 'Shaping a Republic', Silkin finds a point of access to the divine not in the traditional manifestations of godliness, i.e. the church, but in an individual, organically-embodied experience. In 'Conditions' (*Amana Grass*, 1971), the poet rejects organised religion in a related way:

[...] Does God

live between spaces defined in the Hebrew script crushed upright?

So much oblivion in

such librarianship.³⁵

It is apparent that this form of scholarship, in contrast to the exploratory modes of learning in 'A Room in the Moorish Kingdom', oppresses Silkin's attempts to reach the divine. The 'oblivion' he attributes to (what he perceives as) the confinement of godliness to the 'spaces' around unchanging, universally-applied text relates to his own inability to connect with God through the Torah. In a related way to the poet's rejection of God in 'The silence', in 'Conditions' the subject of the poem is his failing faith: 'Part of me feels as though / it would like to believe' (p. 324). As in 'The silence', the negative frames evoke a relationship with God, albeit a problematic one, as does the evidence of fractures in the self. The poet's use of 'oblivion' also foregrounds a sublime negotiation of terror and beauty that runs through the poem. His inability to reconcile himself to a belief in the afterlife parallels an inability to live without the idea:

Care for after death

³⁵ 'Conditions', *CP*, pp. 324-25 (p. 324).

seems a balm swathed over the terrifying
body that, with life,
was beautiful as a god (p. 324)

Here the godly is earthly, bodily and organic, and the poet seems to fear that, on his departure from the living world, he will leave God behind, too. The sublime tension between life and death is articulated in the poet's personal fear not only of death, but of final dissolution of the self. The reader remembers Silkin's reading of Lawrence (invoked in Chapter 1) where 'oblivion' reveals the meaning of the following line: 'Are you willing to be made nothing?'. In 'Conditions', it seems that Silkin is not willing to countenance this at all. He is also unwilling, or unable – as is the case, broadly speaking, in his poetry in general – to lose his spirituality, however contradictory or dismissive his approach to it may be. As a result, here – as so often in other poems, as this chapter has demonstrated – the way to encounter God is with unflinching acknowledgement of the idiosyncratic nature of the world:

[...] death, which cramps
each creature in his pain,
and is joy's measurement.
Both seem gifts of one
divine (pp. 324-25)

Differences are sustained within an overall conception of the divine. For Silkin, God is defined by paradox as much as the ability to 'gift' and create. The various textures of beauty and terror in Silkin's experience of the divine, which we have explored in this chapter, demonstrate to the reader the sublime quality of his God – the mystifying, contradictory, irrefutable 'insisting meek energy'.

As this chapter has demonstrated, in Silkin's poetry both atrocity and the sublime are often found in God. I have explored a number of encounters staged between the poet and the divine in response to the Holocaust, and as I now turn to consider Silkin's engagements with the nuclear detonations at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I want to draw attention to the potential of his poetry to deepen our understanding of the sublime nature of extreme catastrophe. Frances Ferguson asserts that 'the notion of the sublime is continuous with the notion of nuclear

holocaust: to think the sublime would be to think the unthinkable and to exist in one's own nonexistence'.³⁶ The paradox suggested here is, in part, an articulation of the fact that destruction on the scale of what would be produced by the detonation of just one nuclear weapon (more powerful in Silkin's adult life than in 1945, and, at the time of writing, more powerful still) pushes against the limits of language. We have not yet developed a vocabulary or linguistic framework that is able to fully capture the nuclear bomb. In Chapter 1, I suggested that metaphor has a unique power to reach towards the 'other', which in that case was a nonhuman creature; here, I wish to demonstrate that poetic language allows us to approach, if not fully grasp, an understanding of astonishing catastrophe – whether the event is the Holocaust, a nuclear holocaust, or a holocaust induced by anthropogenic climate change.

I return, briefly, to 'Shaping a Republic', to illustrate a first point. I have suggested that the poet and Tosco's shared sensation of unease is created in part by a (perceived or real) anticipation of rejection or attack from external forces. The poet's negotiation of the world, including but not restricted to his lover, is characterised by a complex meshwork of potential and creativity on the one hand, and fear and alienation on the other. This is exemplified in the lines, quoted above: 'in the spaces of that Other is the energy, which clapped / our world into being'. The ultimate Creator (here the 'Other') is defined by its unknowability, and yet the poet is conscious of its being the source of all 'our world'. The apparent ease with which the world was created implies that its destruction might also occur faster, and more completely, than we are able to conceptualise. The sublime tension between terror and beauty, which is also an understanding of the relationship between creation and annihilation, suggests that 'the energy' in this instance represents the conceptual weight of the atom bomb. It is not a contradiction to observe that 'energy' constitutes, in the same poem, both the most powerful form of destruction mastered by human beings *and* the figure of the primary Creator (as in the 'insisting meek energy') – or, rather, it is a contradiction that illustrates Silkin's own sublime poetics. After all, nuclear fusion occurs both in the Sun, the origin of all life on Earth, and in the hydrogen bomb, which, 'imitating the sun', redirects primal energy

³⁶ Frances Ferguson, 'The Nuclear Sublime', *Diacritics*, 14.2 (1984), 4-10 (p. 7).

into a form of ultimate destruction.³⁷ In ‘A Short Poem for Hiroshima’ (also from *Making a Republic*), Silkin grapples with the complex nature of the Bomb’s threat to materiality:

Over the steps of a bank
flesh melts into shadow, no,
for that is absence of light – into concrete,
by a severed atom³⁸

In these lines, the poet seems to be alive to the paradox of the Sun’s energy being harnessed not for growth but for destruction. At the same time, he rejects the notion that human beings vaporised by nuclear detonation are erased or made into ‘absence’. Rather, the poem describes a kind of awful creativity, where body is re-purposed into other solid forms – non-living and inert, yet not *nothing*. A post-human place does not look the same as a place that is pre-human, as the logic of the ‘accumulated weight’ of the organic teaches us.³⁹ The challenge posed by the nuclear sublime to essentialist categories such as creation and destruction is made manifest in a different (but related) way in the next poem under discussion.

‘Juniper and forgiveness’ (*The Lens-Breakers*) describes the new world after a nuclear holocaust.⁴⁰ The implicit fear that this could occur again is vastly different from eschatological convictions of impending catastrophe since not only is what Silkin fears not inevitable, his community asserts an uneasy level of control over the future. This fear of profound catastrophe mirrors the account of living with the possibility of personal disaster in ‘To a lighthouse’. In Silkin’s poetry, God is sometimes located in the human, not in the self, but in society. ‘Juniper and forgiveness’ describes the re-creation of a world after the detonation of an atomic bomb. There is no chance of reversal, yet the poem is not bleak: Silkin suggests that the potential for redemption and regeneration lies in society, even if this is also

³⁷ Drew Milne and John Kinsella, ‘Nuclear Theory Degree Zero, With Two Cheers for Derrida’, *Angelaki*, 22.3 (2017), 1-16 (p. 7).

³⁸ ‘A Short Poem for Hiroshima’, *CP*, p. 753.

³⁹ Or, to invoke ‘Watersmeet’:
[...] for as you know, all of this
meeting is where we have been, and when stopped
cannot be taken from itself. (*CP*, p. 775)

⁴⁰ ‘Juniper and forgiveness’, *CP*, p. 656.

where the conditions for catastrophe were formed and exploited. The idea of ‘God’ in this poem is one that creates through destruction, and whose power is the point of origin of the act of dropping a nuclear bomb: ‘God unfurls the atomic cries / of arrowy birds’. It seems that either godliness is attributed to a terrible act, or a terrible act is attributed to God, which in either case accounts for brutality. The detonation of nuclear weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki is arguably the biggest act of destruction – which is a re-making – that any individual, group or species has performed. The aeroplanes are mechanised birds, ‘arrowy’, targeted and deadly. The nature of this destruction is elemental disturbance:

[...] The land smells,
pulling apart tenacious waters.

It is re-creation.

As the bomb detonates, senses and materials become confused – the bomb is, it seems, quite literally against the laws of nature. Trees ‘hurl between grass’, and the juniper is ‘hopping’ in the ‘swarming grass’: vegetable becomes animal in a strangely alive moment of death. In the moments after detonation, the world seems to be breathing, albeit in a claustrophobic, corrosive world:

It is a new earth, and I like it,
with everything that steps from this ribbed ark. Through adhesive
layers of air, one integument
breathing with another

Not only is movement restricted, the ‘adhesive / layers of air’ threaten the ‘integument’ by subtly describing skin being torn off living bodies. The context is clearly biblical, with references to ‘Noah’, the ‘ark’ and ‘Ararat’, yet everything points forward in time from the unleashing of the weapon in the first lines – there is no delusion of reversing or retrieving what has occurred.

Despite the devastation, there is a perception of beauty in the potential for new creation, post-disaster, and an irrepressible joy at existence, resilience and survival. The reference to Adam’s rib, which in Genesis is the material that is re-shaped into the form of Eve, points to God as the potential power of re-creation: the ark (the idea of God or simple good luck) has protected the survivors, and now it

will provide the means for rebuilding. There is no pastoral impulse to turn back the clock, no false belief that what has been done can be undone. Some accounts of the Anthropocene focus on the 1950s nuclear weapons tests as a point of irreversible change of the biosphere, an entry in the book of the land. 'Juniper and forgiveness' is not elegiac. The poet confronts the horror of the destruction and then concentrates on moving forward. The potential for regeneration lies in social interactions, in an ecology that connects society, nature and the divine. The final lines of the poem read:

[...] God's pairs of us
sly and connubial from the old zones,
with a rustling, delicate sense of children.
In sin we see a new vision, leaving
in twos, taking as we must
the smell of juniper and forgiveness.

The ark's doors are opened, and 'pairs' or 'twos' of animals emerge. Love and sex are spiritual, closely bound up with the divinity's plan for the future. The 'rustling, delicate' vision of futurity betrays the anxiety the couples feel about how to let love endure and how to bring children into a post-apocalyptic world. The 'old zones' cannot be regained, and the re-population effort clearly depends on the smallest communities – 'twos' of human beings and probably, given the conscious invocation of Noah's ark, twos of nonhuman animals as well. Yet these pairs are part of a much bigger community which, as one, desires a peaceful and plentiful world in which to raise offspring. The responsibility for the catastrophe lies with everyone. Since no one is outside the race of people who brought this about, the society is egalitarian and everyone is implicated in the devastating act. This community includes all living things, and it also includes the God who both 'unfurls the atomic cries' and gives the 'pairs' means of communing with each other. God causes (or permits) this terrible devastation *and* provides the capacity and ground for renewal and repair. Equally, the community of living creatures is both responsible for the catastrophe *and* apparently able to re-embrace the material world and share 'forgiveness'. The material world ('layers of air', 'lacy leaves' and 'Juniper') does not share in the responsibility, though it is active and responsive to the realms of people and spirits

with which it is ecologically connected. Society (the ‘pairs of us’ with the ‘sense of children’) and God, however, are both responsible, and this identification of the Creator with human creativity forms a vision of a God that is in society. Such a God is not benevolent: the brutality of God’s creation/destruction/re-creation in ‘Juniper and forgiveness’ is profound. This version of Silkin’s God is the brute power to re-make the physical world – and society with it, because they are too closely connected for one to go unaffected by changes in the other. The striking ambivalence of such a power and offers little comfort: God is love, but God is also catastrophe. God is in society – and evil actors have awesome power.

2.5 Conclusion: Material Metaphors and ‘terror and beauty’

One response to the oftentimes paralysing efforts of Silkin to reconcile himself to a world that is *both* divine and terrible is found in poems that draw out God’s presence in things that are positive and that encourage growth – in knowledge, in the more-than-human world and in love. In others, however, the poet’s anger or indifference colours or even inhibits his spiritual experience. The relationships between the poetic self, the more-than-human world and the transcendent realm – what we might call the more-than-earthly – are explored in different ways in Silkin’s poetry. The nature of God appears to change dramatically, as does the poet’s experience of the divine (and it is not always clear which occurs first). Sometimes God is benevolent, sometimes he is cruel; on occasions the poet turns from God, while on others he denies the existence of him completely, and at yet others he communicates with a divine species in the generative pleasures of love, sex and learning. The perceived intra-actions between beings (human and nonhuman) and the divine being are also complex and subject to change: sometimes Silkin experiences the divine within sensitive communication with nonhuman creatures, while sometimes he appears to reject God by asserting his own organic quality. Silkin encounters vegetal beings in the ‘flower’ poems as creatures who are other and yet are also connected with him as members of a community. His encounters with the divine describe a godly creature with whom the poet experiences a parallel combination of communication and alienation. This might well be problematic for traditional Jewish theology, but Silkin never feigns orthodoxy. The divine does not occupy a distinct realm from the poet; rather, God exists in a more-than-earthly world which often integrates with the organic worlds of the human and more-than-human, while, at other time, it seems to

be beyond reach. In the next chapter of this thesis, I will explore differently articulated challenges to rigid boundaries between beings in the form of material metaphors that recall the flowers in ‘Shaping a Republic’, ‘reared up like horses’. Silkin understands that his attempts to reach both flowers and God are always limited. He also knows that poetry is the medium that will push him furthest in his encounters with the more-than-human and more-than-earthly other.

While spirituality is not the key focus of the next chapter of this thesis, I will draw the reader’s attention to subtle religious elements in Simon Armitage’s poetry that are in parallel with Silkin, despite the evident differences. Armitage acknowledges the recurrence of Christian ‘symbolism and iconography’ in his work: ‘I wouldn’t ever characterise myself as a religious writer, but I’ve certainly used – or not been able to stop myself using – a lot of that paraphernalia in the poems’ (*Interview*). The religion in Armitage’s poetry is generally not overt, and he acknowledges that ‘the spiritual elements of the poems [is] something that I’ve never really come to terms with and that I haven’t developed a vocabulary for’ (*Interview*). However, like Silkin, Armitage sometimes gains access to the divine through a sensory encounter with the more-than-human world, and like Silkin, divine experience is closely connected with an understanding of the sublime. Armitage remarks of the church of his childhood:

There was this bewildering, perplexing, sometimes frightening, sometimes really beautiful combination of architecture and imagery, and it was incredibly atmospheric in the evening – all the shadows and the organ music, the combination of terror and beauty. (*Interview*)

In quite different ways, then, Silkin and Armitage articulate elements of the sublime in their encounters with God. In both cases, the difference between beauty and terror is sustained even while the sublime impression feigns to merge them into one. In the sublime as theorised by Burke and Kant terror never actually reaches the extents of its potential, and the relatively new threat of nuclear annihilation requires the poet to conceive of modes of language that can express the very real potential of disaster, to think the ‘unthinkable’. Silkin is not generating the nuclear sublime but his poetry approaches the problem of the nuclear sublime by offering ‘redescriptions of reality’ (to paraphrase Ricoeur) in metaphor. In a related way, his poetry might allow us to construct a better language with which to interrogate the (again, very real) event of

mass species extinction. 'Juniper and forgiveness' reminds the reader that nonhuman creatures have as much to lose in a nuclear war as human beings do, and for the twenty-first century reader, this further invokes anthropogenic species loss. Milne writes:

the nuclear imagination prefigures and co-exists with what has become known as the anthropocene. The anxiety of nuclearism is not just the anxiety of one's own individual fate but an anxiety about the fate of future generations, species extinctions and the damage done to the environment

(p. 93)

Without the poet's intention, the poem nevertheless suggests that theorising extinction as a manifestation of the sublime has potential. The 'nuclear imagination' constitutes a *material* link between the cultural anxieties of Silkin and Armitage, the former preoccupied by mid-twentieth century atrocity, the latter responsive to the rapid pace of environmental change. In the poems explored in Chapter 4, the dangerous effects of an unstable world are manifested explicitly. In the texts under scrutiny in the following chapter, climate change-induced anxiety is not *overtly* visible, but, as I will show, it is no less powerful a narrative.

Chapter 3: Meshworks and Transformations: Material Change in Poetry by Jon Silkin and Simon Armitage

This thesis has begun to explore ways in which Jon Silkin's ecological consciousness manifests itself in his poetry, where the more-than-human world appears in integration with historical atrocity, the self, sexual love and the divine. I have demonstrated that Silkin's 'nature' is, in complex ways, connected with the human, and suggested that a combined discourse relating to both environmental and social oppression might be useful in the development of a new environmental ethics. I will now bring the poetry of Simon Armitage into dialogue with Silkin's work, to develop an understanding of what a late-twentieth century and contemporary British eco-poetics might look like, with consistent attentiveness to each poet's language and modes of creativity. Each makes a significant contribution to an understanding of how environmental consciousness is addressed and modelled in poetry. The first fundamental point of connection between Silkin and Armitage that has value for this study is that neither is a 'nature poet'. Both are, in very different ways, fascinated by the natural world and are interested in ecologically networked conceptions of language, culture and the self, and in the poet's capacity to speak to and engage with the nonhuman domain, while recognising art's limitations. Both Silkin and Armitage go beyond poems to produce discursive and other non-fiction prose writings and reviews (both) and literary criticism (Silkin). Both poets go beyond the page, producing material for radio (both) and television (Armitage), and beyond primary artistic production, evidenced by teaching creative writing (both) and editorial responsibility (Silkin). They are willing to challenge the idea of the individual artist, by engaging in self-consciously collaborative projects (for example, Silkin's *Watersmeet* and Armitage's *Stanza Stones*). If they are not 'nature poets', neither are they eco-poets in the way that, for example, Ted Hughes might be described.¹ I

¹ In 'The Challenge of Eco-poetics', the introduction to the second edition of *Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*, 2nd edn (Nottingham: Critical, Cultural and Communications Press, 2011), Terry Gifford laments that: 'Two influential American poetry critics Marjorie Perloff and Helen Vendler have both ignored eco-poetry, and have been notable in their disdain for Britain's most respected eco-poet, Ted Hughes' (p. 10). Gifford explains at the opening of this introduction that what he

define ecopoetics as a creative practice that produces poetry in which the subject matter deals with the environment, both human and nonhuman; creaturely and organic processes; and in which the form of the poetry might also be 'ecological'. Central to this understanding is the potential of an ecopoem to let language show the material world in a new light *and* vice versa. Both Silkin and Armitage engage with ecopoiesis in diverse ways, negotiating the problematic task of writing the Other.

Silkin and Armitage demonstrate an interest in the public dissemination of poetry. The very different ways in which each seeks to engage new and diverse audiences with poetry are nonetheless an important point of contact between them. In this chapter I will look in detail at the Stanza Stones, six monumental pieces of stone on the Yorkshire moors that have been inscribed with six poems written by Armitage. This constitutes an attempt to gain access to a new readership through physical environmental dimensions, a different material space from the page or the book. A related form of public environmental poetry is revealed by 'In Praise of Air', which was printed on pollution-absorbent nanotechnology and hung on the side of the Alfred Denny building, part of Sheffield University, in May 2014.² The project's website proudly states that it is 'the world's first catalytic poem', a definition that has both specific scientific meaning (a catalytic converter is a device that, like the screen on which 'In Praise of Air' is printed, absorbs and transforms toxic vehicle exhaust pollutants into less harmful gases), and resonance that crosses over between scientific discourse and the metaphorical (put simply, a catalyst is something that speeds something up). The final line equates breath with speech and offers language as a vital, material phenomenon: 'My first word, everyone's first word, was air'. Terry Gifford writes:

Ecocriticism thus far has largely thought it impolite to be interested in sorting the complex from the sentimental, or the trite, or the deterministic, or the didactic, or the fatalistic [...] I have a feeling that we need to adjust our

referred to as 'green' poetry in the first edition (1995) has now become generally known as ecopoetry.

² The text of the poem is also available on the project's website, from which all quotations from the poem are taken: 'In Praise of Air', <<http://www.catalyticpoetry.org/#project>> [accessed 25 February 2016]. In May 2017 the poem-object was removed from the building, and divided into twelve individual pieces which were auctioned off, with proceeds going to the British Lung Foundation. In its time on the Alfred Denny building the air-cleansing fabric absorbed over two tonnes of nitrogen oxide.

aesthetics for our times and that our criteria for the evaluation of ecopoetry does need refining. (*Green Voices*, p. 11)

Gifford argues that concern about ethics has overtaken proper analysis of aesthetics in environmentally themed literature, an imbalance that risks compromising the intellectual rigour of this kind of critical work. It might not be enough that a poem demonstrates an awareness of animal habitats, meteorology or climate change for it to be considered a (good) ecopoem – and, in any case, self-conscious political intention in poetry can compromise the integrity of the work. Elsewhere, Gifford writes that Ted Hughes ‘admitted to me in correspondence that when he tried to address ecological issues directly in his poetry, the poetry tended to suffer’.³

Armitage acknowledges a similar resistance to explicitly moralistic poetry: ‘I hate anything that is stuffy or po-faced. Ultra-seriousness isn’t helpful in winning people over, if that’s what you’re intending to do’ (*Interview*). This is one justification for his frequent use of irony. Our ‘evaluation of ecopoetry’ will benefit from critical analysis that may be ‘impolite’ in its paying attention to forms and modes of discourse rather than merely to the subject; such as by a critique of public poetry as ecopoetry. I suggest that it is crucial to critique projects based on criteria that are flexible in response to the media used – and that this is particularly appropriate for Armitage criticism, given the diversity of material forms his work takes. It is necessary to consider in relation to ‘In Praise of Air’ the changes to our process of critical analysis (and to what is at stake) when the poem exists primarily outside the book.

‘In Praise of Air’ is arguably not Armitage’s most effective poem when read on a page, but perhaps this is precisely the point. The language is somewhat convoluted in places: ‘Both dragonfly and Boeing / dangle in its see-through nothingness’. However, the tensions in these lines – between a living and a non-living flier, and between density and imperceptibility of air – quickly propose potentially interesting concepts to the reader. This point is crucial: the language of the poem is not intended to be divorced from its form. It is a poem-object, and intended to be encountered as such. A reflection on the pace of the audience’s encounter is key. Writing of his radio work, Armitage notes:

³ Gifford, ‘Gary Snyder and the Post-Pastoral’, in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by J. Scott Bryson, pp. 77-87 (p. 79).

However it works it's got to work fairly instantaneously or contemporaneously with whatever else is happening in the programme. Again, I don't think that necessarily means diluting the work, but it certainly means avoiding dense metaphysical ideas or formulations; by the time they're unravelled or unpacked, the programme might be twenty minutes down the line. (*Interview*)

The audience who walks or drives past the Alfred Denny building will include people who do not often choose to expose themselves to poetry. Most are likely to be travelling (on foot or in vehicles) and simply will not have the time as they pass to make sense of a complex or 'difficult' poem. The people who *will* be at leisure to consider the language and form of the poem will be, for the most part, an audience of a secondary experience of the poem in photographs, reports in newspapers or online (including the project's own website). The straightforward metaphors in this poem demonstrates a different form of directness from the explicit approach to ecological issues that Gifford and Armitage reject. I argue that Armitage achieves a balance between sophisticated language and directness in the Stanza Stones poems perhaps with more success than in 'In Praise of Air'. The parallels between the projects are fruitful for this discussion, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. The differences between the two are revealed perhaps most powerfully in terms of time. The audience encountering the Stones, walking on the moors, is more likely to be able to pause and engage with the words, and the Stones have a probable life-span of centuries (or even millennia) rather than months. The poet of *In Memory of Water* might be at liberty to engage 'metaphysical' ideas a little more than the poet writing for the Alfred Denny building. What this suggests, then, is that not only should 'our criteria for the evaluation' of public poetry be conceived differently from our modes of enquiry in relation to other forms, but that it is also necessary to nuance our approaches to various types of public poetry.

A further, different kind of material sharing of poetry comes out of Armitage's two walking tour books, *Walking Home* (2012) and *Walking Away* (2015). Silkin was engaged with the material business of poetry in a very different way, though he was similarly unconventional. As editor, he sold *Stand* with confidence and tenacity in pubs and cinema queues to unsuspecting (and, in some cases, unwilling) readers. The act of passing the magazine on was, for him, an essential part of the life of poetry. The collaborative efforts of *Stand's* contributors

and editorial team combined with the shared experience of the readers to create a kind of living poetry that was always seeking a fresh audience. Armitage and Silkin's unique forms of public engagement are markedly diverse – one is preoccupied with the materiality of the poem that is left for readers to come to it, while for the other, the material form of the humbly produced magazine is how poetry is taken to its audience. The differences depend, too, on the technology of the moment. Nevertheless, the immersion in the act and the business of poetry, the belief in poetry's necessity and vitality, the understanding of its relative inaccessibility or unpopularity, the refusal to deny the conviction of its potential value to *all* people and the need to be confident and creative in the manner of its dissemination are common to both poets.

The values shared by the two poets are significant. However, even more important to the identification of a British ecopoetics than the individual contributions from each poet is the knowledge that emerges in the tension between the two as opposites. I have suggested that there are significant differences between Silkin and Armitage in relation to tone and form, and any interest in the points of connection between them is developed with the understanding that they are contrasting writers. They differ in their uses of language: whereas Silkin writes dense verse with long, grammatically obscure phrases, Armitage might choose to make the reader work through unexpected narrative twists, in coolly ironic voice. However, while Armitage's work is rooted in a personal and individual experience of West Yorkshire, Silkin's is overtly transnational. Terry Eagleton rightly identifies Silkin's work as contrasting with Romantic poetics, while Armitage's work displays self-conscious echoes of Romantic poetry.⁴ On winning the Keats-Shelley prize for 'The Present' in 2010, Armitage remarked:

I'm not sure if it's possible to be a Romantic poet anymore, but more and more poets seem to be turning their eye towards nature. To the necessity of its otherness. It's hard to explain, but speaking personally, if the birds and the moors and the trees and the ice disappeared, then I would have no interest in writing about a city street, and probably no purpose as a poet.⁵

⁴ See 'Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin'.

⁵ Simon Armitage, quoted in Benedicte Page, 'Simon Armitage wins Keats-Shelley poetry prize', *The Guardian*, 14 October 2010,

Refusing to make too easy an association, Armitage nevertheless identifies a poetic heritage. What he describes is a creative engagement with differences, oppositions and contrasts. Like Silkin, Armitage is interested in the relationships between the natural world and both urban spaces and social domains, and participates in creative terms in a world that is made of birds, moors, city streets and poems, which are all co-existent and complexly related.

The play of similarity and difference that emerges between the two poets is hugely productive. Bringing them together allows us to see each of their natures more clearly, and in different lights. Oppositions are productive in the poetry. Ian Gregson writes that Armitage's

poems can make ordinary things seem bizarre [...] Armitage often achieves this effect through similes and metaphors [...] which, as he puts it, 'bring about those moments of electrical comprehension that we get in literature, based on likeness or similitude or comparison' (*All Points North* p. 94), and which constitute for him a major part of the point of literature, of its reason for being. (*Simon Armitage*, p. 81)

The play of correspondences that is revealed by placing 'ordinary things' alongside each other is here suggested to be part of the essential fabric of writing, which is figured as a mode of knowledge that is both felt and understood in 'electrical comprehension'. This thesis brings Silkin and Armitage into a dialogue, by which I mean revealing the *nature* of each through comparison and contrast while also, as I have suggested, offering an insight into what a British ecopoetics might be: capable of a serious and varied re-assessment of the interconnections between British culture and bioregions.

To consider Silkin or Armitage alongside a more obviously 'ecocritical' poetry – that of Armitage with Ted Hughes or Alice Oswald, for example – would not demonstrate difference in relation to 'green', or ecologically-minded, poets. This difference has ethical consequences in its assurance that environmentalism is not a fixed agenda and does not signify only one thing. It is also likely that any poet in whom we identify an ecopoetics will also have other concerns: and for a poet to

develop an ecopoetics is not to suggest that this is the only kind of creative aesthetic s/he might articulate. It is never my intention to use poetry to service another kind of thinking, and while I hope to reveal an emergent ecopoetics, in all its complexity and difference, in the work of Silkin and Armitage, my readings intend to draw out the creativity of these two writers, in relation to a developing sense of literary ecology. This chapter will begin by looking at poetry that plays with visual resemblances between two creatures or objects (a bird and a flower in the case of Silkin, a bird and a plastic bag in the case of Armitage), and identify a difference in the two poets' approaches: while Silkin's development of a hybrid creature identifies an ecology of connections, Armitage's approach focuses on an irreversible form of transformation.

Keeping the interest in materiality that is key to the exploration of form and shape in the first part of the chapter, I will then develop the idea of transformation in a discussion about the Stanza Stones project, which was co-designed by Armitage and collaborators. The movement is from attention paid to material metaphors – that depend on form, shape and the visual – to a different kind of material language, where poems are literally inscribed into landscapes. I will explore the ways in which the stone-poems are material, in terms of their creation, their manifestation and the audience's experience. The representation of water in the poems is of a material always in flux, and Armitage's conception of mind proposes one way of thinking about the relationship between the self and the world. I will demonstrate how Silkin's unresolved and shifting networks might be different from Armitage's more complete transformations where change occurs that is irreversible. In the case of the Stanza Stones, the processes of change are always continuing. It is with this understanding of the potential for elemental and imaginative transformation produced by collaborative creativity in an open public space that I move into the last section of the chapter. Here I explore Armitage's artistic residency at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2007, which engaged different groups in novel ways. Many of the poems produced during this residency formed part of *Seeing Stars*, which is the focus of Chapter 4. While the transformation in Armitage's poetry that I explore in this chapter relates to elemental flux and movements of the self towards integration and discovery, in Chapter 4 my focus will be on poetic responses to transformation that are altogether darker, more negative and more uncertain. This widens the discussion to involve more of the *overtly* human.

3.1 Flowers are birds, and birds are plastic bags: ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ and ‘RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January, 2005’

I will first look at Silkin’s ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ (*The Little Time-Keeper*) and then Armitage’s ‘RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January, 2005’ (*Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, 2007), which each creates hybrid creatures from the form of a bird and another creature or object.⁶ In different but related ways, each of these poems furthers an understanding of ecopoetics brought about through the play of similarity and difference. ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’, written in Sydney in 1974, describes the flower with phenomenal detail, and reveals a commitment to its nature that is characteristic of the ‘flower’ poems written just over a decade earlier. Those poems reveal a contiguity of human and flower, whose bodies and natures are not integrated but are aligned in ways that acknowledge the inextricable connections across their differences and similarities. In ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ there is a comparable (if differently articulated) interest in cross-creaturely association, this time between flower and bird. The subject of the 1974 poem is the South African native *Strelitzia reginae*, which is known as ‘Bird of Paradise’ because of its spectacular colouring and long, beak- and feather-like leaves. In this poem, the flower and bird are integrated in a meshwork of connections. The flower plays with the ‘idea’ of being a bird, but ultimately does not transform. The connection between the two creatures, flower and bird, is an exploration rather than a transformation. The poem opens:

In flower it is an idea of self
as bird; two nacreous tapering ears.

Nothing tappers in them. No hammer and no drum.

Silkin’s 1964 flowers are ‘creatures’, and here, too, with ‘self’ and ‘ears’, the poet evokes animal corporeality. The flower seems to have a degree of self-autonomy, and the selfhood represented is in flux. Silkin connects the form of the flower with

⁶ Jon Silkin, ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’, *CP*, p. 450; and Armitage, ‘RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January 2005’, *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 60. I refer the reader to the texts for subsequent references.

the body of the bird, and gives the flower animated form, anticipating line 9 when he describes 'this creature'. The flower embodies the 'idea' of itself. After the short opening verse, the poem continues:

The neck flexes. Its cerise bird's-head
gouts its juice. It colours cerise.

Here the body, animate and visceral, seems to be awakening. '[F]lexes' implies muscle movements, and 'gouts', 'juice' and 'cerise' hint at sap or blood. The resemblance between bird and flower is generated in the description of a creature that has self-determining agency. On the one hand, this creates a hybrid creature that is both flora and fauna. On the other hand, the flower is not compromised by the bird, and in fact the poet's knowledge of the bird allows him to get to the 'heart' of the flower itself. In 'South Africa's Bird of Paradise Flower', as in the 1964 flower poems, identification with another being makes the creaturely flower's 'self' stronger and flowers take on qualities that are animal in origin. Silkin plays with visual resemblances:

[...] The head is a lower jaw;
the upper beak, a spindle with blue flanges.

In the idea of the 'head', bird and flower inhabit the same space. In the previous stanza, the reader was shown the 'cerise bird's head', so the repetition of 'head' two lines later recalls the bird's head before that of the flower, yet the 'lower jaw' suggests that the 'head', here, is the flower, which is itself a metaphor. This deliberately complicates the reader's understanding of what is being described, as the poet plays with the connection between the bird and flower in terms of language. It also demands of the reader a return from the second half of that phrase to the first in order to reassess 'head' in light of 'jaw'. In the second part of the formulation, the bird's body – 'the upper beak' – *does* come before the flower's bright 'blue flanges'. The reversion happens again in this other way, as Silkin fashions in language the 'intra-action' of one body with another. At various points, the reader is unsure which 'creature' is invoked; or, it might be better to say, the reader has a feeling he or she is reading about a hybrid form of life that is *both* bird and flower. This happens at the level of the language, in the complex play of metaphor.

