Contemporary Pastoral: Sean O'Brien, Peter Didsbury, Michael Hofmann; and Original Poetry Collection

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Abstract

Landscape reflects and informs the history which shapes it, the society of which it forms a part, and the culture and identity of its inhabitants. An introduction provides a brief survey of contemporary pastoral poetry, identifying two main strands, the Romantic and the social-pastoral traditions. Further chapters discuss the relations between landscape, society, history and identity in the work of Sean O'Brien, Peter Didsbury and Michael Hofmann. Sean O'Brien's poetry depicts 'marginal' post-industrial locations both as the subjects of historical forces and as idyllic; interrogates received English idylls; and substitutes localised idylls based in childhood experiences. Peter Didsbury draws on similar landscapes and a similar sensibility, but shows a more oblique engagement with history and poetic tradition; his treatment of landscape and local identity is also notable for its religious and rhetorical elements; and his creation of pastoral idylls is located resolutely in the contemporary here-and-now. The tenor of Michael Hofmann's work is different: his landscapes are typically dystopian; rather than drawing on a local identity determined by landscape, childhood experience or local culture, his work shows a gap between the idylls and narratives of European high culture and the contemporary world as experienced locally; and his use of temporary homes as locations reflects his style's restless performance of temporary identity. The thesis is accompanied by a creative project consisting of two elements: a collection of shorter poems and an extended sequence. The former develops such themes as the identification of self and culture with a landscape, the religious treatment of place and provincial culture, and the outsider figure as an analogue of the marginal landscape; and such formal features as the Horatian ode, apostrophe, prosaic and metered lineation, and the collision of high rhetoric with prosaic contemporary subject matter. The latter develops various features of the pastoral through the narrative context of an inmate of a lunatic asylum in early twentieth-century Central Europe, drawing on the formal materials of outsider art as well as the content of the thesis.

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Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
Preface	5
Chapter 1: Introduction: Versions of contemporary pastoral	6
Chapter 2: Sean O'Brien's marginal Arcadia	19
Chapter 3: Peter Didsbury's pastorals of rhetoric and religion	54
Chapter 4: Michael Hofmann: 'A profane language'	85
Critical Commentary	115
Creative Work: The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street	137
Creative Work: Broken Tiles	208
Bibliography	259
Appendix 1: Interview with Peter Didsbury	

Preface

This project comprises a critical thesis and a body of creative work. The thesis traces the pastoral genre in the work of three contemporary poets. The creative work consists of two elements: a collection of poems and a separate sequence of poems, supported by a critical commentary which discusses the relation between the critical and creative works and outlines the technical development of my creative work with particular reference to the contents of the thesis.

The thesis makes original contributions to knowledge in the following areas: the detailed reading of a contemporary pastoral tradition in the work of Sean O'Brien, Peter Didsbury and Michael Hofmann; identification and analysis of the Gothic in O'Brien and Didsbury; and the use of classical and traditional culture in Didsbury and Hofmann. The creative work makes original contributions in the appropriation and contemporary use of traditional forms such as the apostrophe and Horatian ode, particularly in the collision between traditional rhetoric and contemporary material; and in the extended treatment of pastoral through the medium of outsider art in the sequence *Broken Tiles*.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Versions of contemporary pastoral

In what follows I trace the pastoral genre as it appears in contemporary poetry, describing the work of some of the most prominent contemporary writers of pastoral in terms of the pastoral tradition. I then move on to say which of the main strands of contemporary pastoral I am interested in, and sketch the contemporary historical context in which pastoral poetry in English is produced. Three further chapters each take the work of a contemporary poet and examine his use of pastoral images and forms.

A large number of contemporary poets present some aspect of the pastoral, most obviously through natural imagery or a concern with landscape. It is not my purpose here to offer a comprehensive account of the genre, but to list and describe briefly some poets whose work may be thought central or important to it in recent years. These include (but are by no means limited to) Eavan Boland, Peter Didsbury, Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, Michael Hofmann, Jeremy Hooker, Ted Hughes, John Kinsella, James Lasdun, Denise Levertov, Peter McDonald, Sean O'Brien, Alice Oswald, Peter Reading, Peter Riley, Jane Routh, and Carol Rumens.

1 Versions of contemporary pastoral

Natural imagery and landscapes have been prominent in recent poetry in the work of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney (Barry 2000: 4). In Hughes's work 'the everyday world acts like a kind of false veneer on the true essence of Nature' (Thomas Osborne 47), but 'what is at stake' is 'neither the countryside nor the landscape [but] Nature, or – better – Creation' (Thomas Osborne 47). Hughes's typical technique is to strip away the veneer in order to discover something essential; in individual objects – birds of prey, animals, thistles – whose close, usually metaphorical examination reveals truths about the metaphysical world and the individual's communion with it. (Note the number of poems about individual animals in his first two books (Hughes 2003: 19, 19–20, 21, 66, 68–9, 74, 75, 75–6, 79, 83–4, 84–6).) This approach leaves little room for the portrayal or criticism of social institutions, since it focuses on individual experience as its subject matter: its landscapes are essentially private rather than social. This quality may lie behind Ian Hamilton's description of Hughes's 'skimped and shallow dealings with the human world' (Hamilton 1973: 166), though the tone of disparagement here is a little unfair: Hamilton is asking Hughes's work to do something it does not set out to do. To take just one example, in 'Pennines in April' (Hughes 2003: 68), the depiction of landscape is focused on the isolated individual's appreciation of size:

> If this county were a sea (that is solid rock
> Deeper than any sea) these hills heaving
> Out of the east, mass behind mass, at this height
> Hoisting heather and stones to the sky
> Must burst upwards and topple into Lancashire.

'Your eye takes the strain', and the moving landscape 'haul[s] the imagination'; though the choice of landscape is hardly accidental, its importance lies in the lived experience it provides. Hughes's practice varies, and it would be crude to suggest that he has no interest in the social aspects of landscape. For example, it would be possible to read *Season Songs* (2003: 305–44) as idylls and *Moortown Diary* (2003: 495–537) as georgics; 'Mayday on Holderness' (2003: 60–1) brings socio-historical details to bear alongside natural and visceral images. But these are exceptions to the general approach. *Remains of Elmet* (2003: 453–93) registers human presence in the landscape in terms of specific cultural items: 'steep wet cobbles... cenotaphs... football pitches, crown greens/Then the bottomless wound of the railway station (2003: 462; see also 455, 474–5, 475–6, 477–8, 482–3, 483). Yet such presences are repeatedly presented as ephemeral and vulnerable (2003: 459, 462–3, 464, 467–8, 470, 478–9, 484–5, 488, 490, 492) in the lifetime and presence of the inhuman landscape, whose sentience (2003: 455–6, 458, 459, 460, 463, 466, 468, 488) and figuration in primeval terms, particularly of heaven and light (2003: 455–6, 457, 458, 458–9, 459, 459–60, 460, 464–5, 467–8, 469–70, 472–3, 474, 488–9, 490, 491), makes clear its primacy in Hughes's imaginative schema. The social world functions predominantly as a foil the to primeval world.

There is a significant relation between Hughes's technique and the claim that his poetry 'has sometimes been too much in thrall to a powerful cultural image of Hughes's poetic personality... an isolated and embattled figure... the hero' (Webster 1984). The notion of the poet as a seer, an individual to whom privileged knowledge of the world is vouchsafed through experience, draws on Renaissance and classical tradition; Sidney writes that '[a]mong the Romans a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a Diviner, Fore-seer, or Prophet [blessed with] hart-ravishing knowledge' (Sidney 1997: 86). But it is also particularly pertinent to the Romantic poets; it is not just the subject matter of his early books which makes Hughes a Nature poet.

The same notion also underlies Seamus Heaney's persona: 'Heaney is the successor to Wordsworth, in that he... thinks through images of nature as a means to explore love,

politics and his role as writer' (Gifford 1999: 97). Although Heaney is arguably a more socially and politically engaged poet than Hughes, the Romantic mediation and interpretation of individual experience remains his primary concern. Early poems like 'Digging' (Heaney 1998: 3–4) use the landscape as the historical lens through which the poet sees his own identity:

> But I've no spade to follow men like them.
>
> Between my finger and my thumbscrew
> The squat pen rests.
> I'll dig with it.

Nature and landscape becomes the medium for the Romantic poet to 'divine' his truths (Heaney 1998: 13). The 'Glanmore Sonnets' (1998: 163–172) use a pastoral retreat as the setting for a meditation on landscape and romantic love; their relation to the Romantic tradition is explicit (1998: 165). Again, Heaney is too various a poet to ignore the social aspects of landscape; the relationships between landscape, language and politics are a recurrent theme, for example in a cluster of poems from *Wintering Out* (1998: 43–4, 46, 53, 54, 55, 56–7) in which the landscape becomes oracular (1998: 55).

Several poets develop the social elements of landscape within the Romantic tradition of Heaney and Hughes. In Peter Riley's *The Llŷn Writings* (2007) the poet returns repeatedly to the same landscape, using a variety of forms to explore both personal and social concerns. Alice Oswald works in the tradition of Ted Hughes (see Oswald 2005, 2006; Riley has described it as 'refus[ing] the widest political and even social agendas in favour of a contribution to an authentic realisation of individual experience' (Riley 2006)), but her best work, *Dart* (2002), departs from the Romantic model by quoting and depicting a community of voices in her treatment of landscape (a river), extending the poem's concern beyond individual experience and into the social.

Set against the Romantic tradition of Hughes and Heaney is a pastoral tradition whose primary interest is in landscape as a social phenomenon and a metonym for society. Sean O'Brien's poetry, though mediated by personal experience and personal visions of geography, society and history, concerns not the individual's experience of landscape but the landscape's reflection of social and historical conditions. While Hughes finds transcendent images for individual objects, O'Brien enumerates realist detail in order to build up a complex picture of a landscape or culture; the individual image bears less

weight because the individual's experience of landscape is not the primary concern. Rather, landscape is presented as shaped by, and shaping, social and historical conditions; and the particular post-industrial, derelict landscapes depicted imply pastoral comparisons with both metropolitan centres and idyllic countryside. O'Brien shares with both Hughes and Heaney an interest in idealising his 'home' landscape, but in his work this is often achieved not through transfiguring images but through the combination of pastoral conventions such as the name and notion of Arcadia with realist detail, insisting on the post-industrial landscape's paradisal features. His interest in history is more explicit – the past may enter the present landscape through the mechanism of ghosts – as is his interest in speaking for the people ignored and silenced by official histories. The latter concern is also present in the work of Eavan Boland, particularly *Outside History* (Boland 1990), where notions of both nationality and gender are implicated in such silencing. 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited' (Hulse *et al*: 52) wryly examines the relations between history, humanity, landscape and the representation of landscape.

Peter Didsbury shares much of O'Brien's sensibility, no doubt partly through having inhabited the same landscape for much of his life. He is also interested in the intersections of landscape, history and society, but the connections his work makes are usually more oblique. His work is often described as postmodernist, but also has strong traditional elements, including an interest in high rhetoric. His treatments of landscape and society include religious elements, and his interest in personal epiphanies (almost always tied to the experience of place) mean he is indebted to the Romantic tradition as well as the social pastoral one. History and high rhetoric are even more evident in the pastorals of Geoffrey Hill, for example *The Orchards of Syon* (2002). The tone and register of much of Hill's work is relentlessly high, and the historical element can outweigh the contemporary to the extent that any sense of pastoral social comment is negated (e.g. 1985: 70–7); but when the balance between historical rhetoric and contemporary detail is achieved, as in *Mercian Hymns* (1985: 103–34), vivid portraits of local English identity are the result.

Finally, several poets typically present dystopian views of landscape. Michael Hofmann presents contemporary landscapes through a detached, metropolitan voice, not grounded like most of the other poets discussed here in a particular national or local identity, but rather tracing the ways in which cultural and literary identities prove inadequate to local

landscapes. James Lasdun's work is similar in tone and style; *Landscape with Chainsaw* (2001), arguably his best book, transposes the approach to an American wilderness setting. Peter Reading's 'relentlessly anti-symbolist, de-resonated approach' (O'Brien 1998: 124) bears some comparison with Hofmann and Lasdun, but his concern with such subjects as cancer (Reading 1995: 275–317), social and cultural bankruptcy (Reading 1996: 9–46) and the end of the species is accompanied by a tone which is grimmer and less detached, while his interest in metre contrasts strikingly with their more prosaic styles.

Of the poets referred to above I have selected three – Sean O'Brien, Peter Didsbury and Michael Hofmann – for further examination in this thesis, on the basis of three criteria: that their work shares certain features, specifically an interest in pastoral's social treatment of landscape and a concern to present contemporary landscapes through an historical lens; that there are nevertheless significant differences between their styles, demonstrating the breadth of contemporary pastoral and allowing me to draw different technical lessons into my own creative writing practice; and finally, that I am particularly interested in their work.

2 The social-pastoral

The thesis is accompanied by a creative writing project which it informs. As a result, although I make use of some theoretical and critical frameworks (e.g. post-colonialism), I am ultimately concerned to identify devices and techniques that may benefit my own creative development, so I have not attempted to impose a theoretical model on the material. One area of criticism which I do not make use of is eco-criticism (represented by, for example, Bate 1991; Bate 2001; Gifford 1995), mainly because (Gifford 1999: 116ff) its interests and approach are specifically geared to the Romantic tradition rather than the social-pastoral tradition I focus on. An eco-critical reading of, for example, Michael Hofmann's 'On Fanø' (1983: 41) would be interesting, but environmental concerns are not central to his work as a whole, as social and cultural concerns are.