The 'flanges' branch out to become discrete entities while still maintaining the connection to the body. This is a process not unlike Silkin's conception of man growing distinct from nature but remaining part of it in the 'Note on 'Flower' Poems'. When the poet continues, 'Why no matching?', he might be referring to the relationship between bird and flower as much as between the flanges themselves: and we think again of Hopkins's chestnuts, and Humphrey's 'rhyme', in which similarity in difference and difference in similarity form the structure of the relationship. Silkin writes:

Why no matching? Five rivets stud
and pair this creature to its under-half.

Here an incomplete division is presented in the 'creature' itself, in a similar way to the suggestion of relationship between bird and flower: similar, but different; joined, but with that join perceptible. The 'creature' is divided from 'its under-half', a statement that implies that while the two halves do correspond (as a 'pair'), there is nevertheless a division within. The specific detail of the number 'Five' gives the reader visual knowledge about the form of the flower. That it comes through with the language of machine-based fastening or repairing is significant: the 'Five rivets' demonstrate both bond and separation. The two forms (which are also, together, one form) maintain distinctiveness and similarity, and so the connection between them takes the form of a joint or hinge, where the two sides maintain their individual characteristics yet with the possibility of flexibility and connection between them. There is a movement in the poem which functions by repetition of this joined/unjoined relationship. It is there between the bird and flower and within the flower, which divides by expansion. It recalls Silkin's violet, which 'halves itself'.⁷ Like the violet, the bird of paradise flower expands by division, in a poem which highlights connection rather than transformation, and identification rather than integration. The point is *not* to make the bird and flower the same, or to subsume one into the other's identity: hence this thoughtful poetics is explorative and non-oppressive. Isis Brook discusses Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'embrace', which 'avoid[s] the idea of immersion, of losing oneself in the world to the point of extinction of difference'.⁸

⁷ 'The Violet', *CP*, pp. 276-77.

⁸ Isis Brook, 'Can Merleau-Ponty's Notion of 'Flesh' Inform or even Transform Environmental Thinking?', *Environmental Values*, 14 (2005), 353-62 (p. 361).

The bird and flower are connected in an ‘embrace’ in this way, where ‘extinction of difference’ between self and other would be the consequence of loss of selfhood – or, in reverse, the lack of identifiable distinctions between other beings and oneself stands in the way of the self’s own integrity. We are coming, then, to an understanding of what Silkin’s creaturely or botanical ‘idea of self’ might be – that is, of an individual within a powerful network, which maintains its uniqueness despite the strong relationships (physical and conceptual) with similar selves. From this perspective, the ‘self’ is related to the world with both similarity and difference, and therefore by its *nature* appears like a metaphor.

A complex version of selfhood is produced, which is ecological and has the potential for change and re-definition. The relationship between self and world is explored by following a connection between outside and inside. The movement from ‘tapering’ in the second line to ‘tappers’ in the third, an example of ‘parallelism’ or the Hebrew form, shifts from exterior form to inside the body: from outer design to inner process or function, and from objective to subjective knowledge. In ‘tappers’, in addition to sound there is a suggestion of ‘tapping’ for a substance, such as liquor, tapping trees for sap, or (figuratively) tapping someone for money. The flower maintains itself as a flower, without the ‘hammer’ and ‘drum’ in a bird’s ear (birds have a similar system to mammals and reptiles). However, in the context of the aural, ‘tap’ also implies a secretive overhearing, a listening-in, in an original articulation of George Lakoff’s negative framing. I have shown in the previous chapter how, in ‘The silence’, Silkin creates not only ‘grass’ and ‘bee’ but a whole idea of ‘Lord God’ by means of negative expression.⁹ In ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’, too, Silkin maintains similarity and difference in the flower’s identity, and between the flower and the ‘idea of self / as bird’, by means of expressing what is *not* there. Absence leads to negation which, contradictorily, leads to half-presence. Or, absence leads to negation, which leads to a kind of presence, which in turn leads to acute awareness of the lack in that idea of presence. Absence and presence co-exist in both discourse and reality. An idea of body – of functioning animal ear – is created in the reader’s mind regardless of the ‘Nothing’ and ‘No’. This is the first of three explicit negations in Silkin’s poem, which all relate to a

⁹ ‘The silence’, *CP*, pp. 692-93.

different bird body part. The form of the flower simultaneously does and does not turn into a bird:

It unfolds deception. Two plumes listen,
and a silent beak emits lucent gum.

The 'deception' is related to the sensory experiences: sound in 'listen', speech and taste in 'silent beak', and sight in the highly visual 'lucent', which connects the subject of the poem with the reader, even if the listening is passive and the 'beak' does not make a sound. The poem then claims there are 'Not two plumes now, but swells', as change takes place in the form, now expressed in the negative. The poem closes with:

[...] And will not take flight,
rooted in austere bright irruption.

The suggestion of flight, even in the negative, calls to mind the bird's movement: but the transformation is not complete, as flight cannot happen. However, the image of a bird in flight is suggested, and so similarity and difference are maintained in the same space: the flower is both bird and not-bird. The identity the poem creates is one that explores certain sides to the flower's nature, and certain correspondences or contiguous relationships with the bird, and with world: in the lines quoted above, Silkin articulates a brilliant gravitational tension between 'upward' flight and 'downward' rootedness. Identifying the flower's nature and placing it in material context (in relation to physical forces) nonetheless reveals only *one* perspective on, or one of the natures of, flowers. This has implications that go beyond this flower and beyond bird of paradise flowers: it points to an ecology of animal and plant and the mutually beneficial interactions they engage in. Thus, the flowers are afforded a prominent position not always afforded to them in culture or science. It also engages the reader's visual and creative imagination, in a form of exploration that reveals certain aspects of the flower's nature, and, in so doing, affords the reader with knowledge, thus connecting him or her in the ecology too. Finally, we must note the last word of the poem, 'irruption', as an opposite of 'eruption': this is not the externalising of a flower opening or a bird taking flight, but an intensified exploration and looking-inside. As in Silkin's 'organic poetry', there is an 'accumulated weight' at the end of the poem: in the final stanza, we understand that the flower 'furthers other selves / that multiply'. This multiplicity in form includes

all the descriptions of feathers and leaves from the middle of the poem, developed here into various possibilities.

Silkin's poem explores the nature of one thing through its relations with (and distinctions from) another, and through its potential for change. Poetic language draws comparisons via visual resemblances and makes discoveries about the poet's world. I now want to look at a poem by Armitage that, in different but related ways to Silkin's, sets up a visual resemblance between a bird and another thing, in this case a man-made object. 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January 2005' is a tightly formed, five-line, one-sentence poem that it is worth quoting in full:

Not the perched, anthracite, anvil form
of a jackdaw, rook or carrion crow
on a sycamore branch, but the limp, snagged,
wind-shredded flag of a carrier bag
on an overhead wire in wasteland beyond.

The poem is balanced between the bird and the bag, both to the eye and syllabically: the first line is 9 syllables, lines 2-4 are ten syllables each, and line 5 is 11, but the break (with the comma before 'but') in line 3 comes after 6 syllables in that line, making each half of the poem 25 syllables. The title is specific in date, locality and social context, putting the poem in a lineage of reflective pastoral poems, though the attention to the manufactured object is distinctly post-pastoral. The representation of place demonstrates an interest in the relationship between the national and local. This national-scale event takes place by means of many smaller events in localised places, both independent and connected. The urban pastoral landscape, where the city, wildlife, self, communities and 'green' thought are entangled, is important in Armitage's work. The title is self-conscious about the poet's role as *both* writer and environmentalist, and the poet is an observer, both as a member of the organised birdwatch and as a commentator on the birdwatch itself.

The idea of observation is clearly central to 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', and the poet draws several powerful visual resemblances which each function by the play of similarity and difference. Moving through the poem chronologically, we first see the bird and the anvil. The bird is made from tough, rigid and opaque 'anthracite', while in opposition to this, the bag is 'limp, snagged'. On one level, the

bird is established as more resilient and powerful than the man-made thing. However, an 'anvil' is a human tool: 'anthracite' suggests that the anvil is a block for hammering metal, which is an interesting integration of natural and man-made forms. The 'flag' and 'bag' constitute another instance of visual and aural resemblance, in both literal/linguistic rhyme and conceptual 'rhyme' (recalling Humphrey). The 'flag' might be territorial or a signal or a marker of territory, which in both cases might be threatening or tyrannical. This locus thus becomes the site of a battle between different materialities, the plastic bag defining or signifying the 'wasteland'. The main visual resemblance on which the poem hinges is between the bird and the bag, of course: the first half perfectly about the bird's non-existence, the second half perfectly about the bag's presence. Finally, there is resemblance between the branch and the wire, where one is obviously natural and one is manufactured, imposed on the landscape like the 'flag'. Either could be a place where the bird chooses to perch, or on which the bag gets caught and becomes subject to the wind. There are several places evoked in the poem, and each place is created in opposition with another: branch/wasteland, garden/wasteland, garden/beyond, branch/beyond. In parallel with the oppositional but interdependent relationship of bird and bag, two kinds of landscape are 'seen' and opposed: the garden with the tree and bird, and the 'wasteland beyond'. Birds do perch on wires, so while the opposition between bird and bag is clearly established, there is a relationship in the contrast, integrating these different kinds of place in an urban pastoral scene where the natural and man-made co-exist. Visual metaphor (pattern comparison) makes an appeal to the reader's imagination. Matthew Cooperman writes that in poetry, 'beauty is itself a use, and describes the transformation of experience into aesthetic action'.¹⁰ Thus the poem might be a *useful* form of action or activity that does not just strongly refer to the subject/world (Cooperman also notes that 'the poem remains practical in its charged interpolation of language and the world', p. 181), but one that stimulates a reaction beyond immediate time and space. The visual resemblances also allow us to understand nature and culture in an ecologically connected way.

¹⁰ Matthew Cooperman, 'A Poem is a Horizon: Notes Toward an Ecopoetics', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 8 (2001), 181-93 (p. 181).

Silkin's poem plays on resemblances and distinctions between organic beings, focussing on the similarities between them and repeatedly switching focus from flower to bird and back again. In Armitage's poem, the movement from the bird to the manufactured object, however, offers no potential for return, and in this way the movement enacts a defamiliarization on the idea of the bird. The poem begins on a negative that nevertheless invokes a bird, and develops an environmental ethics in terms of negative expectation, as Silkin's poem simultaneously speaks of bird and not-bird. The description of the bag constitutes an elegy for the bird that might have been sighted instead. The bird possesses an innately elegiac quality, as the reader cannot conceptualise it outside the knowledge that it is absent. We might think of 'The Final Straw', the poem that concludes *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, which laments the critically endangered Spix's macaw, 'that singular bird of the new world', which is now 'blueness lost in the sun, being gone'.¹¹ In 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', there is an integration of two very different forms of bird and bag. Here Armitage is writing with a self-consciousness about the poet's capacity, in metaphor, to make indirect yet powerful commentary from an environmentalist perspective. The bird is not only drawn out in the negative, it is also partly formed from human materials, tools and manufacturing. One reading might infer that the poet is attempting to show that there is little 'wild', untouched land left in Britain, or that he is expressing a concern about the damage poorly-managed waste inflicts on the environment. Another reading might understand that the poet is suggesting that all human technology and manufactured products – even a plastic carrier bag, a thing rarely thought of as beautiful or natural – has its origins in the organic world. This is true both in terms of the materials used to synthesise the plastic, which all come from the earth, and in terms of the human capacity for innovation and production (humans are part of nature).

This is one point at which the development of a non-hierarchical, non-divisive environmental ethics needs to be managed carefully. If we understand the imperative to work beyond a strict human/nonhuman differentiation, it is also important not to homogenise the human and the nonhuman but to maintain our understanding of difference. We recall Silkin's commitment to representing the

¹¹ 'The Final Straw', *Tyrannosaurus Rex versus The Corduroy Kid*, p. 66.

aspects of the more-than-human world that are not beautiful, though we also recall his argument that the division of human beings and nature is equally destructive as considering the more-than-human merely as symbolic of human beings. How groups of people decide what should and should not be encouraged – which processes are ‘natural’, which less-natural processes are necessary or beneficial, which natural processes are permitted to endure and which are suppressed – is not an answer the poem is willing to give. What Armitage does is describe the complexity of an ecology in which vast numbers of different creatures and materials (autonomous and non-autonomous) compete, support and destroy each other. Perhaps the poem suggests – by way of establishing similarities and differences in metaphor – that the pertinent distinctions we can make are not between things that are either man-made or naturally occurring, but between things that are threatening to their ecosystems (not to individuals but to networks) and those that are not. A progressive environmental ethics might be approached from this direction. Speaking in early 2018, Armitage comments on:

How very quickly this anti-plastic movement has gained traction [...] since the Attenborough documentary [*Blue Planet II*] just before Christmas, very suddenly everybody is super conscious of it, and big firms are at least saying that they are going to act on it, change their ways it. I haven't really known an issue gain ground so quickly [...] I found it quite hopeful, actually.

(Interview)

The poet is fully conscious of art and media's capacity to redescribe an audience's perception of the ordinary, overlooked stuff that constitutes plastic waste. Like *Blue Planet II*'s neurologically-damaged whales, which are one legacy of oceanic pollution, the uncanny plastic bag in 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch' might impact positively on the audience's motivation to create sustainable ways of living.

The bag engages the reader's intellect and emotions by defamiliarizing the bird. The tones of elegy in the poem are important, but reading the defamiliarization affect in the opposite way produces a materially positive and even redemptive re-framing of the plastic bag. Armitage's focus on the ordinary in his poetry engages the reader in a way which can be political, which I will explore in terms of the ordinary in language in Chapter 4, and in this chapter in terms of ordinary materialities. Gay Hawkins defamiliarizes objects and materials usually disregarded

as trash, and argues that re-framing the way we see rubbish has the potential to encourage much more sustainable waste practices, discourses around consumption and encounters with matter more generally. Much of our thinking about waste invokes death, but Hawkins provides ways of thinking about our rubbish that engage the emotions differently. The approach Silkin takes to the *Flower Poems* is to confront and even revel in the aspects of nature that are repulsive to a human observer, and while Armitage's description of the bag is from an ironic distance, in 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch' there is nevertheless space for the reader to focus on, and perhaps think differently about, something that is usually overlooked. Hawkins argues for a similar expansion of perspective:

[T]here has been a certain reluctance to acknowledge the ethical significance of bad stuff in the environment. Oceans streaked with sewage, rivers choked with plastic bags, landfills full of discarded computers are seen as outside an ethics and politics attuned to interconnectivity. This destructive matter is seen as disrupting the deep ecological impulse to identify with nature. While the affective horror of dangerous matter is acknowledged, particularly its capacity to trigger grief or despair for a contaminated world, there is a certain unwillingness to comprehend how bad stuff comes to matter phenomenologically and politically.¹²

While the ecocritic might have fallen short on occasion of rigorously differentiating between successful and less successful poetry, as Gifford suggests, the environmental philosopher is guilty of a different form of blindness to what is 'bad', which nevertheless emerges from a similarly anxious drive to develop new ethical frames. Perhaps ironically, Armitage's 'In Praise of Air' works progressively on both sides of this parallel: the project acknowledges 'bad stuff' in terms of road pollution, while it shows us an example of 'bad stuff' (or less successful poetry) in environmental poetry. The project has a particular way of teaching us. But to return to 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch': on the one hand, the way the bag usurps the bird in Armitage's poem performs Hawkins's 'trigger' of 'grief or despair for a contaminated world': the observer looks for life and finds only the lifeless, and the way the bag has been caught disrupts the ordered world. On the other hand, the

¹² Gay Hawkins, 'More-than-Human-Politics: The Case of Plastic Bags', *Australian Humanities Review*, 46 (2009), 41-53 (pp. 42-43).

poem's close attention to the form of the bag and the prominence of the visual imagination articulate one kind of phenomenological experience of the bag that is unusual (we are more accustomed to carrying our shopping in plastic bags than we are to seeing them wave like flags from electricity pylons). Further, the presence of the bag rather than the bird is itself a disruption to the 'deep ecological impulse to identify with nature', which is deeply political and, I argue, deeply important.

Lawrence Buell's idea of 'toxic discourse' asks us to think beyond conceptions of wild, Edenic, unspoiled nature, which draw an impermeable boundary between human and nature and, even when well-intentioned, enact a form of management and oppression of bioregions, ecosystems and habitats (I will explore the related concept of 'toxic pastoral' in Chapter 4).¹³ Far more progressive is an honest exploration of all the ways human beings cohabit with living and non-living, organic and non-organic substances, creatures and elements, and one example of this is by exploring the ways we live with rubbish. Armitage's cool, distanced focus on this ordinary object does not transfer 'affective horror' to the reader, but allows the bag to be both aesthetic phenomenon and elegiac warning, a nuanced articulation of the messy relationships we have with objects such as plastic bags. Thus, the phenomenological becomes political. One example Hawkins draws on to illustrate the way the aesthetic can be political is a scene from the Sam Mendes film *American Beauty* (1999). In one scene a teenage character shows a friend some video footage she has taken of a white plastic bag being blown about in the wind. Accompanied by music, the sequence is captivating. Hawkins and Stephen Muecke write:

Consider the now iconic dancing plastic bag in *American Beauty*, [an] image of rubbish as beautiful [which] makes trouble for the idea of rubbish as the end of value. The worthless plastic bag, hated for its ecological impact, becomes a sensuous aesthetic object thanks to the gestural framing of the camera that lingers on it and conjures it into new life. (p. xi)¹⁴

¹³ Lawrence Buell, 'Toxic Discourse', *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (1998), 639-65.

¹⁴ Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, 'Introduction', in *Culture and Waste: the Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. by Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. xi.

The release of the bag from the graveyard of ‘the end of value’ asks us to think differently about a very ordinary object. Considering the extent to which discourses around waste tend to privilege the feeling that the rubbish we throw away disappears entirely, and the propensity towards wasteful domestic and industrial practices that this inspires, an altered perspective on waste may help reduce pollution, improve air quality and reduce carbon emissions. Hawkins outlines her steps for a ‘more-than-human-politics’, the first of which is to ‘examine how plastic bags come to matter without [...] putting humans at the centre of the story’ (‘More-than-Human-Politics’, p. 43). As she explains,

Despite the recognition of relational ontologies and differences-within-connections, the tendency is to demonise environmentally dangerous matter as materially irreducible. This inevitably privileges humans as the source of ethical awareness and action. (p. 42)

This refutation of anthropocentrism enhances an ecology-based understanding of manufactured objects, which are connected to us not only as objects of our creation, but also in their materiality in a more fundamental way. The nature of this relationship is characterised by the capacity for change. Hawkins argues for ‘the modest recognition of plastic bags not as phobic objects ruining nature but as things we are caught up with: things that are materialized or dematerialized through diverse habits and associations’ (‘More-than-Human-Politics’, p. 43). Hawkins asks us to take responsibility for the fact of there being plastic bags in the world, but not in a way to invoke feelings of guilt in the reader. The focus is instead on transformation, which takes on ethical and political capital. ‘By refusing to situate plastic bags in a moral framework, as always already bad, their materiality becomes more contingent and more active’ (‘More-than-Human-Politics’, pp. 43-44). Crucially, recognising bags as ‘things we are caught up with’ challenges the idea of the object as ‘having clearly definable properties that are ontologically fixed’ (‘More-than-Human-Politics’, p. 43). The vibrancy of matter, then, can be accessed through experience of the transformation of the bird into the bag in Armitage’s poem.

We have seen that Silkin’s ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ resists transformation, and the language instead develops a pattern of networks. Identifications between life forms are made, which for each brings out their characteristics, and deepens the reader’s knowledge of their natures. In Silkin’s

poem, it is the visual resemblances between the bird and flower that are the poet's notional starting point, and as we have seen, in 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', Armitage, in a different way, builds his poem from similarities and resemblances (the ground of metaphor). The key difference between these poetries lies in the kinds of change that take place. In Silkin's text, the flower shifts into various bird-like forms throughout the poem, and at various points the bird is permitted or resisted in varying degrees – the movement is back and forth between the forms of bird and flower. At the end of Silkin's poem, the flower 'will not take flight, / rooted': it maintains its identity as a flower, even if it maintains the bird-like influences from, or identifications with, the idea of 'flight'. By contrast, at the end of 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', the emphasis has shifted (geographically and in language) from the bird to the plastic carrier bag in the 'wasteland beyond'. An irreversible transformation has taken place, with the bird present but 'in absentia'. The bag is both itself, and an elegy for the idea of the bird and its environments. If we take poetic license and consider that the bag is self-producing, we might say the bag is 'an idea of self / as bird', but of an old self, to which there is no going back. The bag is non-organic material, and is 'limp, snagged, / wind-shredded': there is no implied potential for regeneration or renewal.

The complete alteration in Armitage's poem hinges on 'but' in the middle of the poem, from which there is no return movement. It is useful to compare this to Silkin's 'yet' and 'but' in 'Shaping a Republic', where those apparently small words mark a significant change of direction: they manage or sustain a hinge or tension between two contrary but connected ideas. In that poem, Silkin develops various oppositions and relationships, such as those between poet and lover, and Japan and England, for instance, and in the lines, 'One flower, ionic, with head bent. But a human beating / another's head with a bar, flesh like roe'.¹⁵ The connections depend on difference, but as in 'South Africa's Bird of Paradise Flower' no substitutions truly take place – even when the lovers leave Japan for England, the influence of Japan and of Tosco's being an 'Alien' are still prevalent, and there are several contradictory turns in the poem as opposed to Armitage's single turn. As I have suggested in my reading of 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', Armitage's poetics – like Silkin's – explores similarity through difference, and makes much of the

¹⁵ 'Shaping a Republic', *CP*, p. 776.

creative potential of oppositions. This power of oppositional thought is one of the similarities between the two poets, while one of the related *differences* is in the particular manifestations of identification and change in their poetry. In contrast to Silkin's conceptually diverse networks, which maintain both opposites at the same time, in Armitage's work the focus is often on a process of transformation, where the original state might be remembered or memorialised, but does not exist in the present moment (hence my emphasis on elegy). I want now to develop this idea of transformation and consider the six water poems inscribed by Armitage and his team (for this is, crucially, a collaborative enterprise) on slabs of stone on the Pennine watershed as the Stanza Stones.

3.2 Elemental Transformation: The Stanza Stones

In a 47-mile line along the Pennine watershed from Ilkley to Marsden in West Yorkshire stand six large stones, each inscribed with the text of an original poem written by Simon Armitage. The subject of each poem is water, in each case in a different state: dew, rain, beck, snow, puddle, and mist. The poems' thematic and stylistic coherence produce a thread that spans the geographical distance, to form what landscape architect Tom Lonsdale calls 'the watershed story'.¹⁶ The connective thread is not linear, however, but ecological. Armitage, Lonsdale, and stone mason Pip Hall worked closely together as the key engineers of the project: in *Stanza Stones* (2013), which features first-hand accounts from the three team-members, Armitage writes that the project 'was not in any way the work of a single mind, but endlessly collaborative in nature'.¹⁷ The processes of collaboration extend beyond Armitage, Lonsdale, and Hall to include public funding bodies, land-owners and local groups. Armitage has led creative writing sessions for young writers in the Leeds area, and guide materials published online feature detailed directions, maps and difficulty-ratings for the walk to each stone.¹⁸ The local bioregion and its communities have played central roles in each stage of the project (Ilkley Literature Festival were responsible for the first ideas relating to the project while Marsden is

¹⁶ Lonsdale, *Stanza*, p. 99.

¹⁷ Armitage, *Stanza*, p. 16. As well as brief essays from Armitage and Lonsdale, diary entries from Hall and extensive colour photographs, the book gives the texts of the poems. I refer the reader directly to the book for the full texts of the poems.

¹⁸ See www.stanzastones.co.uk.

Armitage's home village) and the stone-poems continue to engage their audience in site-specific, mutually creative ways. Armitage premiered the group of poems at the 2011 Ilkley Literature Festival under the title *In Memory of Water*, and that title's allusions to interplay between the imagination and the physical world, between history and futurity, and between language and landscape emerge in the Stanza Stones in a variety of ways.

The relationship between what is produced (poems and stone-poems) and the ways in which it is produced (planning, writing, and carving) is illuminated by a reflection on materiality. As Jane Bennett writes, 'human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies', and the Stanza Stones appear to function within an understanding that creativity may be both human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic.¹⁹ Further, the certainty of each of those categories appears to be challenged when the self, the text, and the world are viewed from a perspective of *material* encounters. I will identify key ways in which the creation of the stone-poems is shaped by the stones' materiality, explore the transformative potential of the poems, and make notes towards an account of the audience's experience. I will provide an example of art's potential to offer us the opportunity to (briefly and incompletely) approach an understanding of another creature or element's experience. The artists' observations and tactile experiences of water are passed on to the reader in creative narratives that tell the water's 'story'. The reader might gain insight into the nature of the element or ecosystem, and be able to articulate a more thoughtful environmental ethics. Each reader enters the stone-poem into dialogue with an indefinite number of feelings, memories, ideas, and other imaginative processes, to produce a varied ecology of perspectives on the water. The audience experiences the water as an element that is continually in flux, and is touched by the agency of history, industry and living creatures, and by the particular transformative agency of the stone.

I will first explore the influence of the material – the landscape, the elements and the body – on the writing process, to demonstrate how the language that describes water, flora and fauna has been directly shaped by the physical world to which the poems refer. The stone-poems are not pre-conceived impositions on the landscape, but responses formed from thoughtful material engagement. One such

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 108.

materiality the artists respond to during the planning stages is the potential audience. Armitage acknowledges the non-traditional directive of the Stanza Stones project, writing:

Because it's one thing to publish poetry in books or journals, to preach to the converted perhaps, but something slightly different to write for a public space or to put poems in front of people who might have no experience of contemporary verse and little interest in it. (*Stanza*, p. 13)

The suggestion here is that the poems themselves will be 'slightly different': the conversation with the audience, and their creative impact on the poetry, begins almost at the point of the project's genesis, before Armitage has put pen to paper or begun the process of poetic conception. The poet is conscious of the poems' potential to speak to people who might pass by, whether as intended readers who have sought out the stones, or those who happen upon them by accident:

The Stanza Stones are interesting because they're probably positioned for the least specialist audience of all [...] On the other hand, [the audience] have got the opportunity, if they want, to stand there and stare at this thing and think about it. It's not going past them at a given pace. In fact, it's quite the opposite, it's going to be there for 1000 years, so if they're patient they can spend more time with it. (*Interview*)

This ironic combination of the audience's ability to pause to take the poems in (in contrast with theatre, radio work and even the urban-based 'In Praise of Air'), with the poet's consciousness that the life of the audience in a general sense is likely to far exceed any other project, make the Stanza Stones unique in Armitage's work. The poet's consciousness of the potential longevity of the project is evident in his reflection on the process of writing. Armitage accounts for his poetic production in terms of an exploratory journey:

I've said on many occasions that if a poem, once written, is exactly the same as its author first imagined it would be, then it is almost certainly a failure, and that artistic success must always involve a process of transformation. (*Stanza*, p. 9)

Poetic material accumulates over time, and the 'process of transformation' necessary for the release of creative energy can be seen both in notes on the poetry's generation and in the definitive (final) forms of the poems. The project is a

significant one, wide-reaching and long lasting, and Armitage is aware of the responsibility he shoulders, as he describes in the self-conscious account in *Stanza Stones*. He explains his labours in detail, from the ‘first inclination [...] to write a sestina’, to the acknowledgement that, ‘as so often with a poem, the plan had to change’ (pp. 13-14). While the capacity of the poet to build, alter, and redirect is clearly essential, nonetheless the openness of the remit is challenging, and the poet must work hard to produce work with definition. Armitage has described his tendency to set his word processor to the Faber font and page size when writing poetry for traditional collections. ‘The visual element is part of it’, he says in an interview with the *New Statesman*:²⁰

[*New Statesman*:] So sometimes you’ve lost words or changed a rhythm just to fit the Faber page?

[Armitage:] Yeah. In some ways that might seem odd but we all work to some kind of template; even a synthetic size can push your mind into territories that you might not have taken it when left to your own devices.

This physical language – ‘synthetic’, ‘push’, ‘territories’, ‘devices’ – describes a creative process that is highly influenced by the practicalities of composition. A similar sensitivity to the relationship between the poetic self and the material world is evident in Armitage’s account of writing the water poems, which reveals a creative mind that is deeply engaged with the elements and with physical features of the landscape, particularly groundwater and precipitation. Composition of the poems began when the foundations of the project were already in place, including the team of collaborators, the funding, the legal permissions, and the stones and sites. If Armitage has found that the framework of Faber’s technical specifications shapes his creativity in a positive way, it follows that the ‘pages’ of the *Stanza Stones* (collaborations, permissions, sites, stones) might also provide a useful foundation from which to work. The stones present a different set of restrictions and opportunities, but the principle is similar: that creativity flourishes when the imagination’s freedom is tempered by a set of pre-determined rules. The sonnet form, for example, might provide a firm enough springboard to allow a poet to

²⁰ Armitage, quoted in Alice Gribbin, ‘Books Interview: Simon Armitage’, *New Statesman*, 12 January 2012 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2012/01/simon-armitage-poetry-arthur>> [accessed 2 February 2012].

generate truly novel work with language. For Armitage, the pressures of the project's limitations present him with a canvas on which to work.

I have suggested that this form of creativity is based on the understanding that freedoms can be limiting and restrictions can be inspiring. Yet Armitage overcomes the challenge in a particular way that affords us an insight into the creative transformations at the centre of the project more generally. His account of writing the poems for the stones displays some similarities with Silkin's 'organic poetry', though their descriptions of their creative processes are couched in characteristically different ways. I have demonstrated how 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch' offers some insight into the materially transformative aspects of Armitage's poetics. It is clear from the Stanza Stones account that the 'process of transformation' necessary for 'artistic success' is found both in evidence of the poetry's generation and in the definitive forms of the poems, and in both cases transformation is materially rooted. Armitage is forthcoming about the difficulties he encountered while composing the poems. While Silkin's unease in the 'Note on 'Flower' Poems' relates to the philosophical and political consequences of his project, Armitage's self-conscious account reveals a different form of anxiety, which concerns his creative output as a poet. To what extent Silkin agonised about his own talent as a writer is another question, but he certainly does not betray any lack of confidence in his writing, discursive or otherwise. Careful consideration and some anxiety in the face of the responsibility that a public project of this size produces appear to be central to Armitage's mode of working. If Silkin's organic poems have 'the beginning implied in the end, but not the end in the beginning', Armitage's apparent surrender to creativity confronts the unforeseen developments in a different, though related, way. He describes changes that took place during the writing process, in an example of creative collaboration:

My poetic teacher, Peter Sansom, once told me that it's sometimes best to forget about a poem for a few weeks rather than struggle or fight with it, to let the subconscious put in its shift, so that's what I did, and when I returned to it with a clearer mind and a clean eye, I saw what the problems were. Firstly I was attempting something formulaic and literary rather than trusting to impulses and intuition. Secondly, the sestina framework seemed too inflexible and stubborn to accommodate the epic geographies and rich vocabulary of the moor. Thirdly, I still had no idea what the poem was trying

to articulate. And lastly, I was letting the form dictate the content – a case of letting the tail wag the dog, or to use a Yorkshire phrase, putting the cart before the horse. (*Stanza*, p. 14)

The creative process is described as a fluctuating negotiation between the unconscious activity of the mind and external material reality. The difference between this account of creativity and Silkin's is that while the latter progressively develops the main idea, to reveal fresh images and connections accumulatively, Armitage responds to each insight by re-imagining the entire project. He does not start from scratch, but rather the 'accumulated weight' of his experiences inform his further activity. In terms of his vision of the project more generally, he does seem to start over. The raw material for the poems is eventually discovered through a *material* experience:

After another visit to the hills, this time in lashing rain, I came back with a different idea and a single purpose. To let water be the overall subject: the water that sculpted the valleys, the water that powered the industries, the water we take for granted [...] And to let the various forms of water provide the topic of each individual and self-contained poem. (*Stanza*, p. 14)

Here, creativity is embodied in the moorland: the rain is a physical muse, landing on the poet's skin and then (metaphorically) getting inside his body – which includes his imagination. Perhaps this poetic creation story is carried through to the text of 'Rain', where the raindrop is a seed:

And no matter how much
it strafes or sheets,
it is no mean feat
to catch one raindrop
clean in the mouth,
to take one drop
on the tongue, tasting
cloud-pollen,
grain of the heavens,

raw sky.²¹

The raindrop is made organic, and the sky is made material, both defamiliarized for the reader. These lines are heavy with transformative potential. The ‘cloud-pollen’ indicates fertility, as the ‘grain’ suggests the plants that will grow, which may be turned into food. The sky is ‘raw’, in a state of primacy and ready to be used as a resource, as poetic raw material. Like the landscape itself, Armitage’s course is shaped by water. The rain, ‘lashing’, is forceful, to indicate not only the suffering of a struggling poet but also how a human body may be transformed by the rain’s physical agency. Body and mind, and self and world, are integrated and overlapping: following the tactile effects of the rain on skin, these effects of the rain *provide* the material of the poems. The poetic self and the material world are (to borrow a phrase of Karen Barad’s) *intra-active*:

in contrast to the usual ‘interaction,’ which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*, p. 33)

The sensation of rain on skin, experience of water’s mutability and pre-existing knowledge of water’s social landscape in the region converge and form poetic raw material, material which is thus generated out of an understanding of the co-current co-dependencies of those elements. From this spark of inspiration follows a period of heightened creativity:

To me this is always the most engaging phase, where the internal, abstract concept of the poem is attempting to materialize externally, where the mind is in negotiation with the world through the medium of language. (Armitage, *Stanza*, p. 15)

The conception of mind in these poems is ecological. The displacement of agency elicited by the suggestion that a significant part of the creative process occurs in the

²¹ There is a strong thematic connection with Psalm 78, from which the concept of ‘manna’ – signified spiritual good – seems to have been taken:

Yet he gave a command to the skies above
and opened the doors of the heavens;
he rained down manna for the people to eat,
he gave them the grain of heaven. (Psalms 78: 23-24)

unconscious, where (it appears that) the poem uses the poet as a means of coming into being, seems to afford the poet with some freedom from the parameters of his mind. The pleasure felt in these ‘most engaging’ moments is produced by the poet’s acknowledgement of his mind’s transformative ‘negotiation’ with external material reality, which blurs the boundary between consciousness and the phenomenal world. Such a destabilization of well-established categories relates to a challenge to a hard distinction between life and non-life, where the elemental is an ‘actant’ in dialogue with the poet’s imagination. For Armitage, language occupies the space between the self and world where defined categories such as ‘active’ and ‘inert’ become less concrete: at times, the living mind’s role is passive and the non-living water is active. With this in mind, I want to consider the nature of the other principal element in the project: the stone.