In examining the forms and images of contemporary pastoral, I follow Empson's lead (1995: passim) in taking a basically functional approach. 'For Empson [...] such unrural texts as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Beggar's Opera* [were] versions of pastoral because apparently simple and unsophisticated characters of low social status are the vehicle for the writer's exploration of complex ideas about society' (Gifford 1999: 9–10). My own interest is mainly in the use of landscape as such a vehicle, rather than

characters of low social status, although I do discuss outsider figures as the inhabitants and analogues of such landscapes. I focus particularly on the use of pastoral for social criticism, and for expressing and exploring dichotomies between ideals and perceived realities. (I am aware that the term 'social criticism' is a rather crude one, but I use it to describe engagement with wider social and cultural matters outside the merely personal and the strictly geographical.) I am interested in pastoral poetry which 'expressively embodies... cultural and moral tensions' (Ettin 1984: 105).

This functional approach means that imagery need not pertain to 'nature' or the countryside. For example, Michael Hofmann's 'The Magic of Mantovani' (1983: 28) locates its interrogation of childhood idylls in a cinema; more generally his work contrasts imagined, remembered and literary idylls with experienced contemporary dystopias. This is not to say that pastoral imagery is always absent. In Hofmann's case key landscapes include metropolitan suburbs and Cold-War countryside threatened with nuclear destruction, though interiors are also important settings in his work. Meanwhile Sean O'Brien's pastorals are often set in places which blur the boundary between public and private, such as municipal parks, railway land, shopping centres, riverbanks and disused urban locations, and Peter Didsbury's in more domestic locations such as gardens, as well as the streets of provincial towns. It should be obvious how such settings both reflect and influence the social critiques which are played out in them, and part of my task here is to examine the role played by pastoral imagery in the poets' social visions, including visions of cultural identity.

This last consideration is significant, because a key feature of English pastoral has been its role idealising Englishness and other forms of cultural identity. John Lucas writes that 'pastoral implies a vision of social relationships, harmoniously structured, hierarchically ordered, and succoured by full creativity' (1990: 4). This formulation may be thought to imply that pastoral is a fundamentally conservative genre, emphasising the stability and harmony of its social subject matter. Indeed, critics including Raymond Williams, Roger Sales, and John Barrell and John Bull have provided narratives of the pastoral tradition as politically conservative. Thus Williams:

> Poets have often lent their tongues to princes, who are in a position to pay or to reply. What has been lent to shepherds, and at what rates of interest, is much more in question. It is not easy to forget that Sidney's *Arcadia*, which gives a continuing title to English neo-pastoral, was written in a park which had been made by enclosing a whole village and evicting the tenants

(Williams 1975: 33).

And Barrell and Bull:

> At the outset, the Pastoral is a *mythical* view of the relationship of men in society, at the service of those who control the political, economic, and cultural strings of society... [T]he pastoral vision is, at base, a false vision, positing a simplistic, unhistorical relationship between the ruling, landowning class – the poet's patrons and often the poet himself – and the workers on the land; as such its function is to mystify and to obscure the harshness of actual social and economic organization. (Barrell and Bull 1982: 4).

Seamus Heaney comments that 'this sociological filleting of the convention is a bracing corrective to an over-literary savouring of it as a matter of classical imitation and allusion, but it nevertheless entails a certain attenuation of response' (Heaney 1975: 174). And, in relation to Heaney's own work, Iain Twiddy points out that 'although pastoral literature has settled generic elements and seemingly offers a stable view of the world, its purposes and effects vary' (2006: 51). He goes on to quote Edna Longley's argument that far from being synonymous with mere 'escapism', pastoral is defined by tensions between opposites, 'between Nature and culture, Nature and agriculture, Nature and society, Nature and art, "bee-loud glade" and invasive history' (Longley 2000: 90), adding that 'these tensions recognise change' (Twiddy 2006: 51). The critical perspectives of Williams and Barrell, while useful, do not tell the whole story about their materials. Indeed the 'dual presence' in pastoral of 'town and country, idealisation and realism, celebration and regret, indicates a tension that is fundamental to the "pastoral space"' (Gifford 1999: 17).

Just as the notion of pastoral I am using does not depend on a simple dichotomy between city and countryside, nor does it involve simple good/bad value judgements. Hofmann's visions of his landscapes are largely dystopian, but involve rebukes both to contemporary social life and to the (often artistic and literary) ideals they diverge from. Didsbury's attitude to provincial and domestic landscapes are mainly but not straightforwardly celebratory ('The Hailstone' offers social criticism – 'it had something to do with class/and the ownership of fear' – in the midst of a quasi-religious vision of the provincial town). O'Brien's landscapes manage to be simultaneously (and sometimes problematically) both dystopian and idealising, maintaining a tension between a critical attitude to historical conditions and a lyrical identification with the cultural identities depicted.

3 The traditional and historical context of the contemporary pastoral

The focus of this thesis, then, is the poems' reflections on, and interventions in, their social, cultural and political contexts. Such engagement has always been a feature of the genre, from its origin with Theocritus who wrote the *Idylls* for a patron who was 'the Greek general who colonised Egypt' (Gifford 1999: 15; see also Wilkinson 1982: 14); the *Idylls* drew on life in one imperial territory (Sicily) for consumption in another. Theocritus's 'shepherds, goatherds and other rustic folk converse and sing in a brilliantly artificial version of a Greek regional dialect (Doric)' (Lyne 1983: xiii); that is, their provincial rusticity is defined in terms of their relation to an imperial or metropolitan centre. Similarly the writing of Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* coincided with the birth of the Roman Empire (Lyne 1983: xi–xii); Virgil's own provincial background provided a source for his idealisation of country life (Wilkinson 1982: 12). Part of that idealisation consists in the fact that the life of the smallholder (*colonus*) was largely a thing of the past by the time Virgil came to celebrate it in the *Georgics*, when 'most of Italy consisted of rough upland pasture exploited for absentee landlords of huge estate by slaves... [T]he deliberate exclusion of slavery from the *Georgics* can only be seen as highly significant' (Wilkinson 1982: 22–3). Even at the genre's inception, there is a gap between idyll and reality.

Reference to empire's involvement in the occupation of land and the shaping of landscapes is manifested strongly in Virgil's treatment of the dispossession of landholders in favour of army veterans in *Eclogues 1* and *9* (Wilkinson 1982: 14; Lyne 1983: xi, xvi–xix). These *Eclogues* initiate the tradition of pastoral's ambivalent criticisms of power: *Eclogue 1*, for example, 'shows the brutality of Augustus's policy of rural eviction to make room for his veterans; and then praises Augustus for his clemency in granting Tityrus an exemption. It is a nice question whether that is radical or not; and it is certainly tempting to give more weight to the criticism on which the poem is built than to the flattery which overlays it' (Lerner 1972: 118); tempting, but ultimately reductive.

The genre's development in the early modern period draws on its classical models not only for literary style and subject matter, but also in terms of the social and political values it addresses (Rivers 1994: 125). The development of a national literature was part of the process of becoming (culturally) central: 'if England was truly an empire, it needed to show the expected signs of imperial greatness. It needed a language and a

literature comparable to those of the ancient Roman Empire, on which all early modern empires modelled themselves' (Helgerson 2000: 310). The vernacular literature thus becomes a tool and symbol of imperial ambition: pastoral texts such as Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* and *Faerie Queene* form part of the 'early modern project of imperial self-writing' (Helgerson 2000: 313). Recent critics of the period (e.g. Helgerson 2000; Hadfield 1994 & 2004) have focused on connections between political and literary development, and it should not be surprising that '[m]uch... has been done to interpret the politicization of genres like pastoral' (Lim 1998: 142), given pastoral's overt treatment of political themes. At the same time 'identifying the colonialist motifs and narratives in the writings of Elizabethan and Stuart England does not limit or bound the meanings encoded in literary texts' (Lim 1998: 18); the pastoral tradition in modern English offers no easy narrative of partisanship either for or against metropolitan power, but rather a series of conversations about politics, society, and the relations between the myths of central power and provincial retreat.

Later pastoral poems continue the genre's engagement with social and political issues, though the focus becomes less clearly imperial. It is outside my scope here to trace in detail a tradition leading directly to one or all of the poets I discuss in later chapters. I am not concerned to identify poetic influences except where I have particular reason to do so – for example in the chapter on Michael Hofmann where an understanding of Hofmann's interest in modern German poetry is an important step in contextualising his work; and in the critical commentary, where I go back to Horace, Auden and Marvell as sources of technique in my own practice. What I offer here instead is a sketch of the historical moment at the end of the twentieth century as it informs the work of all three of the poets I am writing about, and a tentative characterisation of that moment as 'postimperial' or postcolonial.

The poems share a sense of the historical moment as being 'afterwards'. Thus O'Brien's settings are often post-industrial, and his depiction of the present as the product of the past emphasises the past as a source of value. Hofmann's characterisation of contemporary landscapes as trite and banal is relative to a culturally rich past, whether real or imagined; and Didsbury's archaeological and antiquarian poems are also backward-looking in the sense of seeking meaning and value in history. This is not the same as saying these writers are conservative; as we shall see, Didsbury and Hofmann in particular *use* historical cultural material for resolutely contemporary ends. But

insisting on the importance of history in shaping landscapes and society may emphasise the historical past at the expense of the historical present, leading the reader to suppose that the contemporary moment is defined not so much by its own characteristics as by the lack of what has gone before – the phenomenon of the pastoral Golden Age, even if the representation is not so simple.

It is useful to describe the history which functions as 'before' in this model. Thomas Osborne cites 'D. J. Taylor's surmise that what unites many English post-war writers, and what accounts for a certain characteristic kind of realism in their works, is the cultural experience of disappointment; or, as Taylor aptly terms it, diminishment' (Thomas Osborne 44). It is interesting that Taylor's description of postwar writers is brought forward by Osborne to cover Larkin and Hughes, and remains apt when brought forward again to the contemporary era. Osborne registers the prolongation of a historical moment when he argues that 'Post-war Britain was – *is* – a postcolonial country' (Thomas Osborne 44; Osborne's italics). In fact it makes better sense to talk not of prolongation but of repetition:

> [I]t could be said that out of the 1950s swells an entire experience of 'Englishness', even it seems for later generations. The 1950s represent, in that sense, a kind of 'central case', as philosophers of science might say, of the experience of English diminishment. (Thomas Osborne 57)

This is certainly true for Sean O'Brien, whose pastoral visions revolve around 1950s Britain; though not perhaps for Michael Hofmann, whose sense of the contemporary as diminished is less dependent on notions of national identity. It is worth noting too that the aesthetic of the everyday, which Osborne traces in Larkin as a product of the postwar mood, surfaces, much-changed but recognisable, in Peter Didsbury's celebration of everyday experience.

It is not just a sense of a historical afterwards that defines the contemporary moment in these poets' work. Specific historical circumstances are brought into play, whether these relate to British imperial history (O'Brien) or modern European history (Hofmann). Hofmann's Cold-War landscapes trace the continuing force of imperialism. Moreover, O'Brien and Didsbury remain in emotional dialogue with Empire and with imperially committed ideas, idylls and images, usually in some or other wistful or elegiac tone. Even poets clearly hostile to Empire and its history may find it hard to pick apart historical oppression from numinous detail. As a result these poets' work is

contemporary in the value-laden sense that they address questions of cultural identity in a way which takes account of both the weight of history and the challenge of the contemporary moment. Although 'European imperialism still casts a considerable shadow over our own times' (Said 1994: 4), the passage of time is distorting that shadow in interesting ways.

The historical contexts which inform recent and contemporary pastoral poetry in English may be crudely summarised, then, by pointing to the decline and fall of the British Empire, but such a picture may be deceptive. For example, the consciously working-class poetry of Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison might be related to the end of Empire via the breakdown of the class system, but the nature of such a relation is unclear: which phenomenon causes the other, and how are other factors (e.g. social changes associated with the two World Wars) to be taken account of? It is not my purpose here to pursue a historical thesis about the nature of late-twentieth century society, so the historical context in use must remain impressionistic. But postcolonial criticism is a useful lens for viewing the material. Several key features of postcolonial criticism are readily applicable to the poetry I discuss. In particular, O'Brien and Didsbury both exhibit a fascination with the 'compelling seductions of colonial power' (Gandhi 1998: 4); O'Brien's poems frequently gesture towards death and blankness, a wiping away of history which strikingly recalls the postcolonial 'will-to-forget' (Gandhi 1998: 4); and the sense of living in a historical 'afterwards' in O'Brien and Hofmann may be related to a 'postcolonial limbo between arrival and departure' (Gandhi 1998:7).

Meanwhile O'Brien's interest in speaking for the people ignored and oppressed (literally and/or culturally) by empire satisfies the description of postcolonial literature as 'negotiating... the once tyrannical weight of colonial history in conjunction with the revalued local past' (Hutcheon 1991: 169). And all three poets demonstrate interest in

> concern with the notion of marginalization, with the state of what we could call ex-centricity. In granting value to (what the centre calls) the margin or the Other, the post-modern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre (Hutcheon 1991: 170).

Indeed, the pastoral resonances of such a characterisation are obvious, from the dichotomy between centre and margin to the ambiguity of its valuations. In context Hutcheon is discussing the meeting-point of postmodernism and postcolonialism. I prefer to avoid the term 'postmodern' altogether as now useless in criticism of

contemporary poetry. But there seems a good case for characterising the contemporary pastoral as postcolonial, and to some extent I am happy to do so.

Yet I am reluctant to label these poets firmly as 'postcolonial' or 'postimperial', because to do so is reductive. The poems' relations to empire may be explicit (O'Brien 1987: 64), but usually they are more oblique or delicate than that. Their social visions are complex, particular and local; the end of empire is an important factor, but must not be overemphasised. For example, to describe O'Brien's explorations of history as postimperial is to collapse them into a single (centralised) historical narrative which then must serve as a rather abstract and crude basis for the lyrical effects these explorations evoke. Moreover, O'Brien's interest in speaking for the people ignored by empire and imperial historiography seems ill-served by a theoretical approach which defines itself in relation to a metropolitan centre, however oppositionally. Meanwhile Michael Hofmann's interest in empire is intermittent and often incidental, yet he shares with O'Brien and Didsbury certain tones, locations and preoccupations which indicate that all three should be seen as working in and addressing a particular historical moment.