With the stones selected, the sites identified, and the texts of the poems formulated, the next stage was for stone mason Pip Hall to carve the poems into the rock. The inscription transmits agency and a special form of life to the stones, but that is not to suggest that in their pre-existing incarnations the stones were lifeless or inert. On the contrary, the stone is a compound of organic and inorganic particles and processes, and a thoughtful observer may ‘read’ parts of such a narrative, as Serpil Oppermann explains:

semiotic materiality is not confined to biological organisms [...] Elements, cells, genes, atoms, stones, water, landscapes, machines, among innumerable others, are embodied narratives, repositories of storied matter.²²

Oppermann identifies parallels between the functions of elements and material bodies that are vastly different in size, scale, range and situation: similar processes occur on landscapes as within atoms. She also demonstrates that the capacity to communicate does not depend on intention. Material qualities articulate an experiential narrative, which is both history *and* the very agency with which that history can be communicated to the informed observer. With pre-existing knowledge, Armitage can observe the bioregional water cycle and articulate histories of human intervention and industry alongside the water’s behaviour and

²² Serpil Oppermann, ‘Material Ecocriticism and the Creativity of Storied Matter’, *Frame*, 26.2 (2013), 55-69 (pp. 58-59).

material presence. A close study of a sample of water might reveal the kinds of rock it has passed through, pollution it has come into contact with, and the temperature and other environmental factors that have affected it. In a similar way, stone ‘is a perfect material archive for stories’, and may be read, even if there remains a huge amount that can never be revealed to the observer. Oppermann quotes Jeffrey J. Cohen:

‘Most any pebble is full of carbon microfossils such as acritarchs, the cysts of ancient algae. Such data burgeon with narrative, for story is a process of relation making, and thereby inherently ethical.’ (p. 66)

The sense of buried histories that Oppermann describes is identifiable in the Stanza Stones in the stone (naturally occurring) as well as in human experience (socially performed). Both are what they are because of what has come before. If ‘story is a process of relation making’, then it is possible to identify in the stone-poems, which create or reveal relationships between poem and stone, human and moorland, people and place, a form of narrative that tells a material history in which these particular forms were organized very differently. The Stanza Stones team are conscious of the social and ecological responsibility that they are taking on. Lonsdale writes of the ‘very confident ethical stance for the project’ and the group’s ‘guiding principles, by which we could justify to future generations that the 21st century has a worthy entry to make in the ‘Book of the Land’’.²³ The resistance of stone, the chosen material for the ‘pages’, influences the language of this entry, as Armitage explains:

The moment that you start cutting into stone you are automatically involved in something elegiac. You can’t help but have an association with commemorative, monumental inscription. The process of creating those poems brought a kind of diction forward in me that I hadn’t necessarily used before. [...] I guess the poems might be longer lasting than some of the other things that I’ve produced, just by virtue of being carved rather than printed, so I steered away from noun objects or phrases which are overtly of their time – [...] technical equipment, branded goods, that kind of thing – things that I normally like to deploy in poems. (*Interview*)

²³ Lonsdale, *Stanza*, pp. 24-25.

While in poems for print media, colloquialisms and (often mundane) cultural references are employed by Armitage as a means of engaging a wide audience, in *In Memory of Water* the same concern to sustain accessibility requires different self-imposed linguistic limitations. It is interesting to consider that the apparent concentration of subject in the poems, on the water and its immediate bioregion, comes not from a turn away from the human but from a sustained engagement with culture and audience that extends past the poet's own lifetime. Writing in response to an as-yet-unborn audience is a performed process of 'relation making' (Cohen), where the future is imagined as the present and the present is imagined as the past, generates an ethics of responsibility for the cultural and material environments that reaches beyond the stones. For Armitage, the project's environmental ethics is also expressed in terms of futurity, though rather than imagining a future observer looking back his perspective is grounded firmly in the present:

I saw an opportunity to draw on the often commemorative nature of monumental-masonry and engraving by making an unspoken connection with environmental themes and concerns about climate change. Perhaps I was thinking ahead, pessimistically, to a future where the Stanza Stones still existed but on a planet that had either drowned or boiled dry. (*Stanza*, pp. 14-15)

Concern about environmental degradation produces an elegiac mode where the stones are transformed into *gravestones*, memorializing a natural habitat, or water itself. But here, elegy functions by inversion: whereas a gravestone respectfully faces the past, the Stanza Stones perform an act of warning, pointing to a speculative future. The potential of material (i.e. non-language) narrative to coalesce with the artists' (projected) creativity produces continually re-negotiable, relational modes of knowledge. As a response to climate change, the irreversibility of this kind of transformation seems quite logical.

I have demonstrated some of the ways in which the poems and the stones are archival objects that contain complex 'meshworks' of material, environmental, social and imaginative influences and affects. A key point about this kind of creativity is its refutation of the notion of the object being static. As well as the formative past, both stone and poem are always transforming, however minutely or however invisible to the naked eye: stone is eroded by water, wind and cold, while

the poem takes on new life as it enters and takes root in the mind of the reader. The Stanza Stones play with the ever-changing nature of art (as well as matter) in an explicit way, by carving the language into stone and rendering it up to the elements. The poems were inscribed on the stones by a skilled stone mason, Pip Hall, who kept an open dialogue with Armitage and the team throughout the process. One of Hall's tasks was to design a suitable lettering style: she and Armitage 'agreed right at the start that it should be common to all poems, that it would play an important role in connecting the Stanza Stones across the Pennines' (*Stanza*, p. 107). The poems appear on fragments of stone arranged at distances from each other, but their narrative is an ecology of relations and interconnections. Hall notes that the common font was created to be 'neutral' rather than active, which affords the act of inscription a significant degree of creative freedom that is nevertheless balanced by a number of restrictions (p. 107). Hall writes of the considerable effort taken to choose stones that would work with the language, the landscape, and herself as technician: the stones needed to offer the right level of resistance to her tools, have a smooth surface for legible lettering, and also 'fit' with an appropriate site. Lonsdale writes that the Puddle stones 'offered natural 'pages' for the poem but their precise position had to be carefully chosen', a decision that was at once pragmatic and aesthetic (*Stanza*, p. 89). Elsewhere, stones have to be imported 'where the existing rock wouldn't offer enough of a 'page'' (p. 29). The idea of non-language elements taking the form of a page that can be written on *and* read is articulated in the descriptive accounts in *Stanza Stones* and in the poems. 'Snow' opens:

Snow, snow, snow
is how the snow speaks,
is how its clean page reads.

The snow's visual blankness does not translate into a lack of agency or meaning. The inorganic is *intra-acting* with the creative observer, who is giving back through his or her act of perception: the snow is both a 'text' to be read and an active 'speaker', and the reader is both observer and participant. The stone collaborates with the artists in different but related ways. In her project diary, Hall makes notes on the Dew stone, which is 'an enormous slab of Scoutmoor gritstone [sawn] down the middle, so that the two halves open out like a book':

The uniformly flat carving surfaces of these 2-metre-high megalithic forms [have] echoes of the printed page [...] it would be good if the lettering helps to connect these machined 'off-comedens' with their intended home, and so [...] I shall keep in mind the distant rolling hills and the irregular courses of drystone walling of the Rivock Edge site. (pp. 80-81)

The letters engage the stone with the language of the poem, connect Dew with the other stone-poems, and enhance the connection between the stone and the landscape. These integrations take place both literally and imaginatively. The poems speak of the water, but they also have an agency in a different direction: a speaking *to*. The Mist stone was chosen despite having a delicate fissure down the middle, and it broke into two as it was being moved to its new site. Hall writes of 'trying to reassure the mortified team that I was truly thrilled', so she did not, after all, have to worry about carving over the crack (p. 70). Like the Dew stone, 'the shape of the cloven stones' that jointly form the Mist stone remind Hall of an 'open book', and these visual analogies inform her organization of the words on the stone page (p 72). She writes that she 'engage[s] with the environment on many levels, and I naturally draw inspiration from my surroundings: this influences my designing and decision-making in subtle, unconscious ways' (p. 81). Hall is ecologically engaged with her environments. What the audience reads in the stone-poems, then, is materially different from the poems they would read on the page, even if the language is the same. The lettering *style* is as 'neutral' as possible, but the ways the letters are made manifest on the stone are directly produced by Hall's responses, not to a generalized landscape and rock surface but to specifics of the respective stone, site and water.

Negotiating with the material of the Beck stone shaped the corresponding poem in a different (but related) way. Hall describes days spent working at the surface of the stone in full waterproof clothing, the water gushing over her after high levels of rainfall in a 'watery onslaught that was to mark the wettest carving experience of my career' (p. 100). Tactile experience of the water sparks her creativity, and just as Armitage found inspiration in the 'lashing' rain, Hall senses something dangerous that is close to the sublime: 'I arrived in dry weather, thrilled and alarmed in equal measure on seeing the wildness of the beck' (p. 101). The exhilaration evident in Hall's account is clearly influenced by the threat posed by the surprising force of the water. The wild, then, is brought into contact with the human imagination in conscious as well as 'subtle, unconscious ways'. The energy of the

beck creates an artist's studio, which in turn becomes the venue in which the audience experiences the work. The nature of that artwork is the stone-poem *in the context of* the movement of the water.

Intra-action with water, therefore, has significant material and imaginative impact on the project's development, and there is a related agency at work in the stone. Challenges Hall faces while carving the Beck stone become opportunities, and push the poem in new directions: 'This rock, more than the others, creates [...] a new template for the poem. Repositioning words to avoid the crumbly bits, there is a rewrite: this not only frees up some space, but also tightens the poem' (p. 102). The stone's material qualities influence not only the layout of the words on the 'page', but also the qualities of the poem's language, which itself shapes the stone and is in turn shaped by it. Form and content are inextricably connected (or, we might say, intra-connected). The stone's resistance and fragility becomes part of the poetic narrative. There is a comparison with Armitage's way of working with the Faber page size, but the stone's capacity to change once carving has begun means it is an active participant in the creative process. Hill notes that the 'Snow' stone offered unexpected creative inspiration: the stone, on Pule Hill, 'turns out to be two stones separated by a sort of niche [...] Indeed Simon took advantage of this rocky lacuna and removed the word 'up' that until now he had felt was necessary after 'dream'' (p. 46). Crucially, the pressure to edit the poem produces *positive* effects: a tightening of the stone around the poem, and a deeper integration between the materials, the artists, and the audience. In a transfer of agency from material to mind, the imagination absorbs properties of the stone and works them into a new creative output, which is expressed by further changes to the stone. This reciprocal, organic process can work at a slower pace, where the poet's ideas for change come a few days later, as Hall's account reveals:

23 April. [...] A call from Simon this morning about another alteration. He thought it would make things easier for me if 'over' were replaced with 'at' ('...water unbinds and hangs at the waterfall's face...' [sic]. I was pleased about a shorter word which would certainly help with the space issue; and far from compromising the poem, it is, as Simon explained, 'more active; visually and aurally lighter; gives it more tension.' (p. 103)

The tension between practical and aesthetic considerations is a highly productive one. As Hall and Armitage continued to collaborate on the production of the stone-poems, the boundary between material stone and material language becomes less distinct, and the drive to create a good poem and a good stone are the same work. The restrictions of the stone invigorate the language by affording it qualities that enhance the audience's *physical* experience of reading. The reader feels the 'tension', sees and hears the 'light' quality, and can sense movement: the beck creeps into the audience's mind with physical presence. The image or idea of a momentary snapshot of water is presented throughout the poems, where the water is always changing and always moving away. The stone, far from being a static antithesis to water's mutability, allows the artists even more opportunity to articulate their experience of water.

The stones have a performative agency which transforms the language with which they are brought into encounter. The reverse is also the case: clearly, the inscription of the poems alters the physical form of the stones, and this is also true in a metaphorical sense. The language of these poems has particular potential to change *both* the way the stone appears *and* the way the stone is seen by the audience, which is not quite the same thing. In her account of the Puddle stone, Hall writes:

I am struck by the way the words I'm drawing encourage a particular way of seeing the stone. I chose the stones for the poem, and yet the stones, with their rusty remnants and hoof-imprinted surfaces seem to be adopting the poem. (p. 91)

The stone mason's activity is neither writing nor a mechanistic chiselling, but drawing. As the poem is embodied in the stone's surface, Hall's inscription infuses it with agency, the ability to actively 'adopt'. While this agency is imagined by Hall, the stone is brought to life in a way that introduces the observer to the stone's long and complex history. The stones bear marks of previous encounters with metals, machinery, animals and elements, and so offer an ecological narrative of social, industrial and material intra-actions. This narrative encompasses both relatively recent usages in quarrying and abrasions inflicted by the pressure of a horse's hooves (from wild ponies but also from domesticated horses used for personal or industrial transport), and a much longer history of sedimentary rock formation. What

is being enacted is a complex interaction between the poem and the industrial landscape, in which distinctions between the social and natural are evident but also put under pressure. The poems take on the influence of the stone, which is not only that of space (moving or removing letters or words to fit the size or shape of the stone) but also the histories that have created the structure and the forms of the stone. The poems are not an imposition on the landscape, therefore, but a genuinely responsive interaction, an account of an encounter between creative minds, material substance, and the vast historical and social environments of each. Without ever directly addressing the material they are laid into, the poems defamiliarize the stone, demanding that the audience sees it afresh. The poetry also defamiliarizes the rain, beck, snow, mist, puddle, and dew. Focusing on ways in which the poems describe water in states of flux, I will now consider language's capacity to re-vision and make strange the principal subject of the poems: water.

Armitage represents water in six different states, creating an effect that is not fragmentary but ecological, due to a stylistic consistency of brevity, directness and tonal clarity. The interrelations between material subject (water), material substance (stone), embodied language and the imagination of the audience constitute a literary ecology. Particulars of the bioregion are central to the project: the language of water is generated in relation to landscape, air, sky, flora and fauna. The poet encounters water with an understanding that it exists in a continuous process of intra-action with its environments, which include the West Yorkshire landscape and the poet's creative consciousness. There is no chronology within the group of poems: each state of water exists concurrently with each of the others, but nevertheless the reader is exposed to unseen processes of change as he or she moves through the poems, imagining the rain falling to the ground and forming a puddle, which evaporates and condenses into mist. These links are not made explicit, but a tendency towards transformation runs through the poetry. Oppermann and Serenella Iovino write that 'the true dimension of matter is not that of a static and passive substance or being, but of a generative becoming', a kind of creativity that is at the heart of the *Stanza Stones* project.²⁴ It is when change occurs to the stone that its nature becomes most

²⁴ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity', *Ecozon@*, 3.1 (2012), 75-91 (p. 77).

apparent, and in a related way, the transience of each state of water is, paradoxically, what most powerfully defines it.

The Stanza Stones poems thus evade static descriptions, and privilege the transformative potential of water, wind and stone. In a related way, the poems explore a world of bodies and material substance that do not exist independently. Timothy Morton's notion of the *ecological thought* 'realizes that all beings are interconnected. This is the mesh. The ecological thought realizes that the boundaries between, and the identities of, beings are affected by this interconnection'.²⁵ Identity depends on external elements for its definition (what is 'me' if there is no 'not-me'?), yet the impossibility of a hard or essentialist boundary also makes the concept of 'me' necessarily multiplicitous. Poetry is able to speak of matter's connective quality in a unique way, to experience the ecological thought through metaphor. An image in 'Puddle' demonstrates a complex meshwork of elements:

The shy deer
of the daytime moon
comes to sip from the rim.

Wild deer live on parts of the Pennine Way, so a reading from this perspective sees the puddle in its bioregional context. However, an alternative reading which is contradictory yet – crucially – not mutually exclusive exemplifies Armitage's ability to generate metaphor that, with both 'this' and 'that' occupying the same space, destabilizes the very oppositions that enabled them in the first place. The doublings here work as follows. On the one hand, 'shy deer' is the primary subject in an image of an animal, bathed in sunlight, drinking from a puddle of rainwater, evidence of an ecosystem at work. On the other hand, the 'shy deer' is a metaphor for the primary subject which is the Sun, or 'daytime moon': as a deer might gradually reduce the puddle by drinking, the Sun evaporates it. The deer and the sun are partnered opposites, as are day and night ('daytime moon'). However, in some hunting circles it is believed that the moon's phases influence deer's movements and mating behaviour, so the modes of influence between deer, sun and moon appear more complex in the light of bioregional knowledge, and the relationships between

²⁵ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 94.

apparently discrete elements demonstrate that material boundaries as we might conceive them are always subject to scrutiny.

It is important to note, however, that the recognition of the interplay of matter is not equivalent to a homogenization: the intra-action of elements does not write out difference. ‘Dew’ plays with a form of doubling in elemental transformation which may be destructive as well as creative. The subject is implicated in contexts of darkness and light, sexual passion and battle imagery, where dramatic change is always imminent:

The tense stand-off
of summer’s end,
the touchy fuse-wire
of parched grass

Doubles appear in a connective vocabulary of burning (‘fuse-wire’, ‘flame’, ‘torch’, and ‘fire-star’) as oppositional to the water. This is a kind of poetic negative creation, where the dew, which only emerges in the second stanza, is defined in opposition to what it is not. In other poems in the set, too, the water emerges *from* ecological proximity to other elements. We might remember how Silkin’s ‘Crowfoot (in water)’ draws a three-dimensional map of the flower in relation to the water and the floating leaf: ‘It is found, rooted, / In still water’.²⁶ For Armitage, too, water is defined by what it is not as well as what it is – for example, the ‘Mist’ comes into being *in relation to* the aspects of its environments that it touches: ‘What does it mean, / such nearness’. In a related way, Armitage writes about ‘Rain’ *in relation to* the sea, the self and the sky, and the picture of the ‘Puddle’ emerges in relation to the Sun, the moon and the deer. In the case of ‘Dew’, we are aware that when water is poured on fire the fire is extinguished. When heat (fire) acts on water, however, the effect is not to destroy it but to change its form – in evaporating, the water does not cease to exist, but merely changes into a different state. So the fire in ‘Dew’ communicates water’s vulnerability and *also* reveals water’s potential to change, as a material that endures even while it is in flux.

²⁶ ‘Crowfoot (in water)’, *CP*, pp. 280-81.

Water's capacity for change is also central to 'Beck' (which is a Northern English dialect word for a small river or stream). What I want to draw attention to here is the way the poetic consciousness plays with the materiality and texture of the water. The poem represents a beck, but it is also a beck *as it is experienced by the poet*. As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, this is one of a number of elements of *In Memory of Water* which are Hughesian. The stream is figured in material terms as a type of cloth, invoking the industrial history of textile manufacture and trade in the West Yorkshire region. 'The unbroken thread / of the beck' reaches a change in terrain and briefly becomes a waterfall:

and just for that one
stretched white moment
becomes lace.

The physical continuity of the stream is paralleled with the 'unbroken' legacy of the industry on which the urban communities in the area developed, both in terms of economy and the waterways (Leeds-Liverpool canal) on which trade was made possible. The transience of the poem's 'moment' acknowledges the decline of that industry, but also plays with the poet's capacity to historicize, elegize and recall. The 'stretch' is both a quality of the fabric and an acknowledgement that for the poet, time does not seem to run at a regular pace. The poet is not seeking meaning in the beck by itself, but rather a composite image that is created by the encounter between the poet and the water. This embodied encounter and the record of these states of water is quite different from Silkin's subjective-scientific enquiries into the natures of flowers, but there is an interesting comparison to be made; for both poets, the life form or element they describe exists on its own terms and reveals the poet's self. The flowers are not only the flowers, but are revealed in terms of what makes them contiguous to the poet: both alike and unlike. The states of water are experienced and recorded in fine detail, but it is a *poetic* recording where, through metaphor and engagement of the visual imagination, the language communicates an element of how an encounter with the water might feel. What necessarily comes with this poetic 'truth' – a getting to the 'nature' of things – is, paradoxically, an obscuring of the water's primacy. The poet deepens the reader's understanding of the world, yet the poet's perception clouds as much as it reveals. A transformation occurs whereby the water changes state – here not with heat of the fire, but under

pressure of poetic consciousness, with the capacity of poetic language to connect the poet's visual sense with that of the reader. What is produced is a *poetic* phenomenon that is neither purely physical world, nor creative imagination, but a composite mix. This embodied encounter suggests that the water in the poem is both the element on its own terms and a chronicle of the creative self. The poet's description of the water is read as a text that on the one hand reveals a powerful (though not impartial) account of the element, and on the other hand functions as a deep (though incomplete) illustration of the poet's mind. Transformative power characterises both matter and mind.

'Snow' explores the relationship between the cognitive and the material through the visual. The poet asks:

What can it mean
that colourless water
can dream
such depth of white?

Affording 'depth' to whiteness is unusual – it is usually black that is thought of as being something one could fall into. The water is not 'colourless' until it is perceived by the poet. The idea that the water is in a 'dream' and creates the whiteness in a dream-world implies an area of crossover between this world and the poet's imagination. Silkin's 'flower' poems do not produce a context in which plants and human beings reductively impose the characteristics of one on the other, but find in their *differences* ways of articulating profound similarities. In Armitage's case, the distinction between the poet's world and the snow's world(s) is not so easily drawn. The contiguous relationship established here is between the snow, as material that is substantial and definable but also *insubstantial* and limitless, and the mind, rather than (in Silkin's case) the physical form (which includes the mind). It might be seen that imagination is the principal term here: the ability to 'dream'. The concentration on light in this poem explores the connection between the snowscape and the eye (and mind) of the perceiver. The poem invokes a visual response in the imagination of the reader which resembles the snow. When the snow is 'like water asleep', or a 'dream' of whiteness, the snow is transformed by the mind, but the poet's visual imagination is also impacted by what it perceives. The idea of mind is ecologically transformative.

The conception of mind explored in the Stanza Stones identifies the creative consciousness as capable of profound understanding of and encounter with the material world. The final stanza of 'Rain' reads:

Let it teem, up here
where the front of the mind
distils
the brunt of the world.

A strong connection between landscape and consciousness is made, and 'up here' might refer either to the moors or to the mind. As they meet, the very idea of meeting is inverted and becomes 'teem[ing]', which is in process rather than static, where what that process produces is a new place that is *both* mind and world. This is a different, but related relationship from the contiguity of poet and flower in Silkin's flower poems. In 'Rain', consciousness and material reality are integrated, but the process is, paradoxically, dependent on an understanding of their separateness. The archaic and Middle English meanings of 'teem' (which make sense here given the language of the biblical contexts) speak of giving birth, begetting or bearing. The complexity and multiplicity – diversity – is a creative and life-giving force. The use of 'distils' is similarly dense and rich: it means to purify a liquid, suggesting a pastoral understanding that communion with the natural world is regenerative for the human mind (and body), while also suggesting scientific understanding. But 'distils' also means to separate, extract, or draw out, where 'draw out' might mean to remove, or to isolate (and keep): as in the first stanza, the earth and sky are oppositional since the rain is taken from one by the other. The positive reduction appears to be a clarification and an accentuation. So 'distils' orchestrates a meeting between mind and world, where one dissolves into the other. Hence, the stone-poems draw attention to the materiality of language, by *estrangement*: the 'raw sky' is a substance (or substances) *and* something experienced in the imagination. By the end of 'Rain', material integration has occurred and what is produced by that distillation process is both moor and mind.

The final example in this section allows us to develop our understanding of the mind's transformation, involving water, poet and reader. 'Mist' addresses the reader in the second person as it articulates a felt experience of the element in which selfhood is challenged and re-asserted. The mist thickens and obscures the poet's

sight, 'drawing its net curtains around', and it achieves solidity. In such close proximity, it is both supportive and constrictive:

walling you
into these moments,
into this anti-garden
of gritstone and peat.

'Mist' might usefully be read as a 'post-pastoral'. The 'gritstone and peat' might have been part of a material construction of a self that is embedded (and embodied) in the landscape, but 'anti-garden' deliberately problematizes the idea of the land itself, and of the poet's (and his subject's) relationship with it. The 'moments' are both temporal and spatial, and are domesticated and hostile, natural and managed. Armitage's moors do not offer the kind of contained, coherent space that, for example, Ian Hamilton Finlay generates for his landscape poems in *Little Sparta*. This 'anti-garden' is a mineral world, 'gritstone and peat', without vegetation. Being an 'anti-garden' creates the *idea* of garden in the negative, and the domesticity of the garden suggests how the moors are both 'wild' – as naturally occurring space – and domestic – as managed land. The transformation of the self involves water, air, earth, time and the mind, where the walls denote restrictions *and* points of intra-action and exchange. The claustrophobia and compression is released in the final stanza:

Given time
the edge of your being
will seep
into its fibreless fur;
you are lost, adrift
in hung water and blurred air,
but you are here.

The 'fibreless fur' is both animal and de-animalised, or perhaps embryonic, a foetus in the 'hung water' of the amniotic sac, occupying the strange place between not-being and being. The 'being' is physical, material, bodily, spatial, but also temporal.

What occurs is a process of integration, and it is in those moments of integration that the idea of selfhood, established in the walled 'anti-garden', is transformed into something spiritual, which is not easily definable and yet very much 'here'. In Ted Hughes's 'Go Fishing', the idea of the mind's integration into the elements, 'Let brain mist into moist earth', offers the potential for healing and regeneration.²⁷ For Hughes, this potential is embodied in language, ecology and community: 'Heal into time and other people'. In 'Mist', an *interfusion* of opposites, which is creative, takes place in the context of the explicit I-you relationship set up in the poem. The opposites form a place within which a dwelling place can be found. The mind's integrations with the material world push the self beyond its own walls, in a transcendental experience where ecological connectivity, experienced as profound, both enlivens and soothes the self.

I have identified several ways in which we might call the language in these poems material. I have suggested that the poems articulate a narrative of water's tendency to transform, in response to its environments (temperature, weather, geology, creaturely life). I have suggested that such collaborative creativity is paralleled with the meeting of water and the poetic consciousness, which react together to produce a new state of water, that in one sense *is* the water passing through the West Yorkshire moors, and, at the same time, is very much *not* that water. The process of the artist(s)'s creative production is organic, in this case meaning that it develops by means of material embodiment. As in the case of Silkin's 'flower' poems, this is a different (if related) quality to what might make us think of them as ecopoems. Louis Hay writes that, 'from the perspective of textual genesis, it appears that studies of the production of a text and its reception are complementary rather than concurrent approaches'.²⁸ I now intend to identify a further parallel process of creative collaboration, by drawing out ways in which the audience's 'reading' of the Stanza Stones is a materially embodied experience. If the landscape is a 'book', then it is an open book that is continually revised and extended by a host of collaborators, which include the elemental/non-life (wind, rain), the organic/nonhuman life (moss, horses), and human life (intentional visitors and unsuspecting passers-by). Armitage has said that the stone-poems are each

²⁷ Ted Hughes, 'Go Fishing', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

²⁸ Louis Hay, 'Genetic Criticism', p. 22.

situated close to established pathways, so the project will not bring about a degradation of the terrain. The Stanza Stones are a significant, material entry into the landscape's history book, but the artists are thoughtful about the nature and range of their impact. Yet the artists have relinquished control of the stone-poems, which are entered into a new, mutually creative collaboration with members of the public who look at, touch, walk past and imaginatively engage with them. The stones are subtly altered by people coming into their vicinity, and the people take away an impression, which they may pass on to others who may or may not visit the stones themselves. In terms of the stone-poems' futures and the actants that will come to bear forces on them, the distinction between life and non-life is *immaterial* (a word used ironically because these actants are very much material). Once the stones are situated and inscribed, they take on new life as participants in a complex mesh of material intra-actions.

I have discussed the ways stones and landscape present themselves to the artists as pages, and have demonstrated that a thoughtful observer can always access a form of creative agency in what appears first as a merely blank surface of stone or snow. I want to briefly return to 'Dew' for an illustration of a further way in which the landscape can be read. There are several plants identified by name in 'Dew': 'grass', 'bulrush', 'reed', and 'bog-cotton'. The last of these is the official county flower of Greater Manchester, and its presence is often seen as an indicator to hikers of potentially dangerous deep peat bogs. Thus, the plant hints at the risk invoked by 'stand-off' and battle imagery, and sets up a tension between human presence and nonhuman environment, where the landscape can be dangerous (where there is a risk of sinking into a bog), but also offers evidence about how such danger can be avoided. A knowledgeable walker can 'read' the signs (bog-cotton) and process the information to act accordingly (by giving the bog-cotton a wide berth). In this way, the moorland ecosystem can function like a text. The audience may 'read' the Stanza Stones in two ways: assuming they know the dangers of ground that bog-cotton grows on, they may read the plant when out walking, and when reading the stone-poem they will understand that this process of walking/ reading is what the poem refers to. The lack of *intention* on the part of the bog-cotton does not mean that there is a lack of *agency*, and the difference is crucial. The walker's drawing an interpretation of what the plant signifies (unsafe terrain) by no means indicates that the organic world deliberately communicated the information, or that it exists *for* the

human observer in any meaningful way. Although the walker is able to respond to his or her environment, the bog-cotton exists before, and without, the walker, but without the walking subject, the bog-cotton's capacity to signify to the human does not exist. The bog-cotton's communicative function comes into being as the plant and the creative human mind are brought together in physical and sensory encounters. The reader will see how 'reading' the land parallels the reading of any text, which, once distributed to an audience, takes on a new life with each imagination that it encounters.

Thus, we start to see that the act of reading cannot, in the case of the Stanza Stones, be extricated from the movements of the body. The physical effort required to access the stone-poems is explorative just like the movements of the mind in reading. Armitage writes: 'It may seem ironic but it is also of great significance that sacred or artistic gestures like these should appear in such a high, remote and inaccessible location, appealing for the most part to an audience of nobody' (*Stanza*, p. 13). The words of the poems are, of course, a very important part of the Stanza Stones, but they are not all of it. The project speaks of materiality in literal terms, but also in non-linguistic and less direct ways. If poetry is supposed to make the reader *work*, with dense language, multiplicities of interpretation and delayed transmission of meaning, then it appears that the Stanza Stones do function in this tradition, but in a radical way. A writer of public poetry, which is akin to a performance, can be expected to have different priorities from a poet writing for traditional publication. The water poems demonstrate a refined use of language, but are relatively unadventurous in form and content. When reading poetry, or listening to a recital, body and imagination are engaged in various ways. In the case of the Stanza Stones project, the audience's embodied experience occurs differently. The audience's engagement with the complexities of metaphor is only one stage in the reading process: the imagination also 'reads' the geography of the moors and the surfaces of the stones. What is generated is a genuinely material poetics where walking to, from, and around the stones – whether they are encountered intentionally or not – is part of the reading experience. The walk away from the stone is coloured by the language, and that walker-reader's perceptions and physical exercise – the movements of their body – continue the collaboration between landscape, language and imagination. The site of the poetry is not only the language and the stones, but also in the reader's corporeal existence. The stones' being situated in 'high, remote

and inaccessible location[s]' is not arbitrary, but fundamental to the engaged, multi-layered poetic experience.

We have gained valuable insights into the nature of a form of collaborative, intra-active creativity. This discussion demonstrates the unique contribution to our understanding of matter that is made not only by poetry and by landscape art, but also by landscape poetry. The Stanza Stones animate their audience's thinking about material nature, producing increased sensitivity to non-organic agency. Further, the project encourages us to understand that the ways we physically move about in the world are intra-active processes, which are never isolated. The response is a sense of *responsibility* which can influence even day-to-day behaviours that are usually performed without thinking. The Stanza Stones show us that sensitivity to the material world, from which we are not separable, is valuable not only to our environments but also, directly, to our cognitive lives. The stone-poems are examples of matter that can be read in a very explicit sense, but we have also seen how they can enhance our knowledge when we turn our curiosity to objects, landscapes and modes of thinking that we might have previously overlooked. The material the stone-poems invites us to read extends beyond the edges of the slabs of stone, into both past and future, and through the landscape of the Pennine Way, and into the human body, which, with a developed understanding of the 'vibrant' embodiment of human beings in their environments, becomes neither as special nor as solitary as we might have thought. If the environmental crisis propagates a radically redefined concept of selfhood, in which the very notion of an essentialist distinction between self and other, inside and outside, is repudiated, the political, ecological, and societal potential may be significant. Art is able to show us what this might look like.

3.3 Conclusion: *The Twilight Readings*

I have begun to explore manifestations of Armitage's ecological consciousness and its influence on the poet's creativity and potential for education and cultural engagement. As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Armitage's work has become increasingly focussed on environmental issues. In the next chapter I will explore humour and irony as discourses with the capacity to stage complex debates about human interaction with nature and to articulate an experience of living in a

time of great uncertainty, referring in detail to *Seeing Stars* (2010). Several of the poems in this collection were written during Armitage's residency at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, and published in earlier forms in the book that came out of that project. This cultural engagement will offer new perspectives on some of the ideas that have come out of the Stanza Stones project, and will allow us to read Armitage's creative practice in genesis.

The collaboration between Simon Armitage and the Yorkshire Sculpture Park began in 2007, when the YSP offered Armitage an artistic residency. A brief consideration of the project will reflect on the achievements of the Stanza Stones and inform a sense of the organic development of Armitage as a poet and artist from 2007 onwards, through the 2010 publication of *Seeing Stars* and the 2011-2012 Stanza Stones project. The 'output' consisted of a set of new poems, delivered in a series of intimate poetry readings over one week in later September 2007, in different locations around the park site. Each reading paired a set of poems (different each time) with a particular location (also different each time).

In 2008, the Sculpture Park published *The Twilight Readings*, which included the texts of the poems organised by their respective readings, photographs of the events, reproductions of draft materials, an audio CD recording of the poetry readings, a foreword by Armitage and an afterword by Clare Lilley, Head Curator at YSP. In the foreword, Armitage describes his interest in the project:

[E]ven in its early years, YSP represented a confident form of self-expression, an unembarrassed public airing of creative endeavour on a large, external scale, which as a poet I found daring and inspiring. Poetry can be a shy little thing. Poems, if they are fortunate enough to be published, tend to be read in silence before being buried alive within the covers of a book, sometimes never to see the light of day again. YSP, on the other hand, has always been about getting art into the public domain, with people walking amongst it, picnicking beneath it, and sometimes (not always to the delight of the staff) clambering all over it.²⁹

²⁹ Armitage, *The Twilight Readings* (Wakefield: Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 2008) is not paginated, so I refer the reader to the text for all references. Both Armitage's 'Foreword' and Claire Lilley's 'Afterword' are short (four and three pages respectively).

Here, as elsewhere, Armitage is conscious of the difficulties poets face regarding poetry's relative unpopularity and perceived seriousness or inaccessibility. His refusal to let poetry be 'silenced' and to actively engage an audience is clearly connected with the organisation of the series of poetry readings. Although they were recorded, they were not videoed in order to maintain an intimacy and immediacy for the audiences. These were 'site-specific', as Clare Lilley writes in her afterword, and the poems themselves were inspired by observations Armitage made during the time he spent in the park. It is interesting to observe how the material creativity in the Stanza Stones project, where Armitage's poems are generated and metamorphosed in interaction with material processes, and which I have suggested can usefully be thought of as an 'organic poetics', is very much alive in a different but highly related 'organic poetry' in the YSP project. That practical, material engagement in poetry is crucial, and the relationship of material language with the audience (who might be 'walking amongst it, picnicking beneath it') is of interest. Armitage's thought here appears to be an early stage in the organic, accumulative development of his artistry that led to the Stanza Stones, which are 'site-specific' poems in a different way. That later project is 'an unembarrassed public airing of creative endeavour on a large, external scale', and it is interesting to see Armitage already engaged with some ideas that, finding them 'daring and inspiring', are absorbed, understood and processed as part of a developing, radical public poetry. Armitage goes on to write:

In fact the very concept of a sculpture park seems to fly in the face of more purist notions of art, and maybe YSP's very existence can be thought of as part of a long, northern tradition of non-conformism and dissent.

His language moves from individual rebellion ('non-conformism') to overtly political ('dissent'). The identification of a political aesthetics and the implication that an artist's creativity should be directly connected with his or her political understanding suggests a correspondence with the revolutionary poetics of Silkin. In the *New Statesman* interview (2012) invoked earlier, Armitage is asked to give an opinion on recent student protests at Sheffield University, where he teaches, which included the occupation of the Arts Tower building. Armitage responded:

I find it rather exciting that students are politically active, out on the streets with placards after what seemed to me to be a period of dormancy. The

extent to which [the protests] then get in the way of other people's learning is a difficult negotiation.

This careful response avoids committing too much either way, perhaps due to awareness of a different kind of politics. Preoccupied with the North as a marginalised place with political revolutionary potential, Armitage too wants to take a 'stand', and he, too, is convinced that the role of art and particularly poetry is crucial to shifts in discourse and movements of change. The difference between Silkin's direct, unwavering exposition of his political convictions, and Armitage's measured, divided response here is characteristic of the creativity and politics of each. I will explore in the following chapter how we might seek to understand differences between Silkin and Armitage not only as manifestations of the differences between two powerful poets, but also more broadly as indicative of shifts in British nature poetry towards the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, as Cold War terror at the prospect of nuclear annihilation transforms into the fear of environmental catastrophe. The solidity of Silkin's conviction, and the slipperiness of Armitage's more fragmented modes of knowledge, may be at the root of this development.

If YSP encouraged me to think more about getting my own work into the public arena, I've absorbed (and sometimes stolen) many other creative ideologies from within its boundaries, most recently the idea that art need not seek to be permanent and eternal. (Armitage, 'Foreword')

Both engagement with the public and an interest in impermanent art that will transform over time are key concepts in the Stanza Stones project, and it is interesting to see Armitage's consciousness of the processes by which his creative thought developed. He talks about the material embodiment of the art, where it is not the pages of a book but something more vulnerable and subject to external influence. That is directly connected to an elegiac mode in which expectation of the artwork's demise is fundamental from the earliest stages. An earlier interest in the kind of project that Stanza Stones became is evident in Armitage's description of his preoccupation with the materiality of poetry during the YSP residency:

I asked to be described as visiting artist rather than a visiting poet or writer, because I imagined working with the physicality of language – seeing poetry as a fashioned and fabricated substance, sculpted from words. I had grand

notions about growing poems in fields of corn, or erecting a poetic shrine to the environment, or studding the old gallops along the edge of the lake with poems engraved onto horseshoes. [...] In the end, though, and in the nick of time, I realised I should be bringing my own thing to YSP, not trying to emulate the practice of others. And my own thing is writing and reading – reacting and responding with written and spoken language. ('Foreword')

This description of poetic process recalls the narrative in the *Stanza Stones* preface, where Armitage outlines his initial idea of a sestina, the period of struggle, the identification of the problems, and the movement around them to the final, successful, idea. Here also is a description of Armitage's development as an artist, more widely: the affirmation of the importance of individual identity, knowing one's strengths and being true to creative impulse; and an interest in unusual forms that incorporate language, and where the fabric of the poem is not the idea of the words but the physical manifestation of them. It is easy to see how this dream of 'working with the physicality of language', has fed into the *Stanza Stones*, and Armitage's development as an artist.

In various ways, the poems that came out of the YSP residency are revealing about Armitage's development as a poet. As he writes in the 'Foreword':

Two types of poems emerged. The first were anecdotal, prose-looking things, like little stories. I was interested in taking one small detail from within the venue, such as a colour, or shape, or object, or even a word, and letting the narrative of the poem grow from it, like an undisturbed daydream.

These poems are the story-poems that were revised and included in *Seeing Stars*. The 'undisturbed daydream' articulates Armitage's sense of the poetic process as one that is organic and, to a certain extent, unconscious. We have seen in his description of the creative process of the *Stanza Stones* poems that there might be a powerful unconscious understanding necessary for organic creativity; or, put differently, the organic state of mind is both on the surface and concealed. The interest in materiality is, naturally, connected with the art at the park itself, and with the subject matter of the poems. In the first case, Armitage writes at length about the influence of Andy Goldsworthy on this project and Armitage's artistic development more generally. Goldsworthy has had multiple works on display at YSP over many years. Armitage writes of the transformative quality of Goldsworthy's art:

His snowballs melt, his dam-walls burst open, his pools of dandelion heads are swept away by the current [...] Even with his recent exhibition at YSP, where less delicate and more resolute structures have come into being, a sense of obsolescence – even mortality – still pervades. At an imperceptible level the clay cracks, the wood rots, the leaf-stems wither, the dung perishes, the blood decays. Precariousness is everywhere: even the sturdy walls and stone arches, held together by their own weight, owe everything to the complex gravitational balance of the planets and stars in which they hang. ('Foreword')

Just as the Stanza Stones have a suggestion of gravestones about them, so in Armitage's reading of Goldsworthy the impermanence of art is directly connected with understanding of mortality, via material forms and natural processes. In this way, these artworks imitate life, not in cold representation or mirroring, but in organic form. This is not unlike the way we have seen the metaphors of a poem replicate creaturely experience by generating a multi-dimensional world. In terms of these material poem-objects, the material form (stone or sculpture) is a space in which interactions with physical and natural forces and processes take place. Those processes often invoke 'mortality', as in the case of the Stanza Stones, which will erode, the words becoming illegible and the structure of the stones themselves suffering weathering and decay.

The stones speak of macro-scale natural forces. The unique value of the stone, sculpture or installation is that it makes us see freshly both the visible materials and the invisible forces (such as the 'complex gravitational balance'). This is material defamiliarization, which of course is interlinked in complex ways with the language defamiliarization that, as Gregson explains, is of such importance in Armitage's work. Gregson writes of 'a key Armitage strategy in which defamiliarization is achieved by zooming and panning, by moving in very small and/or expanding out very wide from everyday experience in order to refresh it' (*Simon Armitage*, p. 80). In both the commentary on Goldsworthy and, less explicitly, in the Stanza Stones project, this process of expansion and retraction takes place in the audience's mind, and so defamiliarizes the landscape that, for many, is an 'unexplored and ignored wilderness': in close proximity to peoples' lives, but so enduringly present that something radical needs to occur to remind of its presence. The Stanza Stones make their audience – and not only those who walk

past the moorland sites, but also those who read about them – think again about what has become so naturalised that its impact has been lessened. Gregson continues that Armitage's 'effects of defamiliarizing [are] produce[d] through his habit of putting places in dialogue with each other' (*Simon Armitage*, p. 81). The dialogue created between the urban-dweller audience's home spaces and the moors, both literally and in their minds, is related to correspondences between the Stones, the local sites on which they are installed, other works of art and the audience. In *The Twilight Readings*, Lilley writes that it is not only the poems on the pages that are achievements, but that the readings themselves were 'important – actually essential'. She continues, on the readings:

They were given during a week in September at twilight, that liminal, shadowy time between day and night when the brain and body sense change. [...] The journeying to and fro, of strangers being brought together by a common interest, were as much a part of the experience as the readings themselves. ('Afterword')

Here Lilley captures the dark transformation, the sense of the 'liminal' and 'shadowy' experiences of ontological change that characterise many of the poems in *Seeing Stars*. Armitage notes that 'the sound engineer reflected back to me how many of the poems had been about death', and there is certainly a pervasive darkness to the poems written during the residency. The poet comments:

As for the prose poems, I can only think that their darkness derives from the art itself, that transience in Goldsworthy's work mentioned earlier, which at times goes further than mere impermanence and exhibits, to my way of thinking, a kind of death-in-life quality (to borrow a Ted Hughes phrase). Because for all that his work connects with the living planet, there is a funereal aspect also [...] Goldsworthy's creations and structures are never triumphant monuments to posterity. For all they celebrate the natural world, with its glorious workings and magnificent components, they also commemorate our brief existence within it. Most of my YSP poems, I think, have been written in some of the darker shadows cast by his work. ('Foreword')

Here Armitage is explicit about the way his creative practice is partially concerned with, and influenced by, absorbing creative material from Hughes and Goldsworthy.

Goldsworthy's 'Hanging Trees', which has been on display at YSP since 2007, is set against the perimeter wall of the park, on the other side of which is a field where sheep graze. The work consists of several stone-walled, sunken, topless chambers. The audience can peer over the walls and down into the rectangular stone spaces, where in each one a section of tree, with various branches, is fixed in and against the four walls, so it appears to be growing out of and back into the stone. Each tree is different from the rest, though follows a similar pattern of arrangement. Moss grows variously on the trunks and branches, and in the winter the snow reveals tracks left by creatures and falling leaves. The tree-chambers are both similar and different from each other; each one stands alone, but together they form a collection, more than the sum of their parts. Goldsworthy's stone chambers are arranged in a linear fashion, against the same, straight wall, so as the audience member walks along the path, through the woods, past each one in turn, and because the tree-sections are below foot-level, it *seems* that the branches all connect with each other under the ground, and that what the audience is privy to view are certain parts of a composite whole. Of course, this is an illusion. But what is interesting is the way the tree-objects are figuratively and imaginatively ecological *because of* the pretence of being physically linked. Here material and artistic ecology are related, and different kinds of knowledge – creative and technical – are exploited or explored together. We have begun to think about the ways in which language, and particularly poetic language, *both* holds connective potential *and* is a reminder of the distance to be traversed, and the impossibility of ever fully traversing that breach, between the self and other, whether the other is another person, a tree, moorland or any other material entity or living being. Goldsworthy's work suggests similar conflicts – the tree-sections both articulate a sense of rootedness, ecology and living process, but at the same time, their strangeness and brutal appropriation of living matter reminds us that we are looking at part of a dead tree. The way this works is by defamiliarization, not of language but in material terms. It is interesting to observe the connection between this material defamiliarization and Armitage's in the Stanza Stones: the divided sections of tree and Armitage's separate stones; focus on death and decay in the past, present or future; the belief in art's capacity to connect, and to make change; and use of the ecological artwork group to draw together specially identified and freshly observed sites, mapping a dialogue between them.

The idea that a dark transformation or ‘transience’ is at the heart of the prose poems premiered at the Sculpture Park and revised before inclusion in *Seeing Stars* will inform my discussion of that collection in the next chapter. In places in Armitage’s work, transformation has healing power and is suggestive of processes connected to light, growth, ecological harmony and perhaps even a divine sense or understanding, as we see in the ‘water’ poems. ‘RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch’ produces a transformation that is more ambivalent than the elemental possibilities characteristic of the Stanza Stones poems. While the elegy for the bird mourns the loss of something good, much of the transformation in *Seeing Stars* involves the inverse: the emergence of something that is bad for some (or all) characters and environments in the vicinity. There is also knowledge of transformation as dangerous, threatening an altered future where present and previous understanding about the world, and ways of living in it, have no certain place. It is easy to understand this as a personal fear of human mortality, and also as directly connected with, and developing out of, Armitage’s concerns about environmental degradation, climate change and gentrification: transformations that occur are not necessarily for the better. In this we might remember Silkin once again: ‘not everything with a natural root has to be encouraged’. In the following chapter, I will demonstrate that ideas of selfhood continually inform and are formed from their environments: the individual is meshed with social, physical and temporal worlds, and the boundaries between self and other are not easy to define. Mind is present in the Stanza Stones, but in *Seeing Stars* a multitude of characters are produced, whose relationships, speech and activities are drivers of the poems’ narratives. While Silkin’s ‘Bird of Paradise Flower’ explores the similarities between flower and bird and makes revelations about the flower, in *Seeing Stars* several cross-category creatures perform different roles, subverting the norms to make revelations not about the creature’s ‘idea of self’ but about the external worlds, societies, cultural practices and material realities that these ‘monsters’ find themselves in. *Seeing Stars* is steeped in the contemporary moment, satirising Tony Blair’s policy on Iraq, public obsession with celebrity culture and the over-proliferation of material objects produced (and demanded) by consumer capitalism. The humour is dark, and the experiences of the characters in these narrative prose ‘stories’ are largely beset by anxiety, insecurity and profound ontological doubt. The play of similarity and difference, which is so productive in this poetry in terms of metaphor, takes on a

slightly different emphasis, as that creative combination of likeness and difference – contrast and similarity – is played out in humour, satire and irony, discourses which thrive on discrepancies between appearance and reality. The sublime beauty of a rainstorm or a moorland beck in the Stanza Stones contrasts sharply with the everyday objects in *Seeing Stars*. Armitage asks his reader to look again at the ordinary. Often, the reader may not like what s/he sees.

Chapter 4: Irreverence and Uncertainty: The Environments of Simon Armitage's *Seeing Stars*

The 2010 collection *Seeing Stars* marks an achievement of the new style Simon Armitage had explored during his time as Artist in Residence at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. The stylistically coherent book comprises story-poems in which apparently ordinary situations move in unprecedented, extraordinary directions. The narratives are dark, humorous, irreverent and ironic. Armitage describes influences on the style of this collection:

One was that it was a reaction against *Gawain*. I had been working on it – monk-like – for about 4 years, and it is a very regulated, very formulaic poem full of technical details that have to be adhered to, it is poetry with a big P. I got to the end of that and my head was fizzing with other ideas. The other thing was [...] a book called *Return to the City on a White Donkey* by James Tate. They were absurdist prose poems and they're the model for those poems.¹

The stimulus for these poems is a reaction against a different kind of poetry, and that highly technical tradition is thus both antithesis to, and unconsciously compounded in, the poet's new style. Armitage's considerable renown and popularity might make him part of the British poetry establishment, but in his writing he continues, self-consciously, to challenge norms:

I think humour in poems is very anti-establishment, which suits me [...] the reason that I was attracted to poetry in the first place was that I saw it as an alternative [...] And then once you establish yourself as a poet then I think you're just automatically drawn towards or try and create moods within your own work that are oppositional to poetry itself. (*Interview*)

Creativity is generated by resistance, then, even (or especially) when oppositions are artificially imposed. Such tensions at the conceptual level have a parallel in the

¹ Alex MacDonald, 'Jaundiced Reality: Simon Armitage Interviewed', *The Quietus*, 12 October 2014, <<http://thequietus.com/articles/16464-simon-armitage-paper-aeroplanes-interview-next-generation-poetry>> [accessed online 13 December 2014].

staged opposites in irony. James Tate's line, 'It's a tragic story, but that's what's so funny' might be written about many of the *Seeing Stars* poems.² Tate acknowledges the strangeness of writing about tragedy, and, with his own dark irony, Armitage also pushes the reader onto uncomfortable terrain where he or she must reflect on what, exactly, they find 'funny'. This line also speaks to an absurd poetics, where coping against meaninglessness or annihilation produces humour: in this way, then, tragedy is a source of levity. The collection develops a unique take on absurdity, irony and humour, three qualities that have appeared throughout Armitage's poetic career, but never with the stylistic consistency of this collection of funny pieces (both 'funny strange' and 'funny ha-ha', in theorist John Morreall's words).³ Yet these poems are not uniform: while they all deal with absurdity, doublings and darkness, a variety of textures are employed to produce irony, black humour and surprise. Generally speaking, the poems in *Seeing Stars* do not have a 'logic' to be unlocked by careful analysis. Often the connection between stories, characters or ideas within poems is impossible to identify: Armitage relishes bringing together two very different and unrelated things, to see how they behave when juxtaposed. One crucial aspect of the poems is narrative. This might seem obvious, since storytelling is a mode common to all the poems in this collection, but I mention it particularly because narrative is closely bound up with the comic in *Seeing Stars*. Indeed, it is often flashes of absurd humour that carry the story, allowing Armitage to make a transition to an idea that, without the brazen, self-knowing quality of the absurdity, would seem disjointed and confusing. To write about 'meaning' in any of these poems is problematic because they deliberately evade understanding, but *Seeing Stars* does offer interesting perspectives on aspects of modern life, taking into account the social, cultural and material. An environmental consciousness is identifiable, as is an interest in romantic, domestic, sexual and filial relationships, development of selfhood, public figures and celebrity and cultural change. I do not consider Armitage a wholly postmodern poet, though elements of the postmodern are evident in *Seeing Stars* – where we see uncertainty, doubt and paradox; where

² James Tate, 'The Art of Poetry no. 92', *Paris Review*, 177 (2006), <<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5636/james-tate-the-art-of-poetry-no-92-james-tate>> [accessed 25 July 2016].

³ John Morreall, 'Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by John Morreall (New York: Albany Press, 1987), pp. 188-207.

highly specific points of detail create a fragmented world; and where selfhood is not a discrete, individual state but one of a network of states. On this last point, as on many others, these poems offer a wide variety of ecologies, which are by turns organic, environmental, social and creative.

The poems in *Seeing Stars* are not overtly nature poems, environmental poems or ecopoems but they are peppered with references to animals, the outdoors, food, waste and other environmental themes and subjects, in ways that define the contemporary moment. Sometimes it seems a comment is being made, but often it is unclear what (if any) opinion is being articulated. What this produces is a collection in which concerns about the environment and (the resulting) heightened awareness of our activity in a material ecology are very much present, and appear alongside, integrated with, or as a background to, romance, narrative, humorous surprise and violence. That the undercurrent of dark absurdity, which often strays into confusion and the unexplained, bubbles up in many of the environmental ‘moments’ in *Seeing Stars* is not incidental. It is as evident that public consciousness relating to human activity’s material consequences is troubled, conflicted and often without proper direction, as it is clear that awareness of the precarious position ecological devastation puts us in is woven in with the threads of all other narratives of experience (food, waste, urban spaces, animals, plants, countryside, society, personal life, the body). Environmental awareness is not sensitivity confined to definitive places or ideas but an aspect of every experience, whether we choose to focus on it or not. In *Seeing Stars*, Armitage successfully identifies various things that are unusual, surprising or disconcerting about our postmodern moment. An ironic stance or poetic ‘doubt’ seeps through the poems, destabilising affinities between appearance and reality and thus calling into question the reader’s understanding of his or her place in the world. While a growing body of evidence suggests that the stable foundations of our lives (predictable climate and weather, protection from flooding, drought and famine) are not nearly as stable as we once thought, it is also apparent that the cracks and splits that are now threatening time-honoured material certainties might well have deepened the general sense of undefined complexity that influences postmodern culture. Ecological uncertainty is by no means the cause of the postmodern condition (if we can call it such) but neither is it purely a product of it. Like the repetitive, mutually influential feedback loops in gene-culture evolution, concerns about impending environmental disaster

are increasingly entangled with other worries, for example loss of confidence in political institutions and what is perceived to be the 'truth'. They might have developed independently initially, but they are part of the same, global, landscape.

This is the 'moment' Armitage is writing: one where the uncertainty produced by the prospect of environmental catastrophe is pervasive. Jon Silkin's context positioned him as a writer responding to a very different sort of catastrophe, namely his proximity (temporal, cultural and emotional) to the Nazi death camps and the fear of nuclear holocaust during the Cold War. The uncertainties (if not the horror) characterising Armitage's moment are much more powerful – there are so many potential terrible outcomes, such as flooding, mass extinction, famine, and many that are difficult or impossible to predict, given the contestability and limitations to both scientific models and the human imagination. It might seem strange to suggest that Silkin's contemporaries' fear of nuclear war was not marked by uncertainties, and of course to some extent it was. But Hiroshima and Nagasaki had shown the world relatively recently what happens when the atom bomb is dropped on developed urban spaces. The outcome is horrific, but, it could be argued, was a *known* horror to 1960s civilians, whereas the worst extents of anthropogenic climate change are, as yet, only in the scientific documents and the imagination of even the most environmentally conscious individuals in the early 21st century. Climate change is already in process and is visible but despite the best efforts of scientists and models there is a great deal of the unknown, and *Seeing Stars* responds formally to uncertainty pervading the poet's experience. These poems do not conclude (neatly, if at all), and there is no linear argument that the reader can follow. While Silkin's attention to the natural world is profound and based on a progressive ethics, discourses of sustainability and green living have developed considerably in the two decades since his death. The sense of self-restraint in green ways of life are, on the one hand, based on a desire for longevity, but on the other hand can be exclusively for affluent middle classes who, again, it could be argued, can afford such pieties. In this way, individual as well as planetary physical health also continues to be the domain of the wealthy, gentrified communities. Armitage is attuned to these points of conflict and irony, and his response to green politics tends to be couched in terms that can accommodate the social pressures, uncertainties and even hypocrisy encountered by contemporary environmental consciousness. This irreverent discourse opens up the possibility of something new replacing the status

quo, and it allows Armitage to be creative in response to environmental degradation, asking his reader to think about these issues without him being didactic. When the reader ‘gets’ the joke, he or she is drawn into a collusion in which environmental consciousness is the norm. The nature of that awareness and ethical conviction is by no means secure, however, and that multiplicity of problems and responses characterises the diverse networks in *Seeing Stars*.

4.1 Irreverent Environmentalism: Incongruity, Comedy and Other Animals

Michael Branch describes what it is like to live with the knowledge of climate change, rapid species extinction and global environmental degradation:

Because we love the world so deeply and yet are forced to watch it burn – or melt – we find in our love for nature not unalloyed joy but rather a bittersweet affection shot through with grief. At the etymological root of the word “compassion” is the idea that we “suffer with,” and in our compassion for the suffering of the earth and its creatures we experience a kind of trauma that often strips us of energy and hope.⁴

The depth and breadth of the problem can be paralysing to the individual. The way Armitage faces this ‘trauma’ in his poetry is through irreverence and humour. In a theoretical context, Nicole Seymour makes a powerful case for the potential of irreverence, absurdity and humour to stimulate progressive change in environmental politics and practice. She identifies another challenge to green campaigners, noting that ‘activists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have identified serious-minded literalness and a paucity of playful imagination as the primary reason why the environmental movement has met with crushing disappointment in the past decade’.⁵ For Seymour, such seriousness constitutes a failure of the imagination: just because the threats we face are serious does not mean that our responses must employ a similar tone. What she suggests, instead, is:

⁴ Michael P. Branch, ‘Are You Serious? A Modest Proposal for Environmental Humor’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. by Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 377-90 (p. 389).

⁵ Nicole Seymour, ‘Toward an Irreverent Ecocriticism’, *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4.2 (2012), 56-71 (p. 61).

an irreverent turn in ecocriticism, one whose inquiries are absurd, perverse, and humorous in character, and/or focused on the absurd, perverse, and humorous as they arise in relationship to ecology and representations thereof. [...] I believe that such a turn is appropriate to our deeply weird current moment (p. 57)

Seymour advocates environmentally-conscious media that explore various shades of emotional, intellectual and practical response. A light-hearted tone does not eclipse fear or disgust, but exists uneasily alongside it. The ‘absurd, perverse and humorous’ aspects of *Seeing Stars* are produced ecologically, in terms of the familial, romantic, social, human-nonhuman, food, material objects, waste, creativity, and language. Further, Armitage appears to be defining a contemporary culture that coheres with Seymour’s, a ‘deeply weird’ experience in which what is unnerving runs beyond the surface, beyond appearances and our simplest expectations, and reaches into the realms, processes and ecologies under the surface: in the unconscious mind, in deep time and deep space, and in an uncertain future. Richard Kerridge draws attention to Seymour’s ‘perception that the environmental crisis has opened an unusual gap between what we know and what we feel and do, giving us a sense of absurdity: our knowledge and our behaviour cannot both be authentic, can they?’⁶ As Kerridge rightly suggests, this ‘weird current moment’ is defined not only by the destabilisation of our once-dependable physical environment, but also by the deeply inappropriate apathetic response. The lack of sufficient action in the face of devastating knowledge produces a state of absurdity. Seymour proposes:

that instead of remaining serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and broader ecological crisis, we embrace our sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humor, even our perversity [...] We would thereby free ourselves to explore what Judith Halberstam calls “alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, ... nor ... mired in nihilistic critical dead ends” (p. 57).

Thus there is a profound desire to bring about change, an ethical turn which is produced by a *looking afresh*, thinking beyond the restrictions of one mode of

⁶ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecocritical Approaches to Literary Form and Genre: Urgency, Depth, Provisionality, Temporality’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, pp. 361-76 (p. 364).

knowledge not in order to escape reality but with the aim to move more closely towards that which we experience materially. There is a parallel between this kind of creative thinking and the potential of metaphor, where multiplicity and play are not forms of escapism but modes of intelligence and of exploration. Seymour articulates an understanding that ‘alternative ways of knowing’ can perform connective functions:

[I] propose irreverence, and the specific qualities of humorousness, absurdism, irony, and perversity, as a “form of attunement and attachment” (Stewart 16) to our object. This form is appropriate to, and would allow us to address and grapple with, those emotional and conceptual pressures we face. (p. 61)

The irreverent mode has the capacity to connect the human subject with the world, however fractious or frightening that world might be. Seymour asks that ‘we allow ourselves to feel uncertain in these uncertain times’ (p. 69). I will explore various manifestations of uncertainty and doubt in *Seeing Stars*.

Seymour, then, argues for openness to multiple perspectives, re-visioning our environments and our relationships to them, and an individual state of absurdity that might, to some extent, mirror the absurdity of external conditions. Central to her understanding is a wish to liberate critical and creative writing from what William Major and Andrew McMurry, in support of Seymour, call ‘the self-righteous posturing that afflicts so much environmental writing’, continuing that ‘environmental criticism had better lighten up by adapting a slightly more ill-mannered tone’.⁷ Seymour writes that ‘there is a clear difference between comedy and absurdism (and the recognition thereof) on the one hand, and cynicism on the other, and that the former are the most appropriate stances for our age’ (p. 63). Her refutation of a cynical defeatism gives absurdity and humour the potential for positive action and thought. The irreverence, humour and darkness of Armitage’s poems in *Seeing Stars* certainly strays into the realm of the ‘ill-mannered’, both in environmentally-focused moments and in those that are not. Alongside this, for Seymour, is a necessary commitment to being more direct, more open, and more honest about what we are exposed to and what we are experiencing: ‘there is

⁷ William Major and Andrew McMurry, ‘Introduction: The Function of Ecocriticism; or, Ecocriticism: What Is It Good For?’, *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 4.2 (2012), 1-7 (p. 7).

something laughable, even hilarious, about the collective position of the ecocritic in the face of ongoing environmental devastation. Rather than ignore or repress that hilarity, I want us to talk about it' (p. 68). Like Armitage, Seymour responds to the very fine line between seriousness and hilarity. Facing the reality of things, even when that reality is disturbing, is the only way to respond effectively and to potentially shape the nature of that reality. Seymour argues:

if our job as ecocritics and environmentalists has become to keep keeping on even if there is no point, then comedy and absurdism are both the inevitable outcome as well as the logical posture. I want us, all of us, to keep acting as if what we do matters, even as we suspect that there is no point to what we do – and then to laugh at this state of affairs, as a way to both acknowledge and mitigate that difficulty. (p. 63)

Here, again, is the suggestion that not only acknowledging the state of things, but also acknowledging how we align with the external world (there is absurdity in the external world, within myself, and in the relationship between inside and out) offers a rich methodology when it comes to understanding – and so having the capacity to influence – self-world relations. What, then, is the point of ecocriticism? It might seem to have so small a part to play in the environmental movement as to be practically ineffectual. It is true that studying literature of the environment is unlikely to solve the environmental crisis on its own. But ecocriticism is highly effective as part of an intellectual ecology, which has the capacity to influence knowledge, understanding, attitudes and habits. Along with biology, geology, philosophy, politics, ecology, sociology, visual art, geography, history and many other forms of inquiry, it will make a unique contribution to our ability to read human culture so far, and direct where it will go in the future. One of Seymour's conclusions is as follows:

many would say that the true purpose of ecocriticism lies not in its intellectualism, per se, but in that core of its name – “criticism,” or “critical,” meaning thoughtful discernment. That is, criticism emerges from, and encourages, not rote consumption, but inquiry, not acceptance but exploration. It asks not simply to know, but to know how we know. And it is there that we see what an irreverent ecocriticism has to offer; how it might be kept, or might keep others, especially that media-savvy younger generation,

from tilting from arch political commitment into celebratory cynicism: it makes laughing at the joke inextricable from asking why the joke is funny. (p. 68)

We might, then, refashion *intellectual ecology* into a *critical ecology*, of inquiry and exploration. Sciences and humanities are of course further connected with creative ecologies of poetry, fiction, visual art and film, sculpture and landscape art, theatre, soundscapes and many other forms of traditional and experimental art and creative self-expression. Teaching audiences that not only does ‘asking why the joke is funny’ not have to make the laughter die away (as it is often assumed it will), but that such *open-minded* exploration of ideas, without the necessity of committing to a single definition, can make the joke even funnier – and if this brings with it a keener capacity for critical thinking, then we have another convincing argument that play is not only pleasure (and inherently valuable for that reason alone), but also a way of enriching our knowledge about the world.