Aside from the shared interest in pastoral, I identify a number of other similarities in the work of the poets. Didsbury and Hofmann make use of classical culture in ways that go beyond deference to ancient authority. Didsbury and O'Brien make use of the unreal and the grotesque in order to insist on the transcendent nature of their everyday subject matter. There is a case for seeing this 'mixing of the fantastic and the realist' as a form of magic realism (Hutcheon 1991: 169), but I think it is better described as drawing on the Gothic. The Gothic shares concerns with both postcolonialism and pastoral:

> an historical examination of the Gothic and accounts of postcolonialism indicate the presence of a shared interest in challenging post-enlightenment notions of rationality. In the Gothic, as in Romanticism in general, this challenge was developed through an exploration of the feelings, desires and passions which compromised the Enlightenment project of rationally calibrating all forms of knowledge and behaviours. The Gothic gives a particular added emphasis to this through *its seeming celebration of the irrational, the outlawed and the socially and culturally dispossessed* (Hughes & Smith 1; my italics).

All three frameworks – pastoral, postcolonial, Gothic – depend on oppositions between norms and others, centres and elsewheres.

In each chapter I discuss pastoral forms and pastoral images in the work of the poet, tracing his particular engagement with historical and social concerns and the particular critical and technical challenges he presents. While all three tie their presentation of landscape to the social elements of their work, each is predominantly interested in a different landscape, and I hope to show how in each case the type and tone of landscape depicted reflects and supports the poet's social vision. All three poets are also concerned with dissent in various forms: O'Brien's is the most obvious, a political dissent expressed not only in his choice of landscapes but also in his interest in criminals, tramps and outsider figures; Hofmann's cynical persona dissents from the liberal society in which he moves; and Didsbury, while rarely achieving great amplitude of social or political complaint, offers a form of dissent in his retreat from the wider social world into a dream-filled, often antiquarian domestic vision. All three poets remain susceptible like most pastoral writers to a charge of quietism, defeatism or retreat from social problems; 'the epic is a constant challenge for the pastoral poet, an implicit rebuke to the lyricist's "slender" song, which is its diametric opposite, in much the same way as the heroic life is a challenge to private leisure' (Ettin 1984: 17). Such a charge is only met by individual poems achieving success on their own terms.

Chapter 2: Sean O'Brien's marginal Arcadia

My purpose here is to consider the pastoral features of Sean O'Brien's poetry, and in particular how pastoral's mode of social commentary and criticism is translated into a contemporary setting. The primary pastoral features I discuss are: a concern with certain 'marginal' landscapes as the sites of value; the depiction of such landscapes, often associated with childhood, as idyllic; the depiction of the same landscapes as registers of history and particularly of historical injustice; and the interrogation of received English idylls and myths as dangerous and seductive.

1 Public Poetry

Sean O'Brien's poetry is conspicuously public in character. He has said: 'I don't tend to view poetry as personal in the sense in which it's sometimes sentimentally thought of as being; I'm interested in expressing what's going on in the imagination, and if the imagination has any function then it's ultimately a public one' (interview with the BBC *Third Ear* programme, quoted in Woodcock 1998: 38). The purpose of this chapter is to show how this concern with the public generates a contemporary pastoral poetry, particularly how the representation of place can become part of a conversation about public values. O'Brien has praised Douglas Dunn for his success in 'relating place to the concealed larger context' (quoted in Watt 1991: 175), and this has been a characteristic feature of his own work. But this attempt to mediate English landscapes involves interrogating the mediations – English myths and idylls – of the past. O'Brien is 'a very trenchant, very fierce critic of some of the things that have been done in the name of England', while retaining 'a good deal of affection for the place' (Watt 1991: 183); and he has said that:

> I am interested in England and Englishness because I find the subject fascinating. The more you think about it, the less you know, the less confidently you can speak about what it is to be English. ... What common ground do the English have except certain historical allegations that are made on their behalf? (quoted in Watt 1991: 183).

Moreover his ideas of England are often supplied by, and mediated through, artistic representations, a fact which the poems recognise and exploit (e.g. 'Special Train's depiction of 'the indifferent/Grey-green that black-and-white made real' (1995: 6)):

> There are certain things which I hold to be somehow English, but they're all inventions.

> They are largely cultural products, works of art, or forms of entertainment, often of a propagandist nature... I watch with great interest British films, of sometimes the thirties, but usually the forties and fifties, which trade as part of their vocabulary of assumptions on an idea of England (quoted in Watt 1991: 183).

Since he has also said that 'any activity, from the simplest to the most elaborate, from the most obviously public to the most allegedly private, is at bottom political' (*Third Ear* interview, quoted in Woodcock 1998: 38), it must be expected that O'Brien's work might constitute a variety of 'urban pastoral' (Padel 2002) much given to social criticism. And indeed this is so; Ian Gregson has called O'Brien's work 'a poetry with Leftist political preoccupations and a downright and aggressive social realist style' (248), and this aspect of his work presumably lies behind O'Brien's own claim to be 'stateless', 'in [England] but not of it' (*Third Ear* interview, quoted by Woodcock 1998: 36). I am not dealing directly here with such directly political pieces as 'Summertime' (1987: 18), 'Song of the South' (1987: 22), 'London Road' (1987: 28-9) or 'Valedictory' (2007: 46–8), which are too unequivocal to be of interest as pastoral. But 'Unregistered' (1987: 23), 'Initiative' (1987: 26-7) and 'Trespass' (1987: 21) are more successful while remaining overtly politically positioned ('The Police' (2002: 19–20) is also more successful and, like 'The Lamp' (2002: 22–3) and 'Tides' (2002: 24), shows an early cross-fertilisation between O'Brien and Peter Didsbury). The bulk of the work is powered by tensions between English ideas and realities, and between aesthetic celebration of certain landscapes and political anger at the way those landscapes came about.

Both these tensions suggest criticisms that the work must face. In the latter case one might ask whether O'Brien's aesthetic depends on the political marginalisation it affects to deplore; while the former may depend on an over-simplified opposition between the 'myths' and 'reality' of English history. This second charge may be met by pointing out how O'Brien's pastoral proceeds largely from a number of cultural idylls and myths picked up in childhood contrasted with a notion of 'reality' similarly grounded in childhood experience. That 'reality' is thus just another personal, idyllic vision. In that case the personal, lyrical-elegiac aspect of the poems ought to be emphasised over the objective social-critical aspect. Such a reading may not satisfy O'Brien's political commitment, since it involves focusing on the mediation performed by the poems' persona rather than the socio-historical material it mediates. Yet it might be a necessary

step, not just in coming to treat the poems on their own ground rather than in terms of the critic's sympathy – or otherwise – with O'Brien's politics, but also in recognising the fact, embodied in a number of poems which inhabit ambiguously public and private places, that the personal and the public are not easily separated. O'Brien has asserted that the job of the poem 'is to see the process as a whole, to see it entire; not to say "There's politics and here is the private life", but to suggest that the two are inextricably bound up with each other' (*Third Ear* interview, quoted in Woodcock *1998:* 38). In context he was defending his practice in opposition to an apolitical lyricism, but the point also serves to confuse and partially undermine that practice, since the personal prejudices and concerns of the public poet act not only to shape but also to distort and limit the social analyses his poems perform.