Relationships between humans and other animals are put under the particular scrutiny that humour brings in ‘15:30 by the Elephant House’.⁸ Overtly a poem about a couple’s relationship, in this narrative Scott and Charlene decide to ‘get married at the zoo!’, find ‘the name of a humanist minister / in the Yellow pages’ and arrange to meet him ‘at 15:30 / by the elephant house’. The elephants seem to provide a pleasant backdrop for the couple: the minister asks if they would rather a location by the penguins, which are ‘so vivacious and life-affirming’, but the couple agree to remain in the spot they have chosen. The couple describe themselves as ‘nature lovers’, but the zookeeper is furious and demands that they leave, branding them ‘supremacists’. His fury at their performing a human, social ritual in front of the animals comes across as ridiculous and over-the-top: ‘Have you no respect for / these creatures, flaunting your humanness in front of them? / Can’t you see how defeated and ashamed they are?’ This is a form of stewardship or ethics of care that divides humans and other animals, accentuating difference and distance. The reader feels that the zookeeper might have somewhat missed the point, but the irony is the

⁸ Armitage, ‘15:30 by the Elephant House’, *Seeing*, pp. 28-29. All poems in *Seeing Stars* are prose poems but I reproduce them with line breaks as they appear in the collection. The edition does not give line numbers so I provide page references but no line references. The poems are not long, so at the first mention of a poem I will give page numbers, and thereafter give page references only if they are necessary for clarity.

couple are paying not too much but too little attention to the zoo animals. Their vows, before the zookeeper interrupts them, include one statement about the 'essence of humanity' and one promise 'to hand over the universe to future generations in an improved and morally enhanced / condition', which of course is a huge promise, but the pretence at such an environmental conscience is even more apparently problematic while they objectify the animals in the zoo. In the second half of the poem the couple return home, have a blazing row and then lie together in front of the fire and 'dispensed / with restraint for the first time in their lives'. That the couple's passions are fired up (and later released) after seeing the animals caged in the zoo is uncomfortable for the reader, whose sense of irony is made even more acute by references to aphrodisiac 'oysters' and 'bison grass vodka'. It seems that the oppression of other sentient creatures liberates the couple. Yet on a fundamental level the poem is funny and is not overtly moralistic. Isabel Galleymore explores the idea that 'the comic mode can help us see ourselves involved within environmental crises, rather than outside them'.⁹ While serious expression can make people feel distanced or patronised, humour has the capacity to make people feel connected, which in turn produces responsibility. The comic mode is also able to bypass feelings of guilt and powerlessness, which explicitly moralising discourse can easily produce.

Galleymore argues for a comic environmentalism that can speak honestly about contemporary environmental degradation without compromising the comedic element. Her argument is based on an understanding that comedy can fuel a *looking afresh*:

[Mark] Jeantheau believes humour 'allows facts and messages to slip into people's brains when a more serious approach would not get past their bias filters [...] whilst the effect of this 'second-order knowledge' may not be that of suspending an attitude in its entirety, in the very least it prompts (albeit temporarily) an adoption of an alternative attitude in order to understand the joke that is being told. (pp. 154-155)

Humour, then, might be seen to mirror metaphor not only in their shared dependence on similarity and difference, but also in each mode of thinking's capacity to make

⁹ Galleymore, 'A dark ecology of comedy', p. 161.

the audience look again, and perhaps see a differently framed reality. This uncompromising assessment of things is central to Galleymore's argument:

we could go so far as to claim that by *facing* the consequences of human impact on the environment the comic mode might reverse [...] concern over the paralyzing scale of the problem and so realise that something *can* be done. (p. 153)

Comedy, then, might provide a practical means of engaging social groups and combatting apathy. The account of satire as an ecological discourse implicates satirist, subject and audience in whatever mode of thinking is being criticised. In a related way, Bronislaw Szerszynski calls for a thinking, doubting discourse in which the subject is involved:

A reflexive stance towards one's own beliefs and values which does not collapse into manipulative or quietistic cynicism requires a truly ironic world relation – an irony not just towards particular things but towards the world's totality, including oneself and one's irony. And such a stance would necessitate a less moralistic and self-satisfied political style, one which acknowledges that no one can know political truths perfectly or live blamelessly, especially under current circumstances.¹⁰

Irony reveals the audience to be involved not as observers but as participants. Losing the 'moralistic and self-satisfied political style' is also central to Seymour's account of irreverent expression. Galleymore directly relates the reader's participation with irony, humour and satire's potentials for positive change:

satire that focuses upon exposing the incongruities produced by our everyday practices is a far more immediate challenge as it confronts our own behaviours directly rather than confronting our behaviours indirectly through the behaviours of others. To focus upon our own incongruities through ridicule is, therefore, to increase the possibilities of a corrective function in the comic mode. (p. 160)

The poem acts as a prism through which 'honest' accounts of behaviour can be refracted, minimising the moments that are too close for comfort. Engaging the

¹⁰ Bronislaw Szerszynski, 'The Post-ecologist Condition: Irony as Symptom and Cure', *Environmental Politics*, 16 (2007), 337-55 (p. 352).

reader and revealing ways in which the reader is ecologically related with the things, ideas and worlds in the text might, then, produce a 'corrective function'. A tangential approach to matters of huge cultural, environmental and ethical importance is identifiable in 'The Last Panda', which allows the subject of species extinction to co-reside, messily integrated, with a very different cultural phenomenon: celebrity.

'The Last Panda' directly connects absurd humour with environmental awareness, bringing together the 'voice' of a panda with the voice of Ringo Starr.¹¹ Neither is named directly in the poem, but instead each is brought into being by references made to their social and material environments. John Lennon, George Harrison and Paul McCartney are all named and the drumsticks identify Starr (the Beatles' drummer), while the panda's identity, given in the title, is expressed in the body of the poem in the panda's narrative voice:

Unprecedented economic growth in my native country
has brought mochaccino and broadband to where there
was nothing but misery and disease, yet with loss of
habitat the inevitable consequence; even the glade I was
born in is now a thirty-story apartment block with valet
parking and a nail salon.

The excesses of capitalism – the idea that everyone needs a nail salon not just locally but in their own building – quite literally impose themselves on the pastoral of the speaker's history. The 'native country' feels very far away, and the romanticized 'glade' does not seem excessive in the context of the distance evoked between the panda's memories and what is now made manifest. Habitat loss and extinction are clear subjects here, though the ways Armitage deploys them is unusual. The absurdity of a panda's having an interest in 'mochaccino and broadband' is nonetheless underwritten by the idea that the panda is a creature in a global community that includes human beings, and that, perhaps, sacrifices must be made if technology is to succeed in producing increasingly equal societies. Yet the surely baseless suggestion that this was previously a place with 'nothing but misery

¹¹ 'The Last Panda', *Seeing*, pp. 57-58.

and disease' darkly ironizes the ideologies of rampant globalisation. There is evidence of the poet's environmental awareness, but not activism: there is no direct appeal to the reader on behalf of wildlife or its advocates, and the unlikely pairing of a panda with a rock star might well detract from such a message. However, it is also the case that this account of the threat of extinction of the Giant Panda might well function in a mode like the 'corrective' humour Galleymore describes. Armitage acknowledges the value of deployment of comedy in relation to serious problems: 'humour isn't always seen as high art, so it probably appeals to me for those reasons, there's something [...] that undermines the piety of the project' (*Interview*). Without seeming intent on rousing guilt in the reader, the poem's dark humour nevertheless produces a pathos that is concurrent with the comedy. When the panda says, 'Every first Tuesday in the month the lady vet gives me a / hand job but due to the strength of the tranquiliser the / pleasure is all hers', the surprise reversal of the expectation and common idiom produces a hilarity in the reader that is quickly followed by an unease that frustrates the impulse to laugh. Yet nothing the panda says (once we have accepted that this panda can speak) is ridiculous, but probably a reasonable account of how it experiences this phase in conservation breeding programmes. For Armitage, dark humour can be a by-product of (or a necessary vehicle for) discussions that are serious in nature:

It's never laugh out loud humour, as far as I'm aware. I don't always know when I am being funny in poems – it's sometimes made apparent to me when I read them, but I'm not always aware of that when I'm writing. Some of those lines seem eminently sensible to me. (*Interview*)

Armitage acknowledges that, 'on occasions', black humour is produced in his poetry 'just because something is bleak to the point that I don't know what else to do with it' (*Interview*). Certainly this accounts for the comedic irony in the situation of the tranquilised panda. What the reader is primarily disturbed by in this moment is not evidence of potential species extinction (even though the aloneness of the panda is emphasised from the start), but the plight of an animal that has, perversely, been forced into an unnatural (and possibly abusive) set of circumstances. The anthropomorphism of the panda individualises the trauma, capturing the reader's concern for one creature, rather than the broader environmental and ethical landscape. It follows that the reader will, in sympathising with the panda, consider and perhaps lament the circumstances that have brought it to this unfulfilled

existence. The convergence of the absurdity, the humour and the engagement of the reader's pleasure principle thus produce a far more effective poem than one that *explicitly* demands an ethical response. Armitage has said: 'I sometimes think of [humour] as a form of metaphor, that you're equating a situation with a sensation' (*Interview*). This form of ethically productive comedy functions, then, by means of doublings, indirectness and layered meanings, meaning that poetry and metaphor are discourses aptly suited to its dissemination.

4.2 The Ecological Reader: Narrative, Surprise and the Audience as 'co-producers of meaning'

Often it is the case that humour 'delivers something that one does not expect – the comic surprise [which] allow[s] the reader to experience certain truths', as Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham observe.¹² The conviction that exposure to comedy stimulates a learning process coheres with ideas relating to the productivity of metaphor and play of similarity and difference that have informed my discussion of Armitage and Silkin so far. I will argue that comedic elements in *Seeing Stars* offer the reader the possibility of fresh perspectives. Yet the poems often resist interpretation or unsettle the reader by sudden shifts in direction. The senses of uncertainty, fracture and incompleteness speak to the collection's articulation of social and lived networks, which I will discuss in detail, but I first want to draw attention to the way this relates to the function of narrative. Armitage suggests that he uses humour as a way of 'carrying a story', because this was the way to be heard in his family when he was growing up. This characteristically down-to-earth remark speaks to the role humour plays in his work: a connective function, setting up an encounter between poetry and the audience that is essential to his poetry's success. The engagement of audience, through vernacular, clarity of tone, humour and public art, is not an accompaniment to Armitage's poetic project, but the driving force of it. The contrast with Silkin's poetics is significant: those engagements tend to be closer and more personal, between the poet and a flower or a poet and another writer. Narrative – the capacity to communicate in a way that necessarily draws the audience along the same path as the poet – is made manifest in the Stanza Stones in

¹² Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 137.

the physical act of ‘reading’ the land while walking, and it is a central facet of *Seeing Stars*. In that collection, however, the ambiguity gives the reader a freedom that is very different from that given to the walker visiting the Stones.

The first poem in *Seeing Stars* opens with ‘I am a sperm whale’, anticipating the interest in self-narration that spans the collection.¹³ The approach here, as in many of the *Seeing Stars* poems, is to forcibly bring together two seemingly unrelated worlds or ideas. The poem is then generated out of that unexpected encounter. The poem weaves together the voices of the whale and an unnamed character about whom we learn assorted fragments of information, such as that he has a brother called Jeff who ‘owns a camping and outdoor / clothing shop in the Lake District and is a recreational user / of cannabis’. The incongruity of a whale speaking, and with such unassumed conviction, might provoke a laugh from the audience. There is no punctuation or other indicators of who is speaking at any particular point, and several statements might be attributed to either the whale or the person. The reader is thus left to play with the turns and uncertainties and create his or her own versions of the voices: from the first line, the poem plays with the idea that anything can be brought to life if it is spoken about. Reading the ending of ‘The Christening’ might help us uncover themes relating to the collection more generally:

[...] The first people to open me up
thought my head was full of sperm, but they were men, and
had lived without women for many weeks, and were far
from home. Stuff comes blurting out.

The story of how sperm whales came to be named as such is based in fact, even if Armitage’s reproduction of it here is clearly intended to elicit a laugh. Yet there is more to it: ‘blurting’ relates less to bodily substance, as might ‘splurting’, than it does to language. The consequences of those sailors’ words about the whale are far-reaching. The poet makes his reader laugh with a risqué conclusion to a highly unusual poem, and yet the final statement also seems to be an apology from the poet, a characteristically self-deprecating acknowledgement of the strangeness of this work. Armitage apologises for the absurdity of the poems in *Seeing Stars* by means

¹³ ‘The Christening’, *Seeing*, p. 3.

of an absurd narrative, and the reader is involved from the first page. The surprise here is humorous and a form of play; and we know that play is a way of learning. Armitage teaches his reader right from the beginning to accept the bizarre and to expect the unexpected to be delivered with confidence. The narrative drive in these poems makes the strange occurrences nevertheless seem inevitable.

In 'The Christening', then, the poet demonstrates a self-consciousness about the act of writing which nevertheless takes place beneath the surface of the narrative. 'Seeing Stars' and 'Upon Opening the Chest Freezer' also succeed in *partially* obscuring the poet's self-awareness, in these cases by displacing language about language onto characters.¹⁴ Szerszynski suggests that a text that is self-conscious about its status as a text is often able to reimagine known or pre-conceived ideas. He draws on Kierkegaard, who (Szerszynski writes) 'felt that the knowledge 'possessed' by people can act as a barrier to the apprehension of more fundamental truths' ('The Post-ecologist Condition', p. 352). For the health of the individual and society, even firmly held understandings must be challenged by new ideas when appropriate, and one way of achieving this is by keeping writing in a process of flux. Szerszynski continues: 'Ironic ecology would similarly favour what Roland Barthes (1975) calls 'writerly' texts, ones which do not impose fixed meanings on readers, but treat them as co-producers of meaning' (p. 352). Self-conscious writing that acknowledges its own project can implicate the reader in its production of meaning. Kierkegaard theorises this possibility in terms of stripping back the reader's pre-conceptions to trigger the development of a new understanding. In Barthes's case, this creative ecology that includes both author and audience suggests that 'meaning' is produced as a happening, a process, rather than a pre-existing truth. The text, then, is organic rather than fixed. In 'Seeing Stars', the speaker is a pharmacist who (apparently deliberately) provokes a customer into anger and then violence. The pharmacist's account, perhaps surprisingly, is calm, dispassionate, and even distant, and is self-conscious about the language he uses:

When people have received a blow to the head they often
talk about 'seeing stars', and as a man of science I have
always been careful to avoid the casual use of metaphor

¹⁴ 'Seeing Stars', pp. 18-19; 'Upon Opening the Chest Freezer', p. 17 (both *Seeing*).

and hyperbole. But I saw stars that day. Whole galaxies of
stars, and planets orbiting around them

The disjunction between poetry and science is an ironic pretence on Armitage's part.¹⁵ The irony of a poet giving his character a voice in which he denies the use of metaphor as a means of successfully describing the world is not lost on the reader. The conversational style in which the visual metaphor is produced engages the reader, both as participant in an exchange about discourse and in terms of the visual imagination. The lead-up to the image of 'Whole galaxies of / stars, and planets' asks the reader to reflect on his or her own use of metaphor, and then compounds the visual element for the reader, who cannot help but imagine stars and galaxies. Whether the use of metaphor on the behalf of the speaker is justified or too 'casual', the reader is implicated and involved.

'Upon Opening the Chest Freezer' knowingly engages the reader who might find some forms of experimental art pretentious. The speaker's husband, Damien, likes to store snow in the freezer, secretly deposit it somewhere outdoors during a summer night, and then (again, secretly) photograph the perplexed people who find it in the morning. The first stanza describes, in the third person, the process of Damien's game, but at the beginning of the second stanza, the voice modulates into first person and the speaker announces she is 'through playing housewife to your / 'art' and this brief story-poem is to tell you / I'm leaving'. The self-consciousness about writing a story makes the reader an intruder or voyeur, which is perhaps an uncomfortable feeling but nonetheless one that emphasises the ecological relationship between poet, poem, voice and reader. Despite the joke, the protagonist's wife subverts her husband's domineering creative activity with her own: the husband acts, the wife speaks. She, too, has engaged her audience in a game that depends on suspended time which gives the artist a window of time through which to escape from view. The reader is left unsure whether to applaud a woman for taking control of her life by ending an unhappy relationship – perhaps rejecting the cold heart of her husband's 'chest freezer', or giving second life to her

¹⁵ See for example Armitage's poetry collection, *CloudCuckooLand* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), and essay, 'Modelling the Universe: Poetry, Science, and the Art of Metaphor', in *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, ed. by Robert Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 110-22.

own – or whether both characters are engaged in a highly performative mode of living that is destructive. Divorcing appearance from reality in their minds causes their connections with each other to break down in turn. This theatre of pretence acted out in personal lives is an important aspect of the prevailing uncertainty in *Seeing Stars*, and I will return to this theme in a later section of this chapter.

In *Seeing Stars*, comic surprise is often produced by black humour. This is exemplified in ‘To the Bridge’, one of the shortest poems in the collection, which opens:¹⁶

The same bridge, in fact, where it had occurred to
him that the so-called Manic Street Preachers, for all
their hyperventilation and sulphuric aftershave,
were neither frenzied, credible or remotely
evangelical, just as the so-called Red Hot Chili
Peppers, for all their encouraging ingredients [...]

The reader is amused by the speaker’s taking the band names so literally, and affording such importance to the name as a marker of identity. Satire plays with a disjunction between appearance and reality, but the poet’s engaging the reader by offering a new perspective on naming is not a revelation but is itself another form of distraction. The poet subjects the band Teardrop Explodes to a similarly tongue-in-cheek critique, before the poem concludes:

Below him, the soupy canal acknowledged that final
thought with an anointing ripple then slouched
unknowingly yet profusely onwards.

Suddenly, the reader is party to the horrible realisation that these apparently light-hearted thoughts are the final thoughts of a person who is committing suicide, right in the moment in which we are laughing at his or her pedantry. In the first line, the poet distracts the reader with wordplay so that when we finally see the situation for what it is, we are implicated in it as a callous, uncaring participant. The reader feels an implicit guilt which is only compounded by the inconsequential nature of the

¹⁶ ‘To the Bridge’, *Seeing*, p. 45.

protagonist's final musings: is this his final contribution to the world? The incongruity of pop music and suicide is deeply unsettling for the reader, in an ironic mode that depends on narrative form. Despite the lack of any *explicit* causality, the unidirectional development of the story implicitly suggests that the climax of the poem is an accumulation of what has come before; what comes first is a cause of what comes after. The suggestion that the names of the rock bands were the trigger is absurd, yet in its implication of an individual struggling to identify reality from appearance, it seems quite sensible. Echoes in the final two lines of Yeats's 'rough beast' that 'Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born' refigures the reader's perspective on an apparently isolated tragedy.¹⁷ Like Yeats's forbearer of subsequent horror, the inability of the unnamed voice in 'To the Bridge' to process an ever-proliferating entertainment and media industry may be a sign of worse to come. Cultural institutions, such as exhibition launch events, high street shops, celebrities and politicians, will form the basis for the next section of this chapter.

4.3 Cultural Difference and Cultural Change

'The Practical Way to Heaven' begins at the buffet and drinks reception of a successful event opening 'the new exhibition space at the Sculpture / Farm' (playfully alluding to the Yorkshire Sculpture Park).¹⁸ This comic poem satirises perceived cultural differences between so-called 'Northerners' and 'Southerners'. After 'The London people' are told that their transport to Wakefield Westgate train station has arrived, one guest has a brief exchange with the event organiser:

'Great show, Jack,' said Preminger,
helping himself to a final goat's cheese tartlet and a
skewered Thai prawn. 'And not a pie in sight!' 'Thanks
for coming,' said Jack. 'Put that somewhere for me, will
you?' said Preminger, passing Jack his redundant cocktail
stick before shaking hands and marching off towards the coach.

¹⁷ W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Timothy Webb (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 124.

¹⁸ 'The Practical Way to Heaven', *Seeing*, pp. 42-44.

Londoner Preminger is courteous but patronising, dismissive and entitled. Yorkshireman Jack, by contrast, is considerate and caring, a 'proud and happy man'. The joke is that the entire staff at the Sculpture Farm are apparently merely affecting a display of bourgeois civility so as to be deemed satisfactory by the Londoners. Once the visitors have departed, Jack signals that they can all drop the pretence, and offers his staff a 'reward':

[...] He clapped his hands, and in through the double
doors of the kitchen came Bernard driving a forklift truck,
and on it, the most enormous pie. A wild ecstatic cheer
reverberated among the tables and chairs.

The group's delight at the sight of the pie is absurdly over-enthusiastic, and they respond in highly performative fashion, jumping into the pie in apparently genuine, orgiastic excitement. The tone is clearly one of irreverence, satirising both the friendly, pie-loving Yorkshire culture and the self-serving, cosmopolitan Londoner. There is an element of subversion, in that the poem resists an easy recourse to North-South relationships. On the one hand, the emphasis on cultural traits makes a mockery of the adherence to the differences, which seem clichéd, absurd and ridiculous. On the other hand, the poem might ask us to consider the social and political contexts in which cultural capital and privilege is divided geographically. The extent to which our cognitive and emotional lives are bound up with our material ones is suggested by the references to food – while one character (with a unique experiential background) eats one thing, another character chooses something different to eat. In this way, the gravy is a loose metaphor for a material present and social history. However, before we are carried away with serious, and quite possibly fallacious, ideas about 'The Practical Way to Heaven' as a political act, I would argue that the real 'meaning' of the poem is built on play. The fresh perspective that the narrative surprise produces might be individual to the reader, rather than a pre-formed assertion of a social politics.

Susan Sontag defines Camp as a mode of being that is highly performative: 'The traditional means for going beyond straight seriousness – irony, satire – seem feeble today, inadequate to the culturally oversaturated medium in which contemporary sensibility is schooled. Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an

ideal, theatricality'.¹⁹ Here there is no attempt to make art a mimesis of nature, or to approach art as a way of getting to the truth. Sontag writes:

Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style – but a particular kind of style. It is the love of the exaggerated, the “off,” of things-being-what-they-are-not. The best example [...] Art Nouveau objects, typically, convert one thing into something else [...] A remarkable example: the Paris Métro entrances designed by Hector Guimard in the late 1890s in the shape of cast-iron orchid stalks. (p. 279)

The difference between something being very intensely itself ('exaggerated') and not at all completely itself ('things-being-what-they-are-not') is less than we might think; or perhaps we might say that Camp occupies the space between these two states. 'The Practical Way to Heaven' seems to perform to both standards, articulating the dependency of each state on the other. The stereotype is brought to its full capacity and undermined in the process: the Yorkshire staff perform so extremely to the stereotype of loving pies that they become caricatures that no reader could really identify with. The excess ultimately extinguishes the germ of the original idea. Camp, then, is 'art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is “too much”' (p. 284) – and yet it is not without depth. Sontag writes: 'Camp and tragedy are antitheses. There is seriousness in Camp (seriousness in the degree of the artist's involvement) and, often, pathos. The excruciating is also one of the tonalities of Camp' (p. 287). This might resonate strongly with Armitage's reader, cringing at Jack as 'A chunk of braised celery slithered / over his sternum'. The repulsive, visceral nature of this image produces a laugh which is compounded by the absurdity of the situation – there cannot be many readers who have experienced what Jack is subject to here. Nevertheless, the poem offers its absurdity unashamedly and the apparent silliness of the narrative does not repel the reader.

The affection with which Armitage describes the over-the-top performance of the pie-eating staff in 'The Practical Way to Heaven' speaks to Sontag's sense of 'relishing' rather than 'judging' the tastes and particularities of a social group (p. 291). It is only when the cultural norms of a certain group are exposed to a different

¹⁹ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 275-92 (p. 288).

group who do not derive peculiar comfort from the same cultural objects that the arbitrariness of such tastes – Northerners loving pies – are displayed. The sense of absurdity, produced in this poem by the Camp aesthetic, can only exist when the two groups (Londoners and Yorkshire people) come together. Even when they are alone, the performances of the Sculpture Farm staff are highly Camp: ‘Now the forklift doubled as a / diving board as Bernard bellyflopped from one of its / prongs into the warm mush’. The absurdity is produced by the knowledge (shared by staff and reader) that this behaviour is illicit, something that must be done in private, and would be shocking to others should the secret behaviour be revealed. Perhaps inevitably, the festivities do not continue uninterrupted. When the staff, swimming in the gigantic pie, are caught by the Londoners, the tones of Camp intensify:

[...] Preminger spluttered, ‘You told me the pie thing was over. Finished. You said it was safe in the north, Jack Singleton. But look at you. Call yourself a Sculpture Farmer? You couldn’t clean out a hamster cage.’

‘Forgive us,’ said Jack. ‘We’re pie people. Our mothers and fathers were pie people, and their mothers and fathers before them. Pies are in our blood.’

The humour is produced by the excessive, identity-defining seriousness with which the staff take their love of pies. While few readers would think taste in pies was something to be afraid of, the general idea of one cultural group performing rituals that another finds unpleasant or shocking can be more easily understood. So, the joke hinges on being, on the one hand, something the audience can identify with, and on the other hand, something that they cannot identify with. The play between those two states – the audience cannot escape but neither can they feel fully at home – is central to the theory of humour I am discussing. ‘The Practical Way to Heaven’ is written in a light-hearted, gently mocking tone yet it probes serious subjects – cultural snobbery on the one hand, and an unthinking adherence to cultural identity on the other. The culture ‘clash’ is played out overtly in ‘The Practical Way to Heaven’. I now want to consider cultural tensions that are played out in the poetry in less overt and less light-hearted ways.

I have suggested that humour's capacity to provoke change is one of its benefits, and society undoubtedly benefits from the introspection and reformation of norms that comedy and art inspires. Yet we must also acknowledge developments in society that are not universally positive, and the idea of an individual's local experience changing for the worse is explored by Armitage in various ways in *Seeing Stars*. 'Cheeses of Nazareth', for example, demonstrates how ontological uncertainty produced by a changing dwelling-place can be distressing.²⁰ The absurdity of forming a narrative that integrates cheesemongery and Christianity is, from one perspective, merely a game on the poet's part, as if the aural part-rhyme of 'Cheeses' and 'Jesus' is all the seed of inspiration he needs.²¹ This wordplay is a deflection, however, from a stimulus for the poem that is much closer to home:

There's an actual cheesemonger's shop in London where I used to walk from the station down to my publishers [...] There was never anybody in that shop when I walked past, and [...] the cheesemonger stood there looking pitiful and sad, but I think I felt both things, this kind of failed attempt to gentrify this area, but at the same time somebody who seemed to have sunk all his money and hopes into this ancient craft. I guess in a lot of those people I see the poet. (*Interview*)

Within the ironic self-deprecation is a serious acknowledgement that rapid change in the world produces an uncertainty within the poet's self-understanding and in relation to a change in the role of the poet. The opening of the poem, 'I fear for the long-term commercial viability of the new / Christian cheese shop in our neighbourhood', is irreverent but not malicious, bizarre but not exactly black. The speaker notes that Nathan, who runs the cheese shop, has 'sunk every penny of his payout from the / Criminal Injuries Compensation Board into that place', tinging the irony with pathos. Throughout the poem, religious and biblical language is woven in with contemporary references. The tone is elevated to the point of comedy; for example, when Nathan asks the speaker to look after the shop for a day, s/he replies that 'it will be an honour to wear the smart blue / smock of the cheesemonger and to

²⁰ 'Cheeses of Nazareth', *Seeing*, pp. 48-49.

²¹ A scene in the hit Australian comedy drama *Kath and Kim* plays on a mistake caused by precisely this consonance; asked by her mother to get hold of a 'little baby Jesus' statue to display at a family wedding, Kim mishears and instead presents a carefully assembled tower of Babybel cheeses.

spend time amongst / such noble foodstuffs'. Yet the pretence at seriousness is not entirely a joke. It may not be a coincidence that in the Bible, Nathanael comments on the city of Nazareth, expressing his doubt that any good can come from the place. The speaker voices his concerns about the viability of the business, asking if it would have been 'better suited to one of the more fashionable / districts', to which Nathan replies:

'No, my work is here,' he said.

'Hope must put down its anchor even in troubled waters.

Today a cheese shop, tomorrow a wine bar or

delicatessen, next week a community centre or a

playground for the little ones, until ye church be builded.'

The specialist food and drink outlets, which are typically expensive, become part of the community- (or church-) building project, exemplifying the way changes are presented as progress despite their propensity to be disenfranchising for some members of the community. The language of urban gentrification is integrated with language of the Bible, painting Nathan as a kind of missionary figure. But the lightness of tone falls away and is replaced by something darker. We learn that the shop has been graffitied, and the speaker invokes Judas as 'the hour of my betrayal draws ever nearer': 'Pretty soon I'll have to turn my back / on Nathan, slip away like the last visitor in the lamplit / oncology ward'. The light mockery in the suggestion of a more 'fashionable district' takes on real force as the impact of gentrification on individuals is implied:

[...] How did it

come to this, unemployed and lactose intolerant,

surrounded by expensive and rude-smelling dairy

products in a fleapit of a council flat during the hottest

summer on record?

Beneath the cheese-related jokes is an emotive image of a person whose impoverished situation is worsened by the arrival of an establishment that is not only culturally irrelevant, but an omen of further intrusions to come. The nostalgia and grief pervading this poem recalls tones of regretful helplessness in 'The Last Panda'.

The casual allusion to an unstable climate within the discourse of urban development invokes the contemporary moment while also making a tentative link between environmentally destructive practices and gentrification, both of which are played out in material terms in consumer capitalist societies. Thus 'Cheeses of Nazareth' explores the phenomenon of gentrification through the particularities of one 'case study'.

Significant transformations in culture are explored in a different way in 'The Sighting of the Century', in which the poet describes an experience while he was 'working as a Tattooist / -in-Residence on a reclaimed slagheap in the South / Pennines'.²² He describes the excitement he and two companions feel at an 'unusual sighting', which is experienced and narrated in the language of birdwatchers:

I knew with almost one hundred per cent
certainty that we were looking at a juvenile female
Celebrity (*Movie Star*).

Armitage satirises the modern obsession with celebrity culture, where celebrities are treated as a unique species, and while they are revered and reviled in equal measure, their influence is so pervasive that the eccentricities of celebrity lifestyle are naturalised. In this poem, the birdwatcher fans' willingness to engage with the celebrity generates interest from 'other / twitchers [...] from as far away as Manchester and / Fridaythorpe', and the cult of 'the local Celebrity Spotters / Club' is deadly serious. The poet speaks in the language of the 'twitchers' to describe the celebrity:

[...] The defining
features I would summarise as follows: a slim-bodied
celebrity with enhanced features, conspicuously plumper
than a stonechat. Its song I would describe as a repetitive
me me *me*, me me *me*, and in behaviour it displayed the
frequent 'coquettish' flicking of the rump and strutting

²² 'The Sighting of the Century', *Seeing*, pp. 67-68.

walk so closely associated with the species.

The comparison with the ‘stonechat’ and the identification of the ‘song’ and ‘flicking of the rump’ produce an image of a creature that is both woman and bird. The poet inks a tattoo on the back of one of his companions, ostensibly as a field sketch of the celebrity, but there are hints that this may be a hurriedly-conceived cover-up for adultery-related nudity. The celebrity is a cross-species hybrid, confirmed by the tattoo featuring ‘secondary feathers’ done in blue biro. For all the observations on the woman’s body and behaviour, we are given no information about her occupation: ‘celebrity’ is description enough. The lack of specifics about her career identify her as someone whose participation in celebrity culture defines her, rather than celebrity status being a by-product of success as, for example, a singer or actor. The idea that wildlife spotting can take place on a reclaimed slagheap suggests that this industrial area has been rewilded – good news for environmentalists, perhaps, yet it also speaks of a post-industrial community dealing with the fallout of a decline of industrialization and mining jobs. The poem suggests societal shift based on commercialization of ‘talent’ – where primary industry has transformed into performance as industry. Entertainment has also changed, from wildlife-watching to observing performers and celebrities. This transformation indicates a culture distancing from the organic world in favour of a disingenuous world of pretence. Elsewhere the speaker’s priorities privilege technology rather than nature:

[...] As misfortune would have it, local
landslip and subsidence have caused something of a dead-
spot for mobile phone coverage in a region otherwise lush
with signal

The play on ‘lush’ not only mechanises the aesthetics of nature, but identifies mobile phone reception as a primary form of sustenance. The culture represented in this poem is one that seems to privilege the artificial (metaphorically and literally) over the organic, and implies a serious and qualitative change to what we consider to be ‘natural’. The humour produced by the likening of the woman to the bird is dependent on the incongruity being backed by a sense that they are not, in fact, *entirely* different. ‘Bird’ is a (perhaps now somewhat dated) slang word for a young woman, and in the poem both may be, to some extent, peacocking. The disturbing

implication of adultery and murder that comes at the end of the poem keeps the narrative (which is amusing and ridiculous in places) firmly in the realm of black humour, generating a sense of moral disorder that reflects on a society where celebrity culture is so pervasive.