2 Historical landscapes

An engagement with history motivates many O'Brien poems, including the bulk of *HMS Glasshouse*, of which O'Brien has commented that 'I ... think you could describe it as a kind of "condition of England" book, not in any very programmatic fashion but simply because a lot of the poems are concerned with post-war history, not from a public point of view but from the point of view of a private occupancy of history, the way in which events make themselves felt in the private life' (quoted in Watt 1991: 174). But the collection begins not with a poem which examines the working or effects of history but one which imagines a landscape from which history is absent. 'Before' (1991: 3–4) takes place in the early morning:

> This is before the first bus has been late
> Or the knickers sought under the beds
> Or the first cigarette undertaken,
> Before the first flush and cross word.

The day's activity stands for activity in general, the operation of history which makes life a fluid and not a static affair. The calm before the storm is pleasant:

> Make over the alleys and gardens to birdsong,
> The hour of not-for-an-hour. Lie still.

and is identified clearly with the lack of a range of historical and social forces which are criticised by implication:

Viaducts, tunnels and motorways: still.
The mines and the Japanese sunrise: still.
...
The policemen have slipped from their helmets
And money forgets how to count.

Moreover the fact that everyone is asleep is a kind of levelling:

The Première sleeps in her fashion,
Her Majesty, all the princesses, tucked up
With the Bishops, the glueys, the DHSS,
In the People's Republic of Zeds.

The poem sets up an idyll in contemporary terms, defined not so much by the presence of natural features or particular social groups (on the contrary, the effect depends partly on the sense of the poem ranging across the country) as by the absence of activity. As Bruce Woodcock has pointed out (1992: 147), it is an elegant preface to the poems in *HMS Glasshouse* which seek to explode idylls and to show how historical activity both powers and undermines ideas of England. It turns suddenly to menace in its final lines:

I declare this an hour of general safety
...
No one has died. There need be no regret,
For we do not exist, and I promise
I shall not wake anyone yet.

The menace of *yet* insists in the face of the poem's hitherto benevolent tone that the idyll is untenable: the day *will* begin, and history will proceed as usual. Ian Gregson has pointed out that 'Before'

> works self-reflexively by questioning the way that objects enter poems, and the poet's ability to recreate the world – so that the whole realist enterprise is called into question too, its claim to an accurate apprehension of objects. (1996: 249)

The poem's ostentatious artifice ('I shall not wake anyone yet') casts doubt on the reality it depicts and hints at how that depiction may be mediated by the poem, poet or his persona.

'Before' bears comparison with a number of other O'Brien poems which depict landscapes that are empty of history or function, and for which similar questions of

mediation arise. Often the emptiness is expressed through a noir style, as in 'Thrillers and Cheese', which follows 'Before' in *HMS Glasshouse*. Despite O'Brien's reputation as a 'realist' (Gregson 1996: 248–9; Barry 2000: 118ff; Padel 2002), the line between depicting objects and expressing the state of mind of the subject is often blurred. The question is often having to be asked whether a poem describes 'a scene [or] a condition of the psyche' (Woodcock 1998: 34). This indeterminacy may be illuminating or problematic. On the one hand, a poem like 'The Era' is interestingly ambiguous about whether it describes a historical condition or a subjective feeling about history; and on the other a poem like 'Cousin Coat' seems to vacillate between public, objective and personal, subjective views of history, in a way which poses a question for some of O'Brien's work.

While 'Before' erects and then undermines an idyll in which history is absent, in 'The Era' O'Brien depicts a dystopian landscape using the same conceit:

> The era we are entering,
> You and I, our shrugging grocer
> And the listener in the wall,
> Won't feel the lack of history.

The connection between such a state and a particular time and place is suggested if not made clear by the lyrical scene-setting which follows:

> There'll be the dripping overflow
> On green-brocaded brick,
> The sound of nothing going on.
> We'll be waiting for muffled reports
> From a neighbouring district,
> But if they should come
> We'll do nothing
> ...
> While in the streets the searchers go
> From door to door
> Holding the death-lists
> And asking the victims
> To find their own names.

There are two divergent readings which the poem, in its claim that the inhabitants 'won't feel the lack of history', drily fails to differentiate between, leaving the reader

unsure whether history is lacking from the world or just from the minds of its inhabitants. The first reading is that the poem depicts a postmodern period in which history (in the sense, for example, of an intelligible human and political narrative) is actually lacking; the tone is fairly unequivocal in seeing this as a bad thing, but it wouldn't necessarily be a thing that could be remedied. The second reading is that the inhabitants of the landscape are apathetic: they 'won't feel the lack of history' not because there is no history to be felt, but because in becoming disenfranchised from their pasts and oblivious of the underlying historical process of the present, they have become passive victims and do not know it. The second reading implies that in fact history carries on as before, but people are ignorant of it. It is the more straightforwardly political reading, and the one which, in the context of O'Brien's oeuvre, we might expect him to espouse. (Consider, for example, the poem 'Nineties', which proceeds from the disbelieving 'They tell me politics/And history are done' to make an oblique comparison between the living conditions of the poor of the 1890s and the 1990s (2001a: 4–7).) But the ambiguity, which arises from the indeterminate relation the speaker takes towards the world he depicts (Is he omniscient, or not? Is 'won't feel the lack of history' ironic?), is fruitful because it allows for both readings of the historical landscape.

O'Brien's sense of history as an uncomfortable fact which must be taken account of, if not accepted – the discomfort is referred to in the wry train announcement in *Downriver*, 'We apologize for any delay and for the inconvenience history may have caused to your journey' (2001a: 73) – is a subject addressed directly in 'Cousin Coat' (1987: 47). Here the coat is history-as-conscience weighing on the poet, a history whose remembrance is a moral matter:

> You are my secret coat. You're never dry.
> You wear the weight and stink of black canals.
> ...
> You mean the North, the poor, and troopers sent
> To shoot down those who showed their discontent.
> ...
> Be with me when they cauterise the facts.
> Be with me to the bottom of the page,
> Insisting on what history exacts.
> Be memory, be conscience, will and rage.

But the poem's rhetorical force might obscure what is also insisted on, that this is a personal history, or rather a personal historiography:

> But you don't talk, historical bespoke.
> You must be worn, as intimate as skin,
> And though I never lived what you invoke,
> At birth I was already buttoned in.
> Your clammy itch became my atmosphere,
> An air made half of anger, half of fear.
>
> And what you are is what I tried to shed
> In libraries with Donne and Henry James.