Reading Fredric V. Bogel, Galleymore accounts for a pattern of similarity and difference in satire, which:

does not simply attack a figure who exhibits radically different behaviour and, equally, satire does not allow the satirist to occupy a wholly innocent position. Instead, satire functions on the basis that the satirist (and the audience who joins in with the satirist's attack) must identify with the satiric object. Bogel specifies that 'satirists identify in the world something or someone that is both unattractive and curiously or dangerously like them [...] something, then, that is *not alien enough*' (p. 154)

Satire clearly depends on points of difference which nevertheless do not preclude connections. The idea that a satirist is, to some extent, an 'actant' in the situation that he or she is self-consciously presenting for ridicule or criticism is one that I will return to in relation to 'Poodles'.²³ Bogel's emphasis on '*enough*' suggests that satire may be a discourse employed when the commentator, troubled by the proximity of the subject's malpractice to his or her own ethical life, acts out a deliberate yet unconscious attempt to produce distance, to re-alienate what seems uncomfortably close. The audience, too, is implicated in this rather messy enactment of similarity and difference: it seems that satire is innately ecological. The reader of 'The Sighting of the Century', then, participates in the game of celebrity spotting and the turn from the organic environment towards technology.

The satirical eye in *Seeing Stars* takes a darker turn in 'Poodles', which critiques British and United States foreign policy in the lead-up to the 2003 Iraq War through a parody of Tony Blair staged as a poodle. The poem is set at an event where dogs have had their fur dyed and styled to produce eccentric forms, where the speaker notices a poodle that has been styled to look like a horse:

They all looked daft but the horse-dog

²³ 'Poodles', *Seeing*, p. 54.

looked daftest of all. The cute red bridle and swishing tail,
the saddle and stirrups, the groomed mane.

The horse-dog is a ridiculous sight but also a pathetic one, a creature that has been manipulated into an undignified parody of a different kind of animal. There is something disturbing about the dog, which is being subjected to a kind of abuse:

[*New Statesman*] Seeing Stars has one of those dyed and clipped dogs on the cover. Those images first made me laugh, then I was quite horrified.

[Armitage] Well that's pleasing to hear, in a way, because I wanted that to be the reaction to the poems in the book. First the absurdity, but then the recognition that there's something more sinister going on. That, to me, was the saddest of all those pictures. Even the saddle on the horse was actually the shaved fur.

The bird-woman in 'The Sighting of the Century' holds power in a way the horse-dog does not. Seemingly autonomous and self-directed, the bird-woman remains a figure of amusement. The horse-dog, however, is subjected to the whims of its owners and the rules of the circus-like show, and is a pitiable figure for it. However, the sympathy the horse-dog initially evokes becomes discomfort and fear as the creature transforms into a monster, first physically, then in body language, and then in speech:

[...] Close up, on its hind, there
were vampire bites where the clippers had steered
too close to the skin. Skin that was blotchy and
rude. I leaned over the rail and whispered,
"You're not a horse, you're a dog." It bared its
canines and growled: "Shut the fuck up, son. Forty-
five minutes and down come the dirty bombs – is
that what you want? [...]"

The 'vampire bites' are signs of abuse, and in turn the victim becomes ferocious. The poodle's reply explicitly invokes Blair and George Bush's claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons capabilities, which formed the central argument in Britain for the

invasion of Iraq. 'Poodles' first appeared in the *Guardian* with a brief explanatory note by Armitage, from which the following is taken:

I believed Tony Blair when he promised to unearth WMDs, and felt cheated by the reality. At the time, Blair was accused of being Bush's poodle, a metaphor that seemed destined to become a poem. Then, a few months ago, the *Guardian* printed photographs of poodles in various states of absurd topiary, and everything fell into place. I was thinking of Blair at Bush's ranch, playing the part, and of the horse as a symbol of the American wild west.²⁴

Blair's widely understood dishonesty with the British people, which is generally assumed to be symptomatic of his perceived subservience to Bush, is not only morally repugnant to the poet but personally disillusioning. Armitage identifies his political leader's betrayal with the overtly domineering (and, arguably, abusive) behaviour of a dog owner who re-shapes the animal into a form seemingly outside the dog's true nature, so to speak. The poet's lived experience of a failed political narrative that had devastating consequences is articulated in the dog shaved and dyed to look like a horse: a figure which articulates, *without words*, the discrepancy between appearance and reality that Blair's misinformation made manifest.

'Poodles' provides an interesting lens through which to consider irony, absurdity, black humour and the pretence or theatre of one creature masquerading as another. All four ideas overlap with each other, in that they deal with the subversion or disruption of established categories, by identifying either a disjunction or a cross-category phenomenon. Jonah Ford reveals the overlaps between monstrosity and comedy, focussing on ways in which the monster – a figure that crosses between two or more categories and will not be restricted to either – challenges social norms in political satire. Ford identifies an incongruity theory of comedy in terms of social experience: 'In general, the comedic, in its various forms, stems from some kind of incongruity, either with regard to expectations of common experience or the cultural

²⁴ Armitage, 'A new poem for Tony Blair', *The Guardian*, 21 December 2009, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2009/dec/21/simon-armitage-poem-tony-blair-poodles>> [accessed 21 December 2015].

assumptions of social situations'.²⁵ One of the amusing elements of the poem, the surprise of the poodle's speech, is accounted for in both ways: it is the dog's irreverent unpleasantness as much as its speaking at all that provokes laughter in the reader. What is funny and what is disturbing seem, then, to come from similar places. 'The assertion that those things which make us laugh and those which make us recoil are in fact more closely related than we might think', as Ford puts it, might well go some way to accounting for the prevalence and power of black humour (p. 90).

Ford also suggests that both humorous things and disgusting things affect us because of their play of similarity and difference:

Monstrosity and comedy. They seem, at first glance, to come from opposite ends of the emotional spectrum, and yet, [...] monstrosity and comedy are joined by a common origin. The field of anthropology has called it the *liminal* – the strange place “betwixt and between” the categories and schemas humans devise to make sense of the world they inhabit (pp. 89-90)

This 'strange place' on the 'emotional spectrum', which is both 'between' two categories *and* devised from the two, is also the site of metaphor, where *estrangement* takes place. Making strange and looking again happen in a poem where the image that the metaphor creates represents reality in a powerful way *at the same time* that it distances us from it. The way the metaphor can change the way we see things functions in the same way as the liminality that shows the arbitrariness of the boundaries we rely on. When a piano note is out of tune, or when someone accustomed to Western music listens to a recital on a sitar, we are reminded that the notes of the scale are simply choices (albeit musically and mathematically informed ones) made about where to divide one frequency from another – the out of tune note jars, but it also disrupts the given-ness of the scale itself. Ford writes: 'monsters and the monstrous are that which confront, conflate, and invalidate important categories of understanding. A zombie is both alive and dead – it is betwixt and between, it is undead' (p. 97). The way the zombie behaves is not analogous with either the living or the dead, just as the shroud brings the couple into a relationship that is neither

²⁵ Jonah Ford, "'I'm a monster!': The Monstrous and the Comedic', in *A State of Arrested Development: Critical Essays on the Innovative Television Comedy*, ed. by Kristin M. Barton (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), pp. 87-104 (p. 100).

alive nor dead, and just as the horse-dog has (so to speak) two feet in the ordinary and two in the absurd. Further, the horse-dog is not limited to crossing two categories, but also takes on human characteristics: the threatening behaviour of the sculpted poodle is communicated in semi-privacy: it is only when the speaker 'leaned over the rail and whispered' that the dog bares its teeth and speaks aggressively.

The *indirect* form of satire in 'Poodles' allows Armitage to explore his feeling 'cheated' in a 'highly charged political poem'. The horse-dog is subversive, a kind of monster, existing between categories, but once it opens its mouth and speaks in the voice of the politicians, they become monstrous by implication, and the horse-dog itself, moving from merely straddling the distinction between dog and horse to straddling the distinction between dog and politician, becomes even more monstrous. By this reckoning, the people who have been elected to lead for us an act on our behalf (Blair and Bush) are monsters, and are *outside* the established norms. From one perspective, this puts some distance between the poet (or reader) on the one hand, and the politicians on the other, as the poetic self is disassociated from the others: I refuse to identify with you, we might speak the same language but you do not speak on my behalf, 'not in my name'. So in some situations the challenge that the monster gives to established norms might appear to be positive and politically progressive, with the potential to overthrow prejudices (race, sexuality) which have unconsciously been produced by the necessity of creating order from an untidy experience.²⁶ But in other situations, as we find in 'Poodles', the category of the subversive or monstrous is even more alarming and repulsive than it appears to be on its vampire-bitten surface. Armitage satirises the conception of subversion as a tool of liberation (this outsider from a liminal space shows us how arbitrary our categories are anyway, such as between straight/gay, female/male, black/white, etc.), and shows how the establishment performs categorisations of its own, often through brazen lies – sometimes, it seems, the monster is within. There are two ways in which this can be taken: on the one hand, this might assert an inherent benevolence in human nature: we resist the way our political leaders have lied to us, we identify their brutality and hold ourselves apart. On the other hand, the suggestion that the

²⁶ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

monster is within refuses to allow the reader to perform that self-absolution: to some extent, we are all complicit in these atrocities. The horse-dog commands the poet to offer a mint, 'and hold it out in the flat of your hand. / Then hop on'. The speaker is both servant to the horse-dog and, assuming he does ride the animal, an unwilling yet undeniable participant in both the monstrous abuse of the animal (riding a dog as though it were a horse) and the implied acts of war.

Armitage produces an unsettling narrative that explores parallels between two different experiences. The reader is not merely an *observer*, but a *participant* (to use Silkin's idiom). We can usefully deepen our understanding of the individual's relationship to culture and community with reference to Timothy Morton's *The Ecological Thought*:

Dark ecology puts hesitation, uncertainty, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking. The form of dark ecology is that of noir film. The noir narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that she or he is implicated in it. (pp. 16-17)

Like satire, then, dark ecology refuses the reader the luxury of a feigned distance. This narrator's ideas of objectivity are shown to be a myth: as he or she pays attention and learns, the insight afforded is that being a wholly external observer is always a fallacy. No one escapes interconnectivity or responsibility. Ian Gregson writes:

the idea that things are not what they seem is everywhere in contemporary culture and is vividly represented in the figure of the spy, or undercover agent [...] this shady figure reveals the presence of hidden agendas and alternative versions of the truth.²⁷

The suggestion of 'alternative versions' of reality will resonate with the reader in the time of President Trump: when his team peddle the idea of 'alternative facts', as if with sincerity, it seems that life might indeed imitate art. But it is also important to note the emphasis Gregson puts on, first, the 'figure', who is representative of a much wider cultural condition, and, second, the narrative that is implied by that figure's being an actant in a multi-layered reality. The spy performs a masquerade,

²⁷ Gregson, *Postmodern Literature* (London: Arnold, 2004), pp. 20-21.

in the hiding of his or her true allegiances and motives, but the job of a spy also implies that there is a secret or pretence to be uncovered in the community. The undercover agent's selfhood is not only defined by his or her interactions with seemingly external bodies (as are so many of the selves in *Seeing Stars*), but it is also ironic that the success of the spy (contributing evidence to detective work) causes the role's own destruction (one cannot be a spy if there is nothing to investigate). The relation-making in Gregson's appropriate metaphor offers proof that the postmodern self is under threat from the very same networks that brought it into being. This idea will surface again in the following section, in relation to 'The Cuckoo'.

4.4 Performing Matter: Theatre, Substance and Space

Armitage gives definition to a contemporary moment that is highly uncertain. Doubt about the future of the environment affects us in our physical, emotional, political and social lives. Growing uncertainty about the physical environments we inhabit necessarily produces a whole range of intricately connected shifts and transformations. Two poems in this collection in particular, both of which deal with the dissolution of romantic and domestic partnerships, play with the sense that as our attention becomes more focussed on matter, the nature of materiality becomes, inversely, less certain. In 'The Personal Touch', the protagonist's partner asks for 'some / space, Paul, and plenty of it', as a gift to celebrate the couple's first anniversary.²⁸ Paul interprets her request literally and, deadpan, goes to a hardware store, where he is shown 'the entire range: hexagonal space, deep ocean space, space / that glowed in the dark, vacuum-packed space', and so on, until the very idea of 'space' becomes fragmented and seemingly beyond our grasp. This condition of heightened awareness coupled with a compromised form of certainty is coherent with the postmodern narrative we are exploring, in which knowledge might just as easily lead to confusion as to enlightenment. The experience of being more aware than ever of the material world just as it seems to be slipping away characterises Paul's experience of relationship break-down, and it will likely be ringing (alarm) bells for the environmentally-conscious reader. The reader is unsettled by Paul's dropping off the gift-wrapped 'space' and then 'zoom[ing] off in the Roadster, /

²⁸ 'The Personal Touch', *Seeing*, p. 55.

faster than I'd ever travelled in my whole existence'. The car was a gift from Paul to his partner, and while the reader is left with the impression of Paul as an unsavoury character, we have been shown so little about the couple's relationship that the reader's sympathies are not engaged. 'An Accommodation' plays with ideas about substance and matter in a similar way, but in this case a pervasive sense of grief produces a powerful emotional charge for the reader.²⁹ The poem describes the break-up of a couple which is played out in extremely literal terms. The speaker's partner recreates their shared home as a room of two halves, neither fully joined nor fully divided:

---- and I both agreed that something had to change,
but I was still stunned and not a little hurt when I
staggered home one evening to find she'd draped a
net curtain slap bang down the middle of our home.
She said, 'I'm over here and you're over there, and
from now on that's how it's going to be.'

The couple are still closely related despite their separation (a form of similarity and difference that mirrors satire). The poet goes on to list 'one or two practical problems' this new set-up creates, 'Like the fridge was on my side and the oven was on / hers'. The literalness with which the idea of the couple splitting up is taken, much like the 'space' in 'The Personal Touch', defamiliarizes the language that we use without thinking. In both cases there is an amusing absurdity to the situation being treated with so little appreciation of metaphor. Yet a dark pathos creeps in to 'An Accommodation', the speaker saying that the men she brings home are 'not fit to kiss the heel of / her shoe', as he 'mooch[es] about like a ghost'. The speaker's acknowledgement that he 'staggered home one evening' and the later reference to his 'bottles and / cans' suggest a transient loss of control through intoxication: a state of being that both is, and is not, everyday individual experience. The 'sacred veil' strung up between the couple is disturbing in its resolute articulation of a space between life and death. This is a metaphor for the heartbreak of a couple unable to

²⁹ 'An Accommodation', *Seeing*, pp. 4-5.

leave each other but equally unable to make things work. The air – or space – between them solidifies into the net curtain, which itself becomes compromised:

Over the years the moths moved in, got a taste for
the net, so it came to resemble a giant web, like a
thing made of actual holes strung together by fine,
nervous threads.

As time goes on, the ‘holes’ take primacy over the veil, themselves becoming what is substantial. The ‘nervous threads’ of the couple’s communication are materialised. The poem ends:

nervous threads. But there it remained, and remains
to this day, this tattered shroud, this ravaged lace
suspended between our lives, keeping us
inseparable and betrothed.

The ‘tattered shroud’ becomes a marker of a liminal space which is neither life nor death. The separation of the couple is merely a reformulation of their connectedness, and in this way the poem expresses a displaced grief, an ending that is undeniable but difficult to absorb. The narrative is told in material terms, but the irreversibility is also cognitive and emotional. Both the speaker and his partner are effectively displaced from their own selves, each becoming a shadow or ghost, merely performing selfhood rather than embodying it. The extent to which we are all performers is one of Armitage’s preoccupations in *Seeing Stars*: where is the line between genuine behaviour and contrived pretence, or between appearance and reality? I now want to draw attention to a poem that explores these ideas in a very different way.

John Morreall describes an ‘existentialist theme that became a theory of humor’.³⁰ This idea, taken from Henri Bergson, ‘is the categorical difference between a person and a thing [...] what we laugh at is mechanical inelasticity where we expect to find the living flexibility of a human being’. It is this ‘mechanical

³⁰ Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 130.

elasticity' that provides the basis for 'The Cuckoo', which offers a (presumably fictional) 'portrait of the artist as a young man' creation story for the film director James Cameron.³¹ While the narrative surprise in 'To the Bridge', for example, is produced by the reader's being brought from ignorance into knowledge, the ontological shift the reader experiences in 'The Cuckoo' depends on a change in the protagonist's perception, in which the reader shares. At the end of his eighteenth birthday party, a somewhat childish affair involving 'colourful / hats and [...] cubes of Battenberg cake wrapped in / paper napkins', his mother sits down with him and, under the 'smell of snuffed candles and discharged party poppers', sets off her own firework: 'James, I'm not your mother [...] I work for the government and my contract / comes to an end today'. The devastating disclosure that his entire family, best friend and girlfriend are all actors is revealed amidst similes, metaphors and specific details that, in the spotlight that the contrast with James's mother's earth-shattering revelation throws upon them, appear minute and absurd: 'James felt like a gold tooth sent flying through the air in a fist fight'; 'Anyway, take care. I've been / offered a small part in a play at the Palace Theatre in / Watford and there's a read through tomorrow morning'. The gulf between James's devastation and the casual attitudes of the actors is absurd, and humorous despite the tragedy of the story. 'The Cuckoo' develops a logic of personality formation: the suggestion is that James's discovery of the fiction of his own life is what has led him to direct films such as *Titanic* and *Avatar*. Yet although Armitage constructs James's world as a multi-dimensional, multi-layered space, there is no apparent reason for the deception. If James has been a cuckoo, brought up in the nest of actors and pretenders, his cuckoo 'parents' are long gone (as we would expect from cuckoos in the wild). Yet if this is a creation story, the godhead is notably absent, and James is devastated by the experience of his life being systematically dismantled, with apparently no one to blame. Rather than a malicious god or absent parental figures, there is a theatre of pretence and performance, and the reader is subjected to what Sontag calls 'the theatricalization of experience' (p. 287). Some moments are darkly humorous, such as James's desperate attempt to elicit some emotion from his girlfriend:

[...] Carla was wearing sunglasses and passing a

³¹ 'The Cuckoo', *Seeing*, pp. 6-7.

piece of chewing gum from one side of her mouth to the other. [...]

[...] James said, 'Didn't it mean anything, Carla? Not even that time behind the taxi rank after the Microdisney concert?' 'Dunno,' she shrugged. 'I'd have to check the file.'

James's most powerful memory from his time with Carla sounds absurdly casual to the reader, and her unconcerned response undermines his genuine emotional reaction even further. The theatrical sequence of revelations enacts a power struggle, which James loses and so becomes a passive audience to his own story. In the context of the poem's logic, his maturing into a film director might represent a taking back of the power he has lost. Yet he actually builds further layers of unreality onto the one he has emerged from. The poem might pretend to consequences and reason, but the logic it produces takes us not closer to but further from a concrete relationship between reality and representation.

Artificiality and theatre are central to Sontag's account of Camp:

Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (p. 280)

The idea of the self as an independent, fully-realised entity is one that is all but defeated by ecological science and accounts of materiality such as Jane Bennett's. Sontag's account of 'Being' as a performance is not a contradiction to an open, interactive identity politics, but in fact supports the insights of neuroscience which suggest that our brains have evolved to think of ourselves as properly individual as a method of simplifying the vastly complex electrical, biological and elemental signals and exchanges that are continually asserting and (re)defining the porous edges of the self. Such a 'theatricalization of experience' as James and the reader experience in 'The Cuckoo' may be one articulation of the human brain's instinct for ordering as a means of processing. 'One is drawn to Camp when one realises that "sincerity" is not enough. Sincerity can be simple philistinism, intellectual narrowness', Sontag writes (p. 288). So Camp is interested in articulating the nature

of experience, but it is an account of living that includes multiple perspectives, experiences and truths that may go against the grain of the artist's beliefs, or may contradict each other. Camp may thus be seen as a radically progressive aesthetic and mode of thought which speaks to the contradictory, messy, performative worlds we inhabit.

The irony in this poem recalls Gregson's comments on the 'undercover agent' as a key trope in postmodern creativity. James's learning what he is (that is, a participant in this theatre or game) has a direct result of ending that game – once he knows about the pretence, it all falls apart, and he can no longer be a son or boyfriend. The people with and through whom James learned about the world end up being the ones who destroy the world they have created together – a metaphor, perhaps, for global environmental degradation. Towards the end of the poem, when James's rejection and misery are complete, he is semi-seriously contemplating suicide when a cuckoo appears for the first time:

[...] Then a bird fell out of the
sky and landed just a yard or so from his feet. A cuckoo.
It flapped a few times and died. However tormented or
shabby you're feeling, however low your spirits, thought
James, there's always someone worse off. His mother had
taught him that. It was then he noticed the tiny electric
motor inside the bird's belly, and the wires under its wings,
and the broken spring sticking out of its mouth.

The irony of James's continuing to recall his mother's teachings after her betrayal is a heart-breaking moment: his world might be a fiction, but it is still the only one he has. The absurdity of the disjunction between the world he believed he inhabited and the world he is revealed to inhabit is both funny and disturbing. It is not only the human beings who are not what they seemed, but James's material environments more widely: the bird is not an organic creature but a constructed falsity, capable of crumbling down, seemingly out of nowhere and for no apparent reason. But the 'mechanical elasticity' extends past the world and curves back in, reaching James's very self: we see James's world quite literally crashing down around him as he

struggles to take on the new knowledge, but the cuckoo as a metaphor for James's disjunction with his nest allows us to see James's faltering sense of self too. As he begins to doubt the social, emotional and material communities in which he has been living, he no longer feels secure about himself. Gregson describes the postmodern self as being 'enmeshed' and 'entangled', in ways that foreshadow Bennett and other new materialist theorists. James experiences a heightened awareness of his own materiality (and thus vulnerability). The self is not isolated or autonomous, but is formed in and out of an ecology of ideas, personalities, materials and forces. Society and language construct identity, and when these fail, a crisis of identity seems inevitable. With no meaningful social relationships, and a shock profound enough to destabilise the self's material security, our powers of communication are made meaningless and motionless, like a 'broken spring'.

Galleymore applies Morton's theory of 'dark ecology', which insists on the acknowledgement of the dangerous, the dirty, the noxious, unpleasant and threatening in any (artistic, theoretical or practical) conversation about ourselves, our relationships, our dwelling-places and our environments, to an 'environmental comic mode [which] reflects Morton's desired 'choke or shudder in the reader' [...] Instead of 'relief' or a full discharge of pent-up energy, the laugh gets caught in our throats' (p. 155). In Freud's account of humour, the pleasure associated with laughing is due to the temporary relaxation of the conscious mind's control over the unconscious, but in Galleymore's comic mode, no such relief is available, and it is this kind of complex, not-altogether-satisfying humour that characterises many of the poems in *Seeing Stars*. While there may be moments that make the reader laugh aloud, there are probably more moments that are partly humorous, in which the implied danger or strangeness just tips the balance away from the ideal joke. This is simultaneously engaging and repulsive for the reader, and this ability of the poet to unsettle the audience is revealed in the next poem under discussion.

'Last Words' approaches romantic love through absurd humour which plays with ideas about identity, performance and materiality.³² The poem offers a dark take on love and relationships, the protagonist scuppered in her chances of marriage. If other poems in *Seeing Stars* explore the choices we make, 'Last Words' approaches the unpredictability of life from the opposite perspective: while we are

³² 'Last Words', *Seeing*, pp. 20-21.

defined by all the minute decisions we make day in and day out, we are also shaped by chance and randomness:

C was bitten on her ring finger by a teensy orange spider
hiding inside a washed-and-ready-to-eat packet of sliced
courgettes imported from Kenya.

The level of detail in the description of the courgettes in such a context highlights this practice of food distribution and consumption as absurd, and strangely unreal, and makes the appearance of the spider seem even more unlucky. C's finger quickly swells up, and her attempts to phone family members for help are unsuccessful. Her mother answers the phone, but she comes across crotchety and confused, seemingly in a hospital or care home, obsessing about the 'pastry brush', 'silver candlesticks' and other domestic objects she claims C has stolen from her. The mother creates the impression that C is drowning in material possessions, while her obsessive rant suggests she is disorientated and possibly unwell. Eventually, C types 'a long, random number into the keypad', and is connected to a man named Dean:

[...] The man said, 'I'm dying too. I've been adrift
in an inflated inner tube in the Indian Ocean for six days
now, and the end is near. I think a shark took my leg but I
daren't look.'

The tone of the conversation is serious: they ask each other why the other is not calling for help, about their relationship histories, and then, with absurd ease, they agree that they 'could have made it together'. The humour in this poem is very black, and the horror of Dean's situation, the shock for the reader, is also what makes it funny. Eagleton notes that 'Comedy is the will's mocking, malicious revenge on the representation, the strike of the Schopenhauerian id against the Hegelian super-ego; but this source of hilarity is also, curiously, the root of our utter hopelessness'.³³ What makes C so lonely is also what makes her so open to connection with Dean; despite all our efforts to keep control, the loss of it can

³³ Terry Eagleton, 'Bakhtin, Schopenhauer, Kundera', in *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, ed. by Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 229-40 (pp. 231-32).

produce pleasure as well as fear. C and Dean's conversation ends with an absurd exchange about vegetables:

[...] 'Do you think we could have made it together?' 'I think so,' she whispered. 'I don't like courgettes,' Dean joked, and those were his last words. 'I would have done broccoli instead,' she breathed, 'or even cauliflower. Whatever you asked for I would have made.'

What lies underneath this is C's readiness to mould herself into whatever she thinks Dean would like: her identity is not secure. The poem then ends with the following: 'There was a horrible pause as we sat there wondering / whether or not to applaud, then the curtains closed.' As in 'The Cuckoo', here there is a sense of being at some remove from reality, but in 'Last Words' the 'theatricalization of experience' pushes reality yet another stage from the reader (or audience). Gregson writes that the 'historical experience of the postmodern constantly imposes the knowledge that we are surrounded by representations rather than the truth': the self performs in a kind of ecology of deception (*Postmodern Literature*, p. 20). Gregson continues that 'this makes acts of deconstruction a constant and inevitable mental habit', hence the speaker's uncertainty about how to respond to the theatre at the end, which builds another layer of truth and reality (p. 20). The absurd depends on there being two connected yet contrasting ideas, as do irony and satire. The audience is implicated in the strange and unsettling story: a play needs an audience. Sometimes that audience is not only a participant but a real driver of the narrative and a real contributor to an undermining of sincerity.

In 'Collaborators', a man whose 'bald / head was as pink as a pig' enters a hairdresser and, with apparent sincerity, asks for his fringe and ponytail to be trimmed.³⁴ The hairdresser overcomes his initial bemusement and, 'warming to the task', plays out the customer's demands in an absurd charade. Collaborators together in the theatre of pretence, the poem is a comedy in absurdity but also goodwill. The hairdresser physically acts out the haircut with grand gestures:

[...] With his

³⁴ 'Collaborators', *Seeing*, pp. 36-37.

biggest, shiniest scissors, Bastian ceremonially lopped off the non-existent twist of hair from behind the man's head then held it up for inspection between his finger and thumb.

The highly performative manner borders on elements of Camp, but it is not only a physical performance. The hairdresser encourages the customer, offering a 'complete shave', and there is a touch of pathos about the man's happy acquiescence:

[...] The man, who was fifty if he was a day, said, 'Even with men as young as me?' 'It seems to be the fashionable choice, sir,' said Bastian. 'Do it,' said the man.

Bastian is fully complicit in the deceit, and the customer, after declaring the 'haircut' a 'revelation', 'paid Bastian with pretend money and set off / down the street whistling a happy song'. The customer's delusion sustains and intensifies, egged on by the barber. The barber himself does not share in the delusion, yet he plays with the very idea of reality in a way even more disturbing than that of the customer. While the reader might find the customer's level of delusion poignant or unnerving, suggesting as it does either mental illness or hard drug use, what Bastian is doing is more deeply disturbing because, consciously and with apparently little concern, he throws out the idea of truth, as though the reality of physical substance is merely something incidental, to be played with, and up for question. In 'The Personal Touch' and 'An Accommodation', Armitage reverses the substantial and the insubstantial, making matter and not-matter stand in for each other and, therefore, stand in the same space. This questioning of the solidity of substance is pertinent, and despite the irony it seems to function within a kind of logic. Bastian, however, seems entirely unconcerned about whether he is performing a real haircut or a charade, and if his playing along with the customer begins with an uncertainty about how to deal with the strange request and a wish not to offend, as the 'haircut' progresses, the barber seems to relish the game of it. It is not only that truth and fiction are confused in Bastian's account, but that he does not seem to care what either of them looks like, or which prevails. This lack of critique of his experience is

far more disturbing than the customer's genuine mistake, whatever might have caused that, because Bastian's attitude removes the gap between truth and fiction, bringing them onto an equal level. We have considered elsewhere how the creative act of drawing connections between disparate objects and ideas is, crucially, not meant to homogenise or to remove the differences between the two sides, but, rather, to articulate a sense of the similarities in the context of those differences. The poem finishes with Bastian's discovery of several dismembered facial parts:

By the time he came to lock the door and put the
CLOSED sign in the window later that evening,
Bastian had forgotten the hairless customer. But after
sweeping the linoleum and shaking the curls and
locks of a day's work into the dustbin in the
alleyway, he was dumbfounded to notice a long,
golden ponytail tied neatly with twine, then to find
nails and thorns, and also what looked like teeth,
and the suggestion of a small black moustache.

While the 'nails and thorns' are Christ-like, the 'small black moustache' is, perhaps, Hitler-esque. The twist in these final lines suggests that not only might Bastian's version of events be delusional, but that he might have had other customers throughout the day, whom he might have shaved or even pulled teeth from. If Bastian is suffering from delusions, however, that does not necessarily relieve the customer we encountered of also having a tentative relationship with the truth. The reader finishes the poem with a sense that each strange experience is as likely as the other to hold veracity – or be lacking it.

One of the ways Armitage employs tropes of absurdity in *Seeing Stars* is as a direct challenge to ontological conviction. The strange occurrences take place within a context of the ordinary, destabilising the reader's understanding of the everyday: if this unremarkable set of circumstances can produce such an unlikely narrative, the reader's capacity for assessing situations and predicting possible outcomes is shown to be seriously lacking. The changes evident in the trajectory from Silkin to Armitage might be seen as a movement from existentialism to postmodernism. In

my discussion of Silkin's 'flower' poems I explored Nicholas Humphrey's argument that animals 'seek out experiences through which they may learn to classify the objects in the world about them', and that this knowledge gives them evolutionary advantage. The disruption to the relationship between appearance and reality that Armitage sets in motion may have a different, though comparable, effect on the reader: as we learn, we learn just how much there is that we do not know. A further point to take from Gregson here is the way a postmodern poetics, which I identify in *Seeing Stars*, articulates a fierce challenge to the notion of 'personal authenticity', creating rather than 'heroes' a diverse range of characters who are, by nature and action, fractured and various. Silkin's poetic selves are by turns anxious and tortured but rarely without courage and a conviction about the integrity of the experience of the self. Armitage's voices, however, are multiple and too slippery to fully define or locate. 'Poem' (*Kid*, 1992), for example, lists a series of kind, cruel and mundane everyday behaviours:

And when it snowed and snow covered the drive

he took a spade and tossed it to one side.

And always tucked his daughter up at night

and slipped her the one time she lied.³⁵

The list of activities performed by the unnamed subject precedes the offhand conclusion: 'Here's how they rated him when they looked back: / sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that' (p. 29). The poem challenges the idea of a fixed or stable identity, instead offering an account of a self in process: character that is not pre-determined, but is always in creation and perpetually under revision, moment by moment, action by action. Yet 'Poem' is as much about how the father is perceived as it is about the man himself: the faceless 'they' decline to pass moral judgement, a non-act that pertains less to mercy than to apathy. For all Silkin's tortured, conflicting voices, he remains throughout his poetic life staunchly committed to ethics and to a conviction of human beings' obligations to their social groups and environments. In Armitage's poetics, however, a cool distance between poetic voice and responsibility mimics, on some levels, the disjunction between appearance and reality that characterises many postmodern accounts and theories of irony. Further,

³⁵ Armitage, 'Poem', *Kid*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 29.