O'Brien has commented that 'Cousin Coat' 'is about an invisible coat which I eventually discovered I'd been wearing all my life and was not allowed to remove. It's an historical coat and perhaps it's best imagined as having at some time spent about fifty or a hundred years lying at the bottom of the Aire Navigation Canal, sucking up mud, chemicals and other bits and pieces' (2005). The poem relates the anxiety of being isolated from the milieu from which one derives one's identity ('I never lived what you invoke') and of moving away from that identity through education ('what you are is what I tried to shed/In libraries with Donne and Henry James').

Such personal concerns might seem to diminish the poem's concern with history into a merely personal interest in background. Meanwhile the rhetorical pose represented by talk of 'the facts' suggests a sureness which stands at odds with this diminishment. The 'reality' which grounds the poem is political in nature. On the one hand, the poem's rhetoric would have us believe the coat's history is objective enough to inform a public argument, but, on the other, its claim to do so relies on the way the poem builds up a personal relation between coat and speaker: *this history matters to me because it's mine.* The drama of 'buttoning in', 'clammy itch', 'what I tried to shed' – the personally inescapable and inescapably personal nature of the coat – works rhetorically to underwrite its claim to importance and attention, although dispassionately one might argue on the contrary that it disqualifies it. The rhetoric may be asking us to slide over some difficulties, in particular the possible variance between objective history and O'Brien's view of it. This tension, the apparent contradiction between the history the poem puts forward as objective and significant and the personal ground of that history,

recurs throughout O'Brien's work. Yet what might save it is not a critic's agreement with the poet's politics or a notional vindication of the view of history he promotes (i.e. an elision of the poems' personal ground), but the very fact that the poems' historiography is a personal mediation – so that the politics are seen not as interventions in the public sphere but as part of the subjectivity which is the arena for certain lyrical effects. That is to say that, properly historicised, the poems are as much lyrical as they are pastoral, and at the same points. Such a conclusion is hardly surprising in the light of the blurring between subject and object I noticed above.

3 Pubs, parks and railway land

The most obviously public aspect of O'Brien's poems is their locations, drawn from a landscape of dereliction, unemployment and poverty. The mood is usually dystopian or elegiac, and either usually includes a tincture of the other. The poems express, or create, an aesthetic of marginal and downtrodden places, 'A taste for muddy beers and pubs like this' (1987: 35). The poems conjure their (usually coastal) landscapes through public rather than private places, possibly because O'Brien is less interested in portraits of individuals than in wider social and historical conditions. But many of these places actually occupy points where public and private meet: they are the public arenas of private activity (public houses, waiting rooms, parks and allotments) and places whose public functions have been erased or put in question (disused docks and factories, railway land).

Pubs occupy a special place in these landscapes, partly because they are where the community goes instead of work ('This is not the drunk between ships' (1987: 24); there are no more ships). There is a perverse sense of community based not on shared work but on shared despair:

> What links us is the way we sit and brood
> On all what little happens cannot mean,
> Like revolution, money or free Bells. (1987: 35–6)

The pub has a counterpart 'out off the jetty': 'a matchless collection' not of ships but

> Of tin cans and corpses
> And things rotted out of their names
> In the slack water after the tide. (1987: 35–6)

Poems like 'Souvenirs' (1987: 24) and 'Dry Sailors' (1991: 35–6) are elegies for the lost worlds of activity with which their passive dystopias contrast. They also acknowledge that re-imagining the shipping lines is a poor second:

> Becalmed at this table next door to a river
> No one these days navigates,
> The water-clerks, white suits in pawn,
> Have boarded the island of restaurants
> To sail theoretical oceans. (1991: 35–6)

This acknowledgment is significant because it aligns O'Brien's own imaginative explorations of the subject as largely ineffectual and middle-class (these are clerks, not dockers). Note also the imperial 'white suits'; the speaker of this poem says of the closed shipping lines, 'We know them the way we know Conrad,/By longing for water but having to read it' (1991: 35–6). Such discomfort is problematic and leads here to an impulse towards blankness which is a repudiation of the (literary) history by which the speaker feels himself both seduced and assaulted: to sail on 'An ocean quite empty of all but the weather/And us, and the log we shall quickly forget' (1991: 36).

Parks are important locations for O'Brien's pastoral, though the parks he describes are only distantly related to the parkland pastoral tradition of Jonson, Carew and Marvell (Raymond Williams 40ff). In 'HMS Glasshouse' (1991: 33), the glasshouse of the title, a Victorian conservatory in Pearson Park in Hull (Woodcock 1998: 33), provides a link between the sea and the downbeat urban landscape, and hence a means of relating the high politics of the Falklands War ('the *Unterseeboot* of the state') to the social reality of the neighbourhood ('the park [which] offers… somewhere/To wait while appearing to act'). Bruce Woodcock has pointed out that the glasshouse 'epitomises something strange and mysterious' (1998: 33) in a location otherwise mundane, and that the use O'Brien makes here of two 'simultaneously particular and imaginary places, the two blurring across each other as reality and imagination meet and inform each other in peculiar ways' (1998: 34) is a typical O'Brien device.

But the park doesn't function only as a mundane reality off which imaginative conceits may feed. It epitomises a landscape which O'Brien's personae are at home in, and contribute to the development of an aesthetic which finds such places attractive even as it traces their role as symbols of disappointment and historical neglect. The pastoral

love-song 'The Park by the Railway' (2002: 3–4) asks:

> Where should we meet but in this shabby park
> Where the railings are missing and the branches black?
> Industrial pastoral, our circuit
> Of grass under ash, long-standing water
> And unimportant sunsets flaring up
> Above the half-dismantled fair. Our place
> Of in-betweens, abandoned viaducts
> And modern flowers, dock and willowherb,
> Lost mongrels, birdsong scratching at the soot
> Of the last century (2002: 3).

The naming of the park as 'our place' is an example of O'Brien's tendency to locate 'home' in disused public places. This tendency is the central concern of 'Of Origins', another pastoral love-song which creates an idyll, this time not in a park but in 'the miles of railway land,/The scrub and hawthorn nowhere-much/That murderers and children loved' (1995: 19). 'There too' the poem says, among the cuttings, bridges and embankments, 'Was always afternoon, a cold/And comforting evasion of the rules' – bringing in two of O'Brien's favoured tropes: the static idyll; and transgression and outsiderdom (figured by the child's freedom from adult rules but more ominously by the murderers) as the human counterpart of the marginal landscape and as a moral (or amoral) equivalent to the aesthetic value he locates there. It ends:

> I sat inside the culvert's mouth
> Past teatime, smoking, waiting for the snow
> And reading *Penthouse*. I insist:
> *Et in Arcadia Ego.*

Clearly the primary sense of the last line is 'that too was an idyllic childhood', a claim for the aesthetic and ideal qualities of that life and landscape. But there is also a reading which makes the line spoken by a personified Death: even dispassionately realist childhood idylls are based in a kind of innocence subject to disillusion in adulthood. In a much later poem the poet returns in death to the 'municipal Arcadia' (2007: 80) of Pearson Park (identified by the 'glasshouse' (2007: 81)) to find 'the young myself still sitting there' as a 'ghost', and, failing to recognise the place as paradise, asks the ferryman to go on to the next place; '*There is no next*, he said. *This is the place*' (2007: 81).