Silkin agonises over the nature and qualities of the material world, and his own relationship to it, but he is never in doubt that there is an objective reality, a material presence to be explored, whereas Armitage's voice, particularly in *Seeing Stars*, encounters a physical environment that is much less certain. A comparison might be made with Silkin's spiritual poetics, in which both the idea of godliness and the idea of the religious subject change between and within poems, and in which deities and cognition of religious experience are by turns fractured, incomplete or difficult to define. If in Silkin's poetry, uncertainty relating to religion and spirituality effects not a turn from but a pivot towards subjects of scripture, cultural history and communication with the divine, we might identify in Armitage's poetry a similar preoccupation with materiality. For Armitage, this is only intensified by the ontological fear and doubt produced in the postmodern moment, by the environmental crisis, global terrorism and cyber- and AI-technologies (to name just a few contributing factors). If Silkin has a concrete engagement with the material world (which is not, of course, static), but is fretful about the spiritual realm – which is articulated in terms of personal experience though may be rolled out to represent a wider turn from Judaeo-Christian religiosity in mid- and late-twentieth century culture – then in Armitage, too, we see this difficult uncertainty manifest itself the material world.

4.5 Material Things: Proliferation, Expansion and Growth

We have gained a sense of the instability of the physical, social and emotional environments of Armitage's contemporary moment, and I now want to continue this exploration with a focus on the treatment of material objects (and their environments) in this poetry. First, I want to look at two poems that articulate a capitalist excess, where the influence of material things grows until it is overwhelming. 'An Obituary' is arguably one of the most emotionally affecting poems in *Seeing Stars*.³⁶ The poem barely crosses into humour; the energy produced by absurdity and surprise is not released in uneasy laughter but contained within the poem. The poem addresses a deeply personal situation, but it is in the context of a more general depiction of an oppressive and dangerous proliferation of material goods. The poem implies that Edward has shot and killed his mother, an act that

³⁶ 'An Obituary', *Seeing*, pp. 30-31.

seems to have been triggered by a form of psychosis, paranoia or schizophrenia, a serious mental illness which in turn is connected with Edward's profoundly disturbing experience with the material world. The poem opens with Edward 'Stealing from his mother's house', bringing into the same space both familial betrayal and a failure of capitalism (presumably Edward is either greedy or has been failed by the system). Edward finds a handwritten note, which reads as an obituary for him, probably written by his mother. The note describes a progressive separation and alienation from the natural world, as Edward tried, with increasing desperation, to satisfy himself by acquiring possessions:

'As a child, Edward liked to climb trees in the
plantation and make dams in the stream at the foot
of the garden, and once carved a toy rifle out of a
table leg. But right from the very beginning there
was a craving emptiness in Edward's life. Board
games and soft toys, space-hoppers and bikes – the
more it was given the deeper and wider it grew.

The pastoral tone to his gentle and considerate interaction with the landscape while productive work goes on around him is displaced by a voracious appetite for a fragmented influx of objects, the lust for which Edward is unable to satisfy. The reversal of what is substantial and what is insubstantial recalls 'The Personal Touch' and 'An Accommodation', and here as elsewhere the irony draws attention to the fabric of language and the production of material-based metaphors. Tim Edensor writes: 'The dynamic tendencies of consumer capitalism are particularly geared to the production of surplus and in order for the new to be accommodated, the old must be chucked out, erased or made invisible'.³⁷ High levels of waste are not only an unavoidable result of this phase of capitalism, but are actually a necessary part of it: acquiring more things is only possible if there is a way of discarding the old ones, and a 'rigorously regulated' material world serves capitalism. The addiction to material things relates to a developing paranoia. From one perspective, these

³⁷ Tim Edensor, 'Waste Matter – the Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World', *Journal of Material Culture*, 10 (2005), 311–32 (p. 315).

paranoid feelings are framed as a failure of imagination and a loss of the ability to determine the difference between appearance and reality. The note continues to account for Edward's life:

more it was given the deeper and wider it grew. All
sweetness was rancid on Edward's tongue and all
teachers and doctors were assassins and spies. All
handshakes were tentacles, all compliments were
veiled threats, all statements and assessments were
worthless confessions obtained under torture, all
care plans were Byzantine conspiracies of evil intent.

The mention of the 'care plans' indicates the extent of Edward's vulnerability, made more explicit by 'him scream[ing] his agonies into [his mother's] face'. This is a pertinent reminder of the dangers of *looking afresh*: it can lead us to a corrupted or painful perspective or experience just as it can open us up in a positive way. The artifice, and the sense of being at one remove from 'real' events, that pervades other poems in *Seeing Stars* is present in 'An Obituary': the information we are given about Edward's life comes to us second-hand and is authored by someone we have not met. The note is revelatory, yet it suggests to us just how much we do not know. After reading the note, Edward opens the wardrobe and removes '*the greatcoat*' (my emphasis). Clearly this is an item that holds significance for him, and indeed it seems ready to physically overwhelm him: the greatcoat 'slumped towards / him then engulfed him as he hauled it from the rail'. The 'huge, overburdening' coat is threatening, a monster, with 'its triceratops collar, and its mineshaft / pockets, and the drunken punches of its flailing / sleeves' – a Heaney-esque moment of objects taking frightening shape in 'intra-action' with a nervous mind.³⁸ The coat then morphs into a further shape, which represents two layers of the poem's organised reality. The reader is shocked to learn that someone has been shot in this coat:

[...] Through the neat bullet hole in the back,

³⁸ I am thinking particularly of 'The Barn', in *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 7.

daylight looked distant and punched, like the world
through a dusty telescope held back-to-front to the
eye.

This corrupted, 'back-to-front' perspective on the world articulates, in a different but related way, the nature of Edward's paranoid responses. He is able to identify the manner of the speech or gesture but reverses its meaning: a compliment becomes a threat, handshakes become tentacles. The turned-upside-down, blinkered, telescopic view also parallels with the reader's insight. The handwritten note in the poem gives the reader an account of Edward's life that is seriously limited, but at the same time communicates with powerful effect a sense of the confusion, isolation and pain that have pervaded his life. The final image of the poem is tragic in its depiction of a vulnerable person mourning loss and waste:

[...] And there Edward wept, crouched in the
foxhole, huddled in a ball under the greatcoat,
draped in the flag.

While it is not explicitly stated, the conclusion to the story seems to be a violent, unwell son regretting his act of matricide and regretting his aloneness. In these final moments, he is pressed down by material things, the narrative suggesting that capitalism's rapacious demand for material possessions has triggered in Edward paranoia and mental breakdown – in parallel with the suicide in 'To the Bridge', which, in narrative form at least, takes place as a response to an overwhelming variety of music groups. 'To the Bridge' and 'An Obituary' are two of only a few poems in *Seeing Stars* that are much more tragic than comic in mode. In each case, the central character develops a feeling of profound social displacement, also evident in 'Cheeses of Nazareth', which seems to be insurmountable. In 'To the Bridge', the entertainment industry seems to be to blame, while the waste of life in 'An Obituary' is closely tied to objects which are likely to end up in landfill as waste themselves.

The over-proliferation of material things and the sense of claustrophobia this can bring is explored with a more humorously ironic and less tragic tone in 'The Delegates', a darkly humorous poem in which the speaker and an associate skip the afternoon session at the 'annual Conference of Advanced Criminal Psychology' and

go ‘into town to go nicking stuff’. The irony of experts on criminal psychology indulging themselves in illegal behaviour is underwritten by the pettiness of their crimes. The two characters go from one high street chain store to another, pocketing inexpensive items, seemingly just for the thrill:

[...] In Waterstone’s he slipped an unauthorised
biography of disgraced South African cricket captain Hansie
Cronje inside his raincoat and I sneaked out with an Original
Magnetic Poetry Kit.

The act of writing poetry is, once again, emphasised, defamiliarized, and even made slightly ridiculous. The humour of the specificity of the objects and the shops (they also visit John Lewis, Poundstretcher, Specsavers and Oxfam) is concurrent with a humour developed from the incongruity of these very ordinary places becoming sites of drama. Yet despite the humour, the landscape of capitalist consumerism, experienced as an infinite collection of objects, is claustrophobic. The reader is made painfully aware of how many man-made *things* there are, and also how niche many of them are: it seems impossible that some of them, such ‘a signed 2005 official / McFly calendar’, are not destined for landfill. After this shoplifting spree, the speaker and his friend run to the park, and:

[...] from the high iron bridge
we slung the lot over the ornate railings into the filthy river
below until every last item of merchandise had either sunk
without trace or was drifting away downstream. ‘Remind
me, Stephen, why we do this,’ said Dr Amsterdam. I said,
‘I really don’t recall.’

The absurdity of the calm discussion, after the frenzied stealing and running to the disposal site, is amusing, yet is underpinned by a horror not only at the needless polluting they have just enacted. This might be a comment on a society which, similarly, consumes and wastes huge quantities of material goods every day, with a similar kind of relentless mindlessness, which is not identical but certainly relates to Edward’s addictive behaviour in ‘An Obituary’. The duo agree to make this trip their last and bid each other goodbye, with Dr Amsterdam ‘Peeling a brown calfskin

glove from / the cold, moulded fingers of his prosthetic hand’ and offering it to his friend to shake. This image demonstrates the layers of truth and pretence that appear in so many poems in this collection: the crack in reality, mechanism where one expected a living body and the sense of things both being and not being what they appear to be. The final image of the poem is one of incongruity:

[...] A mute swan pecked
idly at a Paisley-patterned chiffon scarf before it picked up
speed and slithered over the weir.

At first, the incongruity is funny – what can a swan gain from a patterned scarf? – but this does not last long. The scarf is given something of the ability to behave like an animal, and the sense that the littered item is taking on a new life in its new context is alarming as the reader realises that this act of mindless littering has altered the biosphere. What impact the scarf might now have on the river ecosystem is unknown, and the laugh ‘gets caught in our throats’. The reader is left with the unmistakable feeling that, despite the extreme control over matter that the proliferation of retail outlets and goods for sale exemplifies, human influence over the physical world is not absolute. The way the scarf behaves now it is in the water is largely beyond human management, as it takes on new life in a new environment. While the negative impact of discarded waste is clearly a concern for Armitage, he also finds ways of celebrating the vibrant potential for re-use and (quite literally in the next poem under discussion) re-cycling.

The potential of the object to exceed its taxonomic limitations is explored in ‘The Tyre’ (*CloudCuckooLand*, 1997). A group of children find an old tractor tyre on the moors, cut it out from the undergrowth that has started to claim it and, together, ‘bullied it over the moor, drove it, / pushed from the back or turned it from the side’.³⁹ The tyre seems to contain the potential for other kinds of life: when they find it, the tyre is living, organic,

sloughed, unconscious, warm to the touch,
its gashed, rhinoceros, sea-lion skin
nursing a gallon of rain in its gut.

³⁹ ‘The Tyre’, *CloudCuckooLand*, pp. 4-5. I refer the reader to the text for quotations.

Like the paisley scarf that ‘slithered’ away in ‘The Delegates’, the tyre has an agency that seems to exceed the properties imparted to it by human identification (or objectification). I noted that the child-like protagonist in ‘An Obituary’ experiences a powerful encounter with objects that recalls Heaney, and the excitement, danger and sense of discovery motivates the speaker of ‘The Tyre’ in a similar way. Once the group are rolling the tyre, its materiality shifts and there is a feeling that they are ‘unspooling a thread’. The tyre becomes a connective device through which the group becomes closely bound together: ‘There and then we were one connected thing, / five of us, all hands steering a tall ship’. The tyre is also working to integrate the group with the landscape. They roll the tyre, ‘felt the shock / when it met with stones’, and through the jolts and lurches the group ‘reads’ the landscape, and at the same time read their own bodies, with each individual’s places of resistance and give brought to conscious awareness, while also contributing to the feeling of a single body. The tyre behaves as a fluid material that allows a particular kind of communication between body and landscape with a unique affect. The tyre picks up speed and energy, changing from an object like a ship that can be managed and controlled into something autonomous that outstrips human control:

So we let the thing go,
leaning into the bends and corners,
balanced and centred, riding the camber,
carried away with its own momentum.

Bennett shows us the fallacy of thinking that objects (like chemical waste, old furniture, discarded pottery or tractor tyres) are without agency, and Armitage’s depiction of a supposedly inert object outliving and outstretching the value and categorisation imposed on it seems to demonstrate sensitivity to the vibrancy of material things.

After letting the tyre go, the children are panicked by the damage the high-speed, heavy object could cause when it reaches the roads and houses in the village below. Yet this is not a cautionary tale of disaster produced by misbehaving children, and the group are surprised to discover that:

down in the village the tyre was gone,
and not just gone but unseen and unheard of,
not curled like a cat in the graveyard, not

cornered in the playground like a reptile,
or found and kept like a giant fossil.
Not there or anywhere. No trace. Thin air.

The tyre has outlived categorisation, including the animalistic metaphors imposed on it by the speaker. The fantasy and make-believe that young people use to develop the imagination, and learn about what might and might not be possible, become a mode of knowledge in the concluding lines of the poem:

Being more in tune with the feel of things
than science and facts, we knew that the tyre
had travelled too fast for its size and mass,
and broken through some barrier of speed,
outrun the act of being driven, steered,
and at that moment gone beyond itself
towards some other sphere, and disappeared.

The sense of being able to think beyond what is logical or rational is expressed as a touching fantasy, though the seriousness with which the speaker engages with affect – ‘the feel of things’ – resonates with this reader’s understanding of the potential of creative, intuitive and non-explicit modes of knowledge to impact on belief systems. Even though the tyre has ‘disappeared’, it has left powerful resonances in the minds of the poet and his friends: the power of negation here emphasises the fact that when we discard things, the fact that they disappear from one space does not mean that they do not still exist in some form.

The ontological fragmentation that the tyre’s disappearance brings about does speak, on one level, to the sense of postmodern insecurity invoked earlier in this chapter. Yet at the same time, the willingness of the speaker to create a shared narrative asks the reader to think again about what they do and do not know about material laws. Hawkins reads Bennett, who:

argues that the experience of enchantment is often linked to material metamorphoses, and that crossings and admixtures reveal the possibilities of radical shifts in meaning and matter. More important is the capacity of material metamorphoses to reveal the instability of ontology. Enchantment, for Bennett, is much more than a spectatorial delight; it is a moment of potential ethical transformation. “My wager is that if you engage certain

crossings under propitious conditions, you might find that their dynamism revivifies your wonder at life, their morphings inform your reflections upon freedom, their charm energizes your social conscience and their flexibility stretches your moral sense of the possible.”⁴⁰

The mind is influenced by matter, the multiple possibilities of which are revealed in the perceiving consciousness. The state of mind is one that is, like the speaker of ‘The Tyre’, ‘in tune with the feel of things’, where the suggestion of transcendental experience is not located in an immaterial spiritual realm, but in the material present. In their different ways, both Armitage and Bennett seem to say: instead of always looking away to discover something new or something wonderful, look again at what is here, be sensitive to the possibilities of the ordinary. What Bennett describes is an imaginative engagement with materiality, where the feedback loops between them produce the conditions for ‘ethical transformation’. The idea that our ethical convictions are bound up with the experiences we have on a physical level is put forward by Hawkins in a convincing critique of *habits* as *habitat*-forming:

The arts of existence also involve habits. Habits locate us not simply in a social context but in a habitat, a specific place of dwelling or position. Our interactions with that place – what we make of it, what it makes of us – generate a mode of being or ethos that structures social behaviour, often below the threshold of conscious decision making. Rosalyn Diprose reminds us that the Greek word *ethos*, defined as character *and* dwelling, gives dwelling a double meaning as both noun and verb, place and practice. And from this notion of dwelling as both habitat and habitual way of life the idea of ethics was derived. (*The Ethics of Waste*, p. 25)

Hawkins proposes an understanding of human life as the product of both creative capacities and a structured social world. Ethics are produced by an individual’s material experiences, often in unseen ways. Experiencing matter in motion or metamorphosis, whether in art, physical reality or language, organises and reorganises the self, the ‘social conscience’ and the ‘moral sense of the possible’.

⁴⁰ Gay Hawkins, *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 90.

4.6 Monstrous Pastorals in Mind and Matter

The poems under discussion in the following section draw on conventions of the pastoral, such as retreat into so-called wilderness and filial or romantic bonding. However, I define these as disturbed pastorals in part because the irreversibility of the narratives refuses the idea of looking back (to a golden age or to anything else). ‘Michael’ is an absurd poem that explores themes of masculinity, familial relationships and growing up that are seen throughout *Seeing Stars* in a related way to the ‘logic’ of character formation in ‘The Cuckoo’, ‘Michael’ identifies direct causal links between a child’s early choices in life and character in adulthood.⁴¹ The poem opens in conversational tone:

So George has this theory: the first thing we ever steal,
when we’re young, is a symbol of what we become later
in life, when we grow up. Example: when he was nine
George stole a Mont Blanc fountain pen from a fancy
gift shop in a hotel lobby – now he’s an award-winning
novelist.

The poem opens with a statement delivered with straightforward conviction, and the poem’s absurdism is produced by the way the matter-of-fact logic in the poem’s dialogue jars with the unlikeliness of the ‘theory’. Irreverence or antipathy lies in the casual acceptance of childhood shoplifting, the quietly satirical suggestion that a privileged upbringing (not all hotels have a ‘fancy gift shop’) leads to critical (and financial) success in adulthood; Kirsty the investment banker ‘who stole money from her mother’s purse’; and Claude, who ‘says he / never stole anything in his life, and he’s an actor / i.e. unemployed’. Kirsty privileges money over morality while Claude privileges the idea of self as artist over a conventional life, and they and each of the other characters in the poem become ridiculous when pigeonholed by the poet in this way, an effect that is compounded by comparisons with the others.

The poem is asking the reader to think in analogy and metaphor – to identify connections, comparisons and logical progressions, i.e. meaning. Perhaps the

⁴¹ ‘Michael’, *Seeing*, pp. 10-11.

success of the novelist who stole the expensive fountain pen should make us criticise the integrity of literary awards, as compared with the struggling, innocent actor. But before we laugh too easily at the stereotype of the committed yet perpetually out-of-work thespian, we notice that Claude ‘*says* he / never stole anything in his life’ (my emphasis): perhaps his theatrical training allows him to create a strand of personal history that he wishes to present at this moment, i.e. perhaps he lies. So the poem slips away from the logical clarity that it works so carefully to feign, evading the identification of meaning that all creation stories make, both cultural and personal. This kind of story- or history-making is one kind of making of dwelling, or *oikos*, as the stories that tell *how* we got to where we are today also tell us *where* we are today. ‘Michael’ seems to explore the desire to locate instances of cause and effect, inscribing meaning in individual human lives (as well as ethical consequence or accountability) as directly related to language-based narrative.

Narratives about the self gain unexpected power in ‘Michael’, a poem that plays on the pastoral to produce darkness, not in the landscape but in the relationship between father and son. The narrator appears to change subject at the opening of the second (and final) stanza:

Every third Saturday in the month I collect my son from
his mother’s house and we take off, sometimes to the
dog track, sometimes into the great outdoors. Last week
we headed into the Eastern Fells to spend a night together under
the stars and to get some quality time together, father
and son.

The landscape itself is beautiful and bountiful, and initially there seems to be potential for filial bonding. ‘Michael’ is a rewriting of Wordsworth’s ‘Michael: A Pastoral Poem’ and the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, but a rewriting that refuses recourse to sentiments about the moral good that comes from going back to the ‘great outdoors’. In Wordsworth’s ‘Michael’, the son, Luke, leaves his rural home for the city, where, in true pastoral tradition, he is lost to his family. In Armitage’s poem, the direction is reversed, yet Luke seems very much at home in the countryside (to the surprise of his father) and it is here that he reveals a disturbing kind of morality. There seems to be an irrepressible resurgence of the

wild which takes place in the boy during his movement into the space of the 'great outdoors', which first manifests itself in Luke as a hunter, able to catch a fish, 'With nothing more than a worm, a bent nail and / a thread of cotton'. Michael becomes an observer, secondary to Luke's competency:

I was all for tossing it back in the lake, but Luke surprised
me by slapping it dead on a flat stone, slitting its belly
and washing out its guts in the stream. Then he cooked it
over a fire of brushwood and dead leaves

Luke is not only the hunter, but is also able to care for himself in a domestic sense, with a self-sufficiency of mind that might, in retrospect, seem to anticipate the extreme manifestation of self-sufficiency suggested by his admission at the end of the poem. Morton writes that: 'Rugged, bleak, masculine Nature defines itself through extreme contrasts. It's outdoorsy, not "shut in." It's extraverted, not introverted' (*The Ecological Thought*, p. 81). The journey into the wilderness or the great outdoors is, in Morton's account, a masculine trope. The pastoral retreat from the countryside that Wordsworth's Luke enacts is reversed here, and Armitage's Luke's masculine presence expands throughout the poem until he occupies it fully, to the exclusion of all other voices and arguments: 'You know, if they'd done wrong. Now go to sleep, dad.' The ease with which Luke inhabits the role of executioner sets him up, in his own mind at least, as godhead, passing biblical judgement on others, and the final injunction to his father is commanding. Morton writes of the television character Supertramp's journey into the outdoors:

This is no journey into the wild but into the mind. Men (mostly men) like Supertramp think that they're escaping civilization and its discontents, but in fact they occupy the place of its death instincts. Their fantasy is of a world of absolute control and order: "I can make it on my own" is what American boys are taught to think. The "return to Nature" desperately acts out the myth of the self-made man, editing out love, warmth, vulnerability, and ambiguity. (*The Ecological Thought*, pp. 83-84)

Those qualities are exactly what Luke's self-assurance overpower and ultimately push out, leaving him with an uncompromising belief in his own ability and integrity. Rather than communication and exchange with his father, Luke acts out a

narrative of a self-sufficient entity on his own terms, and his belief in the self's autonomy becomes dangerously warped. Cohen's ethics of narrative shows up the potential that stories have to teach us about the world, in ways that may be useful to ourselves and/or others. Here, Luke's *projected* narrative – not about where he has come from but about where he is going (though one is not real without the other) – produces a *dark* ethics, which is dark not because it is amoral, but because, although it functions within the same ethical framework as Michael and his friends, it produces something terrible. There is a sense of nostalgia which is shockingly supplanted by Luke's disturbing comments, and the sense that the father does not know his son well. The pastoral is disturbed because of Luke: the landscape is perfect but the conversation is incongruous with it.

The division between father and son in 'Michael' is produced not by geography, speech or even articulated thoughts, but by the poem's involvement of the reader in witnessing absurdity, which is unsettling. The reader's appreciation of the absurdity of the situation produces and is produced by a slightly different set of expectations from the father's, but the poem's success is that the blank page that follows the final lines is all that is needed for the reader to share in the disturbed experience of the father. The key point of absurdity in the poem comes late in the evening, after father and son have eaten and 'bedded down in an old deer shelter', a reference to James Turrell's permanent installation at the YSP, *The Deer Shelter Skyspace* (2007). Built within an 18th century deer shelter, Turrell created a space that allows seated visitors to watch the sky through an open quadrant in the roof. Framing a small area of sky demands the audience *look again*, yet to the exclusion of the wider perspective. This installation plays with conceived notions of appearance and reality, and of environment and *techne*, which might inform our reading of Armitage's poem:

[...] There was a hole in the roof. Lying there on
our backs, it was as if we were looking into the inky blue
eyeball of the galaxy itself, and the darker it got, the more
the eyeball appeared to be staring back. Remembering
George's theory, I said to Luke, 'So what do you think
you'll be, when you grow up?' He was barely awake,

but from somewhere in his sinking thoughts and with a
drowsy voice he said, 'I'm going to be an executioner.'

This moment can be read as a critique of absurdist existentialism, which plays out as follows. Camus writes about the profound absurdity of the silence of the universe in the face of human suffering and desire: it is not the indifference of material existence, nor the emotional lives of animals, that are absurd, but the *combination* of the two and the vast distances between them. Michael is looking up at the sky, lying down in a peaceful place. The gentle exploration of the wilderness that he and his son have experienced this afternoon has built a dwelling-place for their emotional bond. The hut they choose to sleep in has a hole in the roof, through which they can watch the stars: the suggestion is that the day's activities have brought Michael into a state of building, dwelling and thinking, one that that gives access to a material and spiritual world beyond the self. Presumably the quietness and remoteness of his situation bring him into a semi-meditative state, where his imagination projects an image of himself onto the vastness of deep space: the eye is looking back at him. The connection that he feels translates into a sense of the divine, purpose or meaning in the universe, and into a sense of self-importance and control over the self: stealing the pen makes me a writer; the causal link makes me an actant in my own narrative. It is at this point that the humorous satire of the first stanza returns, with a much uglier face: a startling assertion that brings him back down to the ground, making a mockery of the implied familial bond, and almost seeming to tease or punish Michael for daring to identify meaning in his relationship with the universe. As in Camus's description of the absurd state of man, in 'Michael' it is *when consciousness and the world come together* that absurdity is produced, not in either one on its own. The father's hearing overcomes his sight, a change of sensation which is projected again onto the sky, and the calmness of the boy who knows how to fillet a wild fish is transformed into something terrible:

But I'm sure I could do it. Pull the hood over someone's
head, squeeze the syringe, flick the switch, whatever.

You know, if they'd done wrong. Now go to sleep, dad.

The implied threat to the father is compounded by the poem's finishing with these words. Reading the final lines of the poem alongside Wordsworth might suggest, as in 'A slumber did my spirit seal', a connection between sleep and death. As the

reader scans back through the poem in search of the pivotal moment that might produce this logical conclusion, s/he is reminded that even if one is able to find such a narrative in the poem (is the poet suggesting that eating fish is murder?), the whole premise of the 'logic' to the poem (the game played at the dinner party) is itself an absurd, satirical joke.

David Farrier argues that comedy has the potential to displace the pastoral mode and usher in in its place something more appropriate for our current situation, more alive to problems, dangers, dirt, pollution and all the messy and transgressive aspects of contemporary material life. In this way, we may 'find in toxicity a more appropriate metaphor for an age of chronic ecological uncertainty'.⁴² Comedy's capacity to identify dichotomies, paradoxes and problems is highlighted as holding the potential to make direct impact on the discourses it engages with. Facing what is difficult or even unachievable is the key to a better-functioning environmental ethics, and comedy is a mode which, with its inherent emphasis on surprise, irony and unsettling the status quo, is likely to be successful in articulating this dark turn. While the types of comedy Farrier is exploring are not identical to Armitage's dark humour in *Seeing Stars*, nevertheless the comparisons between the various comic, ironic, contemporary modes of expression are prevalent. The reader might recall turns to 'nostalgia' in 'Michael' and 'The Last Panda', which both couch the pastoral retreat into the wilderness (in the first case) and the pastoral melancholic longing (in the second) in the context of, in the first case, an unexpected and disturbing revelation, and in the second, an absurd meditation from the indistinguishable voices of a panda and a rock star. In both of these poems, the contrasting themes disrupt the pastoral tones and, refusing a simple journey or elegy in the pastoral tradition, present the reader with a commentary on contemporary nature-culture intra-actions that is significantly more thorny and difficult to grasp. Yet while a young boy's interest in becoming an executioner is a dark blot on the lyrical representation of a father-son bonding experience, and the absurdity of integrating melancholic discussion about species extinction with an imagined monologue from one of the Beatles pollutes the serious ecological implications of hyper-development, Farrier is also referring specifically to 'toxicity' of the material

⁴² David Farrier, 'Toxic Pastoral: Comic Failure and Ironic Nostalgia in Contemporary British Environmental Theatre', *Journal of Ecocriticism*, 6.2 (2014), 1-15 (p. 13).

kind: dirt, chemical waste, plastic bottles in landfill and all other manifestations of matter that do not fit with either our desire for a pure, unspoiled nature, or for a clean, civilised social and domestic sphere. Farrier defines 'toxic pastoral' as follows:

versions of pastoral in which former pastoral certainties are degraded, permitting an engagement with and celebration of the ambivalence in human interactions with the more-than-human world. Toxic pastoral foregrounds the 'impure' and symbiotic rather than the 'pure', separated (albeit mutually-reinforcing) civic and rural spaces of conventional pastoral. Like Buell's "toxic discourse", toxic pastoral insists upon the interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values, and expounds a more "biotically imbricated" and "elastic" version of pastoral. (p. 4)

Such 'former pastoral certainties' might refer to the psychologically beneficial effects of working or relaxing in the countryside, the relationship between a physical journey and cognitive developments and a belief in the harmonious relationship between man and nature when one is not divorced from it artificially (for example in a city). Farrier rightly acknowledges that the cleanliness of this view of the material world is erroneous, a too-easy version of a messy reality where human/nature, nature/culture, good matter/waste matter are divisions made to the detriment of a nuanced understanding of the world. The productivity of the toxic pastoral coheres with our understanding of the vitality of matter, and the vitality of ecosystems, places and bodies. 'Michael' does not exactly fit the toxic pastoral frame, but the disruption to the pastoral idyll constitutes a conceptual and emotional impurity in the context of a pastoral retreat. The landscape itself, however, remains unchanged by the conversation. To see how Armitage develops the idea of a toxic pastoral in terms of the material, I am going to look at 'Beyond Huddersfield'.

Both 'Michael' and 'Beyond Huddersfield' are disrupted pastorals, in which a naïve and overly romanticised experience of 'wilderness' transforms into a disturbing experience, though in very different ways. Like the irony of the seemingly generous nature in 'Michael', 'Beyond Huddersfield' satirises ideas about a pure, untouched wild nature that is somehow separated from other spaces. The poem hints at hypocrisies in the attitudes of people who will treat one place with reverential consideration while wilfully contributing to another site's becoming

toxic. The opening of the poem has hallmarks of a naïve pastoral, told as a 'back to nature' style getaway:

We drove a couple of hundred miles north. To sip beer in
a log cabin. To taste the air from the mountains and feel
the DNA of our ancestors tingle in our marrow. We
hooked compliant fish from the lake, grilled them over a
log fire and ate with our hands as the sun melted into the
west.

On the one hand, this is a highly sensitive, compassionate way of behaving, idealistic, harmonious (if idealistic) vision of a profound coming-together, the fish giving itself up to be eaten not with utensils but the hands, embodying the ecological knowledge of it not ending with death but being materially re-cycled. On the other hand, the irony of the fish being 'compliant' in its death, and the primitive experience of feeling DNA 'tingle in our marrow' generate a power dynamic. The speaker and companion experience this place as one that is geared towards them, ready to deliver whatever they want. It is a description that is beautiful but also ironic in that what is lovely about the landscape is told in terms of how that made the experience good for the people.

The speaker and companion leave 'the place just as we'd found it' and make a 'fingertip search of the meadow for the tiniest slivers of / silver foil and suchlike': the environmentalist's exhortation to 'leave no trace' is taken seriously. The protagonists move from consumption to consciousness of waste, and they go to the 'roadside / recycling site to offload the rubbish':

[...] The woman on the
gate with the gun and the clipboard waved us over and said,
'Plastics in one, cans in two, cardboard and paper in three,
and there's a bear in four, so mind how you go.'

The way the different materials are to be sorted into neat sections is merely an extension of the cognitive function that allows the speaker to partition the land into areas worth respecting and those not worth respecting. The irony of moving rubbish

from one area to another, destroying one place in order to preserve another, is apparent. The logic of this only works because, as far as the speaker is concerned, the two places are not connected. The poem brings to light the fallacy of the idea that throwing something away really sends it away: while it might be put out of our conscious or immediate sphere, the nature of ecology means that it still remains our material world, even if it is repurposed, recycled or burnt as trash. The terrible trick of our cultures of waste is that we are able, so far and for the most part, to manage waste in a way that *seems* to wipe it off the face of the earth, as Edensor describes: ‘Rubbish is piled into containers, conveyed to increasingly guarded reprocessing sites, cremated, used as landfill and apparently thereby erased’ (p. 315). Of course this is a fallacy, but it affords us an interesting insight into related fallacies of ‘pure’ nature as undisturbed wilderness. Waste practices allow people to avoid facing the consequences of their consumption, and as such are firmly bound up with capitalism. Dividing rubbish means it loses its material vibrancy and creates a homogenous, un-ecological affect which removes community responsibility and perpetuates the feeling that things can be put out of sight and out of mind.

Heather Sullivan identifies a strong link between rituals of hygiene and cleanliness and rabid capitalist over-consumption of material things:

Modernity's many anti-dirt campaigns include efforts made to remove or conceal bodily filth, waste, and the sweaty labor of agricultural processes. [... However,] the efforts to conceal “dirt” in its many forms have encouraged urban residents to believe that dirty nature is something far away and disconnected from themselves and their bodies. This concealment functions alongside the over-production of “things” that can simply be thrown away, never to be seen again, as if waste and dirt blissfully disappeared from the earth in a wink of the eye.⁴³

Once again we see how discourses around waste – what is no longer wanted – can serve to reinforce an artificial distance between the self and the world, and produce the destructive belief that both the human body and the material and organic world more generally have a kind of pure, pre-Lapsarian state that is desirable. Sullivan’s insight that alongside the benefits of cleanliness with regards to reducing disease has

⁴³ Heather I. Sullivan, ‘Dirt Theory and Material Ecocriticism’, *International Studies in Literature and Environment*, 19 (2012), 515-31 (p. 526).

come a wilful ignorance about individual consumption coheres with Edensor's demand that we look again at the 'congealed life' in the ordinary objects and everyday materials. Morton describes wilful ignorance of the ways waste is recycled and reused:

In the United States, many people now drink recycled wastewater. Some people simply don't want to know that their water is recycled excrement. It is public policy to tune out this fact. Yet recycled water is less unclean than "naturally" filtered water. We lose not only our undisturbed dreams of civilized cleanliness through this process but also our sense of Nature as pristine and nonartificial. (*The Ecological Thought*, p. 9)

Rather than tuning into the benefits of this type of water management, the 'public policy' is a collective amnesia. Understanding the ways our own waste is not flushed down the toilet into a vacuum, but merely passed into a different space in the same material reality, might go a long way to helping people consider their complicity as participants in a complex physical mesh. Instead, we are left with an ironic image of a 'pristine and nonartificial' material universe in which we are only partially implicated. It is important for us to face the reality of the toxic chemicals and plastics polluting both land and sea, and normalising the presence of waste materials and trash piles in culture is certainly one way of doing this: as Hawkins remarks, it might be waste, rather than nature or the environment, that triggers action and makes us change our ways (*The Ethics of Waste*, p. 11). Raising awareness is the first step on the road to less destructive practices, and bringing waste into the light, so to speak, will demand a huge shift in the ways people think about their material encounters.

In relation to 'Poodles', I explored the figure of the horse-dog as a kind of cross-category 'monster' that disrupts the status quo and demands a new kind of discourse. In 'Beyond Huddersfield', a bear performs a similar challenge to the order. The speaker and companion discard their rubbish, and then:

in the last skip, a black bear was squatting in a pile
of junk. He was a sizeable creature and no mistake, could
have creamed my head clean off with one swipe of those
claws had the notion occurred. But he just sat there, on his

throne of trash, doing nothing, staring his five mile stare.

The landscape described, with mountains and log cabins, seems to be the kind of environment (probably North America) in which bears could be a native species. But the bear has crossed from the space where we would expect to encounter it, and intruded on what is ostensibly the urban. The bear's crossing from one category to another disrupts the neat organisation of space and place. The disruption this causes takes place on two levels. The first is the idea that the wild rears its head even in places where people leave their rubbish. The second is the possibility that the bear's lack of presence in the first part of the poem, in the wilderness, was simply another way in which the natural elements conspired to give the speaker a pleasant and non-threatening experience. Rather than encounter the bear in the mountains, where the speaker might end up being a not-so-compliant dinner, the bear is displaced, and the human beings can relax in a managed, safe and anthropocentric mountain campsite. Even in the rubbish tip, the bear is large and powerful but seems to have had the capacities for behaving like a predator completely removed from him, both physically and cognitively. For the bear this is tragic, but for the humans who want to travel into the wilderness, the threat has been neutralised and they can enjoy the air, light and views without having to worry about the risks. That this is an unrealistic and no doubt reduced version of the landscape does not seem to be of concern.

The incongruity of the bear is disturbing to the reader, an effect that is magnified in the remaining part of the poem. After returning home, the speaker finds himself thinking of the bear over the next few days, and in an indulgence of imagination (which is analogous with the falsity of the idea of pure nature) the speaker 'couldn't suppress the / escalation of inglorious imagery', and imagines the bear in increasingly absurd anthropomorphised images:

[...] First he was begging with
a paper cup. The next time I thought about him he was
wearing a nylon housecoat. Then a pair of Ugg boots, and
the tortilla wrap between his paws was a soiled nappy.

The trash pile is a kind of indiscriminate mass of materials, but once we look closer, individual objects appear which are disruptive to the speaker's and reader's

narratives about the bear. These images of the bear wearing or holding various items of clothing, bits of food or junk such as the nappy or the 'whitewall tyre' turn the creature into a kind of horrible joke, helplessly overwhelmed by synthetic objects, clutching 'a paper cup' or 'flipping burgers with a floral lampshade on / his head'. The objects that have been thrown away increasingly bear pressure on the bear, which the speaker relishes: 'either for his sake or mine, nothing could stop me / jumping in the car after work and racing north to the tip'.

We recall the hybrid creatures in Chapter 3, Armitage's bird/plastic bag, and Silkin's bird of paradise flower which is formed of 'rivets' and other machine-like characteristics, which bring the creature beyond the organic world while simultaneously reasserting its place within it. The bear in 'Beyond Huddersfield' is a cross-category, cross-species 'monster' that recalls the many other hybrid creatures in *Seeing Stars*: the horse-dog in 'Poodles', the bird-woman in 'The Sighting of the Century', the panda-rock star in 'The Last Panda', and the sperm whale-man in 'The Christening'. Morton's dark ecology asserts the importance of embracing identities that challenge norms or assumed categories: 'When we think the ecological thought, we encounter all kinds of beings that are not strictly "natural"' (*The Ecological Thought*, p. 8). Morton suggests that these encounters take place partly in the imagination: that approaching the world from a perspective of interconnectivity allows the mind to conceive of new bodies that are both natural and machine, which brings bionic creatures and those that perform multiple identities at once into the day-to-day. There is no attempt on Morton's part to smooth over the disturbing elements of this all-pervading grotesqueness. Elements of Morton's argument are echoed by Szerszynski:

an ironic ecology does not entail the withdrawal from engagement and creative experimentation with nature [...] [but] would instead be more likely to value and proliferate 'impure' and vernacular mixings of nature and culture, new shared meanings and practices, new ways of dwelling with non-humans, new 'naturecultures' (Haraway, 2003). Its defining legacy would be neither the nuclear power station, nor the nature reserve, but a living, evolving plurality of shared forms of life. ('The Post-ecologist Condition', p. 351)

This vision of an ecology that engages with a multiplicity of modes of understanding about nature and society embraces a complex and sometimes messy worldview in which man is neither master of nor caretaker of any forms of life, but part of a network. In this way it recalls Morton's ecological thought, which puts emphasis on keeping the dirty, the dark and the difficult in view. Morton writes:

A more honest ecological art would linger in the shadowy world of irony and difference. [...] The ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror. Democracy is well served by irony, because irony insists that there are other points of view that we must acknowledge. (p. 17)

It is a 'shadowy world' like Morton's that much of *Seeing Stars* finds itself in: things not appearing as they seem, characters with strange moral frameworks or disconcerting convictions, death, betrayal, violence, cruelty and very black humour. This collection approaches the politics of human existence, both with specific invocation of current affairs ('Poodles') and in terms of domestic relationships ('An Accommodation'). Morton describes the ways that acknowledgement and incorporation of multiple perspectives do not hinder but, in fact, advance political progress. He also suggests that irony is inherent in all human experience, and that with darkness, negativity and horror, it should not be hidden or suppressed, but acknowledged and even embraced as vital facets of being.

4.7 Conclusion

In their profoundly different forms of creativity, Silkin and Armitage may each be identified as a poet writing in intra-action with catastrophe. In Chapter 2, I have explored some of Silkin's responses to global atrocity, and the ways anxiety about potential atrocity informed his poetry. Although he often lacks Silkin's earnestness, on the surface at least, Armitage is also a poet of commitment. Increasingly in his recent collections, Armitage's response to potential apocalypse is articulated in the poetry in a different, but related, way to Silkin's. This discussion of *Seeing Stars* has identified a poetic response to a contemporary moment that is characterised by deep uncertainty and by a heightened awareness of the physical world. Suddenly, the ordinary stuff of everyday life seems to be in jeopardy – not only places and things but habits and language – and so it has never seemed so important or so strange. Armitage's ability to stand back and critique what has become generally accepted,

while also demonstrating a courage in the face of danger and darkness, produces poetry that can challenge the status quo.

The dark vision, biting satire and ontological uncertainty in *Seeing Stars* contrasts with the Stanza Stones project, which demonstrates a celebration of community, cultural history and even spirituality. I might add that, despite or perhaps because of the encounters with the dark, the messy and the tragic in *Seeing Stars*, the poet's commitment to and care for his environment is no less apparent than in the celebratory mode of *In Memory of Water* and the Stanza Stones. In their own ways, both projects are 'site-specific' poetry, deeply concerned with specially chosen places in Yorkshire. Armitage produces very different manifestations of place-bound creativity – thematically and stylistically tightly-focussed poems celebrating the physical, social and cultural history, presence and potential of water on the one hand, and on the other hand, surprising narrative poems, steeped in the contemporary moment, which revel in bringing together seemingly unrelated figures, themes and ideas. Such a manner of bringing very different things together produces accounts of culture and individual experience that are quite original, and it also produces a range of hybrid 'monsters'.

In this way, *Seeing Stars* offers the reader a complementary reading of the flower/bird in Silkin's 'South Africa's Bird of Paradise Flower' and Armitage's 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch', which were discussed in Chapter 3. Whereas those two poems, however, each focus on one individual (flower in the former, plastic bag in the latter), the cross-category figures in *Seeing Stars* are often not the primary focus of the poem, and even when they are the main 'character', description of their form is not the primary mode of creativity. For example, the speaker in 'The Last Panda' is significant for its voice and the cultural and environmental phenomena it refers to, not the way it looks. The *Seeing Stars* 'monsters' tend to be actants in a complex, multi-layered drama – for example, the anthropomorphised bear in 'Beyond Huddersfield', which does take on physical human traits but remains in a liminal, in-between space. 'Bird of Paradise Flower' and 'RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch' do not *produce* similarities or shared behaviours, but rather seek to interrogate shared visual and formal characteristics that *are already there*. In those two poems, then, differing yet complementary approaches to visual metaphor explore organic and non-organic similarity and difference.

What the poet's sensitivity to environment produces in *Seeing Stars* is a humour that is irreverent yet nuanced, subtle and strategically deployed to target conventions and developments in environments (social and physical) that are, in the poet's view, worthy of satire. The reader is subjected to an experience of a world that at times is strikingly familiar despite the absurd narrative twists. Cultural change occurs too fast for some people to keep up, and seemingly without logic, central organisation or intention: the poems surprise the reader just as the events surprise the protagonists, whether a long-time urban resident disenfranchised by gentrification or a father unable to reach his son. Culture, society and the material world are no longer dependable, and in Armitage's world of *Seeing Stars*, emotional relationships suffer and communities splinter as, desperately trying to stay afloat in an uncertain world, individuals turn inwards.

Conclusion

In *Through the Weather Glass (& What Icarus Found There)*, a semi-autobiographical account of Lucy Burnett's attempts to engage with a world under threat, she writes:

there is something very queer about laughing
during climate change

the joke gets stuck in it
and won't come out no matter how you try¹

Burnett's approach to climate change comedy coheres with the frustrated nature of the black humour in *Seeing Stars*, where 'the laugh gets caught in our throats' (we recall Isabel Galleymore).² The poet's anxiety about laughing not *at* climate change but 'during' it suggests a perception of serious instability. As the poem ranges beyond the specific scientific realities of dramatic global temperature changes to affect lived experience more generally, it creates a productive dialogue with the environmental, social, political and experiential uncertainties pervasive in *Seeing Stars*. Burnett, like Simon Armitage, understands that the threat of climate change compels a discourse that accounts for the creaturely, the human, the organic, and all the complex 'intra-actions' between them. Her use of 'queer' adheres to the meaning of 'strange', but the poem also suggests an engagement with the political potential of queer ecology as theorised by Timothy Morton, which itself provides a useful basis for scrutinising what has been learnt in this study, and how this critical appraisal of Armitage and Jon Silkin might be developed in new directions. Morton writes: 'Life is not Natural [...] life is catastrophic, monstrous, nonholistic, and dislocated, not organic, coherent, or authoritative. Queering ecological criticism will involve engaging with these qualities'.³ Silkin's attempts to account for atrocity and evil in a

¹ Lucy Burnett, *Through the Weather Glass (& What Icarus Found There)* (Newton-le-Willows: The Knives Forks and Spoons Press, 2015), p. 177.

² Galleymore, 'A dark ecology of comedy', p. 155.

³ Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA*, 125 (2010), 273-82 (p. 275).

world that also admits flowers, romantic love and the divine provide the critic with one such avenue; the suffering of various characters in *Seeing Stars* might provide another. Morton's account of queer ecology includes a rigorous counter-argument to homophobia that reaches beyond the limits of the human: 'queerness, in its variegated forms, is installed in biological substance as such and is not simply a blip in cultural history' (pp. 273-274). In this thesis I have explored the challenges that Silkin's and Armitage's poetics each present to essentialist definitions of selfhood, species and materiality.

Morton turns to Darwin to demonstrate the rationale for, and potential of, queer ecology:

evolution theory is antiessentialist in that it abolishes rigid boundaries between and within species [...] Life-forms are liquid: positing them as separate is like putting a stick in a river and saying, "This is river stage *x*" (Quine). Queer ecology requires a vocabulary envisioning this liquid life. I propose that life-forms constitute a *mesh*, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the non-living, between organism and environment ('Guest Column', pp. 275-276)

There are several important points that we can take from this account. In *Seeing Stars* we have explored a different (but related) account of the porous, 'liquid' nature of beings by identifying various individuals who are approached not as autonomous, self-contained beings but as 'liquid', 'open-ended' products of 'interrelations' 'between organism and environment' that are always vulnerable to change from forces over which they have little control. We remember the woman in 'Last Words' whose life is taken by a poisonous spider: there is no hard border either between the self and other beings, or between the body and supposedly external 'actants'. The Stanza Stones, as discussed in Chapter 3, 'envision this liquid life' in a different way, asking the audience to engage with stone-poems that embody the 'concatenation of interrelations' between liquid water and solid stone, and between materiality and language. In quite different ways, both projects demonstrate a poetic consciousness that, physically and imaginatively, inhabits the 'mesh'. The Stanza Stones also pose a challenge to conceived divisions 'between the living and the non-living', as the mutable agency of stone and water (and, one might

add, language) defy expectations of supposedly inert non-life. Without homogenisation, the stone-poems ‘confound boundaries’ between different media, seemingly in parallel with Morton’s interest in ‘the lessons of evolutionary biology – that the boundary between life and nonlife is thick and full of paradoxical entities’ (p. 276).

My discussion of material metaphors in relation to Armitage’s ‘RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch, 29-30 January, 2005’ and Silkin’s ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ identifies challenges to essentialist categorisation of species. In the first case, this forms another example of metaphor’s capacity to address difficult ontological questions regarding the (rightfully problematised) distinction between life and non-life. In the latter example, the poet demands that the reader ‘abolishes rigid boundaries between and within species’ by using visual resemblance and, no less importantly, the acknowledgement of this in language used to name the flower, to explore the imaginative potential of a hybrid creature. This challenge to fixed species categories is articulated by Armitage with reference to the various hybrid creatures in *Seeing Stars*. In both cases, crucially, difference is maintained within the crossings-over and the identification of similarities. They avoid homogenisation in characteristically different ways: in ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’, the flower explores its relationship with a bird but remains ‘rooted’, while in *Seeing Stars* the dog-politician, celebrity-bird and panda-musician each behave as cohesive creatures – yet the absurdity maintains a space within them. Silkin’s creaturely interactions in the ‘flower’ poems privilege encounter rather than (what I have defined as) the material metaphors in ‘South Africa’s Bird of Paradise Flower’ and *Seeing Stars*. Nonetheless, the ‘flower’ poems demonstrate a parallel intra-action, also characterised by variation within difference, which also challenges rigid species boundaries. Flower and human being appear to be quite different from each other until the poet looks more closely, at which point characteristics or situations that have seemed overtly plant-like or overtly human-like are revealed to be more collective than previously thought.

This brings me to the last insight of queer ecology (as theorised by Morton) that is under discussion here, which is arguably the most radical of all from this perspective since it asks the reader to challenge traditional boundaries in all three of Morton’s areas – ‘between species, between the living and the non-living, between organism and environment’. This is particularly relevant to Silkin’s encounters with

the divine, which, as we have seen, are made manifest in his poetry in a variety of ways. My readings of Silkin's spiritual ecologies demonstrate that he approaches God with a similar 'antiessentialist' understanding of species to that in the 'flower' poems. Silkin encounters his God in poetry in ways that parallel his interactions with earthly creatures. The various forms that God takes constitute a divine species: divine creatures that on one hand are multiple facets of a singular deity, and on the other hand at least *appear* as a number of different beings. Similarity and difference define the relationship of one manifestation of the divine with another. The reader recalls the God of 'Snow Flies (the Yuki Mushi)' who 'rolls a smoke', a casual human activity that 'blurs and confounds boundaries' between human beings and deities – between earthly species and divine species. In 'To Come Out Singing', God is found in the material world not as a being but as a pervasive force, 'a wind travelling from feast to feast', challenging the demarcations of such conceived categories as material and transcendental, self and divine, imagination and materiality. These challenges to essentialism are made by Silkin's addresses to a multiplicity of God-forms and by his variously located experiences of the divine (including, of course, the occasions when God appears to be beyond his reach). Crucially, this only comes into full relief for the reader when Silkin's spiritual poetics is read in dialogue with the more overtly creaturely poetry. Then the reader is able to see that the careful challenges to hard species boundaries between flowers and human beings parallel the hazy borders between the self and the divine, or, often, the self, the material world and the divine. The poet's spiritual experience is achieved most profoundly as he intra-acts with the more-than-human world, as the last stanza of 'Shaping a Republic' suggests, though such moments of communication with God are always transient. In Silkin's poetic ecology, then, the more-than-human unproblematically includes the more-than-earthly, the more-than-organic. Familiar definitions of 'nature' as the organic realm beyond the human are very far from Silkin's understanding of the material world. In his poetry, the divine appears to occupy the challenged boundaries between categories that define the monsters in *Seeing Stars* – in Silkin's expression, God is both living and non-living, material and immaterial, conscious and non-conscious. In this way, Silkin's God occupies what (we recall) Jonah Ford describes as 'the *liminal* – the strange place

“betwixt and between” the categories and schemas humans devise’.⁴ Silkin’s God appears variously as quasi-human, as an expression of connectivity between beings, and as a distant, unreachable inhabitant of a different realm entirely, and in this way has more in common with the hybrid creatures in Armitage’s poetry than we might first expect. We recall, again, Ford: ‘monsters and the monstrous are that which confront, conflate, and invalidate important categories of understanding. A zombie is both alive and dead – it is betwixt and between, it is undead’ (p. 97).

Identifying the strangeness of the divine, which is part of the strangeness of all things, may (especially in a context of anthropogenic climate change) stimulate a new ethics of responsibility. Morton writes:

Nature looks natural because it keeps going, and going, and going, like the undead [...] Acknowledging the zombielike quality of interconnected lifeforms will aid the transition from an ideological fixation on Nature to a fully queer ecology. I call this transitional mode “dark ecology” [...] Instead of perpetuating metaphors of depth and authenticity (as in deep ecology), we might aim for something profound yet ironic, neither nihilistic nor solipsistic, but aware like a character in a noir movie of her or his entanglement in and with life-forms. (‘Guest Column’, p. 279)

The dark ecologies of *Seeing Stars*, in dialogue with the liminal divine species in Silkin’s poetics, might allow the reader to make this ‘transition’ to ‘a fully queer ecology’. The fact that Silkin’s relationship with God is sometimes defined by unknowability is no challenge to this idea. ‘To us other life-forms are strangers whose strangeness is irreducible’, writes Morton (p. 277). Silkin’s direct acknowledgement that other beings (both flowers and God) must always remain partly elusive, and the anxieties inherent in Armitage’s confrontation of a world undergoing radical change (revealed in the positive elemental transformation of the Stanza Stones and the fractured social lives in *Seeing Stars*), offer rich accounts of ‘something profound yet ironic’, that is indeed ‘neither nihilistic nor solipsistic’. For all Armitage’s irreverence and Silkin’s sometimes barely-restrained anger, each poet demonstrates a sincerity of voice in their attempts to grapple with the various manifestations of the more-than-human world.

⁴ Ford, “‘I’m a monster!’”, p. 90.

Morton contrasts the idea of ‘community’ with ‘collectivity’. While the first is ‘a holistic concept’ with a philosophy such as, ‘For the sake of the whole, parts might be left to die – the whole is bigger than their sum, after all’, ‘collectivity [...] results from consciously choosing coexistence’ (p. 277). Silkin’s reader might recall his yearning for utopic ‘co-existence’ as described in his essay on Edward Hicks, an argument formulated differently from Morton’s yet curiously coherent with it. What makes Silkin and Armitage’s poetries sincere – and this is also useful for a reader who is seeking new ethical frames – is not only their acknowledgements of the intra-active activities of ‘the environment’ with politics, history, the imagination, art, social groups, sex, love and the divine, crucial though that is. A form of poetic sincerity is generated in each case by the poet’s abilities to resist recourse to homogenisation and the ‘holistic’, and instead to maintain, with all the difficulties that come with the approach, the *difference* within the ecology. ‘We shall achieve a radical ecological politics only by facing the difficulty of the strange stranger’, writes Morton (p. 277). Working with language, Silkin and Armitage suggest to their readers how this may be done.

I Afterword: New Branches

In this study, I have sought *both* to provide an insight into the rich, varied and as-yet under-researched poetries of the two writers under discussion, while also positioning them within a cultural discourse. With this in mind, I close this thesis by proposing a secondary stage of the project, in which insights gained from the dialogue between Silkin and Armitage played out here might inform a reading of a second pair of environmentally-conscious poets that, at first glance, appears to present more differences than commonalities. In doing so, I approach each poet’s creative imagination on its own terms while also looking for similarities within the differences, to contribute to our developing sense of contemporary poetry in a time of climate change. Sinéad Morrissey (who is Northern Irish) and Pascale Petit (French-born but UK-residing) will diversify our notions of British poetry beyond the Englishness of Silkin and Armitage. Introducing two female voices into a discourse that might be seen to privilege the masculine is worthwhile in itself; it also contributes to the development of a nuanced environmental ethics that might counter the rigidity of out-dated, ‘over there’ conceptions of ‘nature’. ‘Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine’, writes

Morton, and while not all writing by women is able to resist the kind of mode Morton criticises (just as not all writing by men produces it), Petit and Morrissey each articulate a questioning, responsive engagement with the more-than-human world (*The Ecological Thought*, p. 16). Each poet is alive to strangeness, negativity and horror, and to the ethical complexities, elegiac imperatives and profound uncertainty that characterise our experiences as creatures living during anthropogenic climate change. I will turn, briefly, to each poet's most recent collection at the time of writing.

Petit's *Mama Amazonica* (2017) initiates encounters between creatures of the Amazon rainforest and the poet's mother, post-trauma and in a psychiatric hospital. The poet thinks of one through the other without recourse to hierarchy or one being pressed into the service of the other. Petit, a trained visual artist, describes herself painting flowers in 'Musica Mundana', demonstrating an interest in the materiality of creativity:

[...] I threw in some
baby smocks, and they bloomed,
glowing in the clay-and-straw ground.⁵

Petit figures herself not as an absolute creator but as a creative practitioner working in interaction with the materialities of paint, language, representation and flowers. She may plant the flowers, but their life extends beyond her. In this encounter, she seeks to communicate with, and make connection with, vegetal beings: 'I thought I heard one bud clear its throat / but my ears were too coarse' (p. 51). Like Silkin, animal metaphors used in accounts of flowers suggest contiguity rather than appropriation; as in Silkin, the flowers are frustratingly alien; as in Silkin, interest in nonhuman beings is, in complex ways, interrelated with other modes of knowledge and other preoccupations. Petit's account of the creaturely is one in which jaguars, lilies, caimans, butterflies and her mother are all, equally, vibrant, complex, sentient creatures. When correlations between them are made, the reader understands both that, like the vulnerable, hospitalised woman, the animals are endangered, and that the poet's mother is a powerful, sometimes unpredictable, often unknowable living being. 'Extrapyramidal Side Effects' is comprised of ten fragments of verse, each

⁵ Pascale Petit, *Mama Amazonica* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2017), p. 51.

named for a symptom or treatment. In 'Mania', simile is powerful: 'Imagine a mother with a mind / hyper as a rainforest' (p. 65). Petit conceives of another symptom in a different, but related, way: 'Paranoia is a spectacled caiman / with a horsefly between her eyes' (p. 65). In each case, although the phrase ostensibly seeks human analogy in the more-than-human, Petit succeeds in bringing together these two very different kinds of life, in metaphor, while sustaining the integrity of each. The reader finishes the line imagining all the loudness and activity of a rainforest *and* a mind that is incoherently over-exerting; similarly, the caiman is made vividly sentient *at the same time* that the account of paranoia resonates. Ecologically connected, the experience of two beings are in the 'same moral universe', to recall Dana Phillips once more.⁶

In 'Lithium', from the same sequence, Petit draws an explicit parallel between her mother's incarceration in hospital with that of another captive creature:

Now that her thyroid's burnt away
she floats in her turquoise negligee
like a manatee in a tank. (p. 67)

Each is trapped and listless. The confrontation of vibrant potential with misfortune and suffering in these two situations are not in parallel – one's power is taken from her for her own safety, while the other's is taken for entertainment. Nonetheless, each example teaches us about the other. The alienation the poet feels from her mother, the mother's estrangement in her illness, is communicated in the image of a non-verbal marine creature, out of its natural habitat, separated from her by glass, positioned as such in order to feign a feeling of connection with the more-than-human world for the visitor. With no less power, the perceived violence of the medicine administered to her mother reflects on the manatee's situation and leaves the reader unable to defend its incarceration. With an ethical consciousness that argues for animal rights, defies taboos against mental health and argues for a thoughtful, experiential feminism, Petit is an important voice of the present moment. Her use of metaphor to create non-hierarchical poetic ecologies attests to the complexities of encountering the creaturely in a time of anthropogenic species extinction and climate change. In *Seeing Stars*, Armitage demonstrates a keen

⁶ Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology*, p. 211.

understanding of the psychological toll that environmental uncertainty produces. Given the growing evidence of climate change-induced mental health disorders, which is only expected to rise, the encounter Petit stages between these two kinds of trauma may be prescient.⁷

Turning, then, to what I hope will be a productive contrast with Petit, in the form of Morrissey's *On Balance* (2017), I draw the reader's attention to 'Whitelessness', a series of poems in the different voices of six scientists and creative professionals who each travel to Greenland for work.⁸ In each case the speaker's encounter with the material environment is not merely observational but engaged interaction and interpretation. Each voice is quite different, articulating its particular academic or creative perspective, but what links them is that their responses all engage with the *changing* nature of the landscape they visit. Sensitivity to the more-than-human is evident in all six accounts, and in all of them, too, the voice is shaped by the threats they are unable to ignore. The account of 'The Artist', who 'did not pack colours', is explicitly elegiac:

For all the white animals – the hares,
the foxes, the wolves – I just leave
spaces on the paper where their bodies were
last time I glanced up. (p. 54)

While mourning species loss, Morrissey also asks how artists can engage with a changing world. It is a very different interrogation of creativity from that of Petit's 'Musica Mundana', yet in both cases, the physical substance of paint or crayon is found to be insufficient to respond to an uncertain material world. 'The Photographer' closes his/her piece with a tragically ironic allusion to climate change:

[...] In the beginning,
God put a rainbow in the sky

⁷ See, for example: American Psychological Association and EcoAmerica, 'Mental Health and Our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance', <<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>> [accessed 20.01.18].

⁸ Sinéad Morrissey, *On Balance* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017), pp. 51-56.

as a promise

that He'd never let the ocean rise again. (p. 52)

The speaker's apparent feeling of abandonment by God recalls Silkin's furious tirades against a deity whom (he perceives) passively allows human violence to persist. Yet although – or perhaps because – this is a world where human intrusion, Shell company exploitation, species extinction and sea level rise are all points of consciousness, humour, irony and absurdity weave their ways through the six poems. 'The Marine Biologist' opens with irreverent humour, in a deadpan voice that might recall Armitage: 'FUCK EVERYTHING BECOME A PIRATE / declares my t-shirt, but I don't mean it' (p. 55). S/he is eccentric, apparently alone (or at least no colleagues make it into the account) and amusingly pretentious. Observing ocean invertebrates in a petri dish, the biologist intones:

[...] hush, the world's
most previously inaccessible ballet-
dancers are practising arabesques.

Such secretly parted curtains! (p. 55)

The mode of speech communicates the absurdity of the biologist's activity of scooping up buckets of sea water and observing tiny creatures which, like Petit's manatee, are removed from their natural habitats. The poem ends with the biologist excitedly declaring that he has identified 'an entirely new species of Annelid' and that, when observed, 'they appeared to be having sex' (p 55), which implies a focus on identifying correspondences between oceanic invertebrates and human beings as 'liquid life' (Morton). Yet the alien-ness of the creatures is sustained, despite the scientific search for knowledge, and the absurdity in the biologist's account of scientific activity irreverently suggests to the reader that the differences between human beings – their passions and ways of being in the world – can also be dramatic. A human being might find another human being to be alien in the same way that s/he would find an annelid to be alien – non-hierarchical creaturely ecologies can be observed in difference as well as similarity.

Humour performs in other ways in 'Whitelessness', too. 'The Geographer' and his colleagues are 'drilling up the planet's large intestine / and seeing what it's eaten', when, 'Ridiculously / overdressed, two musk ox trundle past' (p. 53). The

reader's laugh at the description of the oxen gets caught in the throat (recalling Galleymore) as the incongruity works to its logical conclusion: a warming world is becoming hostile to the creatures that have long been adapted to colder temperatures. When the geographer says in the following line, 'We must sound enormous', the reader participates in shock and shame at the abuse of the oxen (p. 53). The last of the six poems is from 'The Archaeologist', whose account also employs absurdity to articulate a form of grief for Arctic species loss. From their ship, the archaeologist and colleagues 'watched a polar bear / attacking an outpost', and when they went to get a closer look, saw that 'It had shredded / the pages of a *Reader's Digest*' (p. 56). The unexpected intrusion of the magazine produces a laugh that is quickly stifled as the reader realises that the incongruity of the image is, in fact, relatively unremarkable evidence of litter pollution. The uneasiness that the reader feels increases as the poem closes:

Before we got there, its long body had lolloped
away over the rocks and, even from a distance,
had kept on flashing back at us, like Morse. (p. 56)

The self-conscious reference to Morse code, like allusions to various other modes of communication in 'Whitelessness', implicate the reader in the co-production of a world without the whiteness of the polar ice caps. As in Armitage's *Seeing Stars*, here Morrissey will not allow the reader the luxury of feigned distance. Like Petit's creaturely ecologies, Morrissey's anxious response to an uncertain world is unrelenting.

The poetry explored in this thesis shows the reader that irony – broadly defined to include incongruity, absurdity, material metaphors and challenges to established categories – constitutes an element of poetic discourse with which poet and reader are able to define new ethical standards. At all times, the productive potential of metaphor, which is able to 're-describe reality' (recalling Ricoeur), is pushing up against the limits of language.⁹ The need for metaphor in poetry is testament to the ultimate shortfalls in language's descriptive and communicative capacities which cannot take us quite as far as we would like; yet, paradoxically,

⁹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, p. 5.

defamiliarization gives the reader a new set of criteria with which to decipher the world. Silkin employs a style, exemplified in the 'flower' poems, which self-consciously acknowledges these limits. The impossibility either of knowing what a flower's experience feels like or of reproducing a flower in a poem with any accuracy are taken up as raw poetic material, and contribute to the self-reflexive difficulty in the language. Armitage accounts for the insurmountable alien-ness of the more-than-human world – which, in the case of both poets, often seems to include the self – in a very different, but related, way:

I think it's Don Paterson (somewhere, maybe in one of his aphorisms) who says something like: 'remember that no object in the world knows the name that we have given it'. Nevertheless, having accepted that, I'm happy with giving things names, in the complete understanding that they are not going to answer to them. (*Interview*)

The limitations to our knowledge of the more-than-human world are perhaps never as profound as when we use language, yet, paradoxically, metaphor also provides a powerful means of revealing correspondences with beings and phenomena beyond the perceived boundaries of the self. Poetry that is uncompromising in admission of its own imperfections is therefore likely to push these limits furthest. In Armitage's words: 'I also accept that language is an effects-filter and an encoding device rather than a system by which everything can be understood in its most elemental form, but it's the best one we've got. Plus, it's quite good fun' (*Interview*). Characteristic good humour does not obscure the thoughtful tentativeness in this account of a poet grappling with his medium, and, indeed, the ability to play, in language and in metaphor, is the poet's most powerful tool.

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