The railway land of 'Of Origins' recurs in several of O'Brien's poems; indeed the railway has been one of his favourite devices for thinking about landscape and history (Kennedy 1996: 49–50; Tony Williams 2006: passim). Certain aspects of its geography and history ally it to O'Brien's aesthetic of the marginal. Others, which I shall come to in section 7 below, suit it to the pastoral and elegiac modes.

What makes railway land so attractive to O'Brien's murderers and children is its status as no-man's-land, neither public in the sense of being populous and subject to social mores, nor private in the sense of being owner-occupied or guarded. It is marginal in virtue of having a vaguely defined relation to the society it serves and is part of; and it is therefore excellent terrain for a poet interested in life at the margins of that society and its narratives. Moreover the history of the railway makes it tremendously useful not just as a geographical setting but also as a symbol for contemporary (political) landscapes. The cuts represented by the Beeching Report provided disused railway land with the power to evoke 'the golden age of the railways' (Wolmar 2005: 17) in contrast with a debased present (ironically the notion of the golden age itself was a piece of pastoral artifice which 'must be largely attributed to the efforts of the advertising departments of the Big Four [railway companies]' (Wolmar 2005: 17)). O'Brien's 'Special Train' begins:

> The service ran only on Sunday,
> For free, from the sticks to the sticks
> Along lines that were never discovered by Beeching (1995: 6),

and goes on to depict an idyll constructed in childhood, informed by 1950s film culture. The speaker wakes to a reality betrayed both by such glossy idylls and by a failure of English polity which the Beeching cuts represent:

> A theme park of oddments
> Where tracks were converging
> Past pill-boxes, scrubland and hawthorns,
> Lamp-posts and slab-concrete roads,
> To the ghost of a council estate.

It ends:

> We've sat here at twenty past six
> On the wrong side of England forever,

Like mad Mass Observers observing ourselves,
And if we should wonder what for, we must hope
That as usual it does not concern us (1995: 7).

The poem travels a great deal of ground, from the lost railway idyll to the familiar contemporary reality to the political complaint articulated in the last five lines. The poem's force lies in the contrast between the dreamed world and the 'real' landscape of 'pill-boxes, scrubland and hawthorns,/Lamp-posts and slab-concrete roads' (1995: 7). It suggests how artificial idylls not only misrepresent the speaker's real home but estrange him from it ('We were braking to enter a county/Known neither to us nor the Ordnance Survey' (1995: 7)). One might suspect that the realist tone, authentic in its depiction of the landscape, is being asked to bring a spurious authenticity to the life that takes place there. After all, the 'reality' described is a remembered childhood, not an unmediated present. One of the grounds of that authenticity would presumably be the ambiguous status of railway land, which precisely in its marginality and mundanity appears to resist attempts to mythologise it. Yet that authenticity, the sense of a reality unmediated by idylls, is itself asked to serve as a ground for O'Brien's idealisation of the landscape as Arcadia (1995: 19, 2007: 80–1).

O'Brien shares his penchant for railway land with Ryan, his transgressive alter ego from *The Frighteners*, who says,

There's ground you cannot farm or build on.
It's found after sidings and prefabs,
All tussocks and halfbricks, with sheds
Like the bases of doomed expeditions.

Left to myself I should gravitate there,
At home like the madman of Hessle (1987: 39).

The madman points towards two recurrent tropes in O'Brien's work, the transgressive outsider figure (whether madman, murderer or tramp) and the repudiation of both knowledge and self. The latter idea, a yearning for blankness in the face of (usually historical) knowledge, which sometimes reads like a death wish, is further suggested by a later section of the poem, which desires

the chance to know nothing, claim all

> And to speak my own trivial language –
> Its jabbered ellipses and sly repetitions,
> Unbreakable meaningless code. (1987: 39)

I shall come back to this trope below. But it is worth noting that it features in another railway-land poem, 'On the Line' (1991: 41), where 'the [railway] line' figures not only as a line to be transgressed and which separates the 'wrong' and the 'right' sides of the tracks, but also as an edge, the boundary of a known world which O'Brien's personae are typically anxious to escape:

> I'm awaiting the right afternoon
> When there's nothing to read and no work,
> When I'll find I've gone out for tobacco
> And never come back. I'll step over
> The line that divides my own place
> From the one where the map has no answers.

The railway land is suitable ground for an imaginative escape ('I'll follow the rails through a hangar of dust/And come out on the edge of the evening') for several reasons. One reason is the way it serves as a *de-facto* museum:

> Not even the nineteenth century managed
> To fill in the gaps. The red factories stand
> With their decoys of steam, on short time
> In a soup made of old grass and water

Another is simply aesthetic: 'what comes after… might still be houses,'

> Or schools left in acres of brickdust,
> The sheds of a last-ditch allotment
> Or simply the first line of hawthorns
> That marks the true edge of the city.

But a third reason might be that the derelict land lacks inhabitants, activity and purposes, so paradoxically provides both a blank canvas for intoxicated imaginative flight and the historical blankness which O'Brien's personae turn to in bleaker moments.

4 Madmen, trespassers and tramps

The outsider figure represented by 'the madman of Hessle' is the personal equivalent of the marginal landscape O'Brien variously laments and celebrates. The interest of the outsider for O'Brien is displayed most neatly in 'Trespass', where the 'you' of the poem (really a variant of 'I') 'take[s] the smugglers' road beneath the fields' and contrasts pointedly with 'those/Who own [the fields], who *are* England' (1987: 21; my italics). The trespasser is an oppositional figure, more precisely an excluded figure who may not call the landscape he inhabits 'home', even if he is the human analogue of it. The countryside of 'Trespass' is recalled in 'Interior' (1995: 4–5), a longer and more complex discussion of the relationship between material and cultural ownership; and the theme of trespassing is revisited in 'So Tell Me' (1995: 24), a country-house poem which also recalls Douglas Dunn's 'In the Grounds' (1986: 101–2), linking O'Brien's trespassers implicitly with the battle over cultural ownership carried on by Dunn and Tony Harrison in the generation preceding O'Brien's (Kennedy 1996: 24–54).

But the outsider doesn't only figure as the hero of the working class, good-intentioned and serious like the speaker of 'In the Grounds'. Just as the landscape that is O'Brien's speciality is alternately, or sometimes simultaneously, grim and idyllic, so the redemptive power of dissenting outsiders is complicated and compromised by the traits and activities that make them transgressors and put them outside the wider society. The type is epitomised in the Ryan poems (1987: 33–44). They are 'the serious drinkers'; 'Their voices belong with the shit-stained ceramics/And doors riven off' (1991: 37); and they may be neither as eloquent nor as friendly as Dunn's personae: 'For reasons that never were your bastard business' (1991: 38). They may be tramps in a Dundee shopping centre, 'Their speechless cries left hanging in the cold/As human fog, as auditory stench' (1991: 21), their perverse capacity to shed light on the contemporary world expressed in their designation as 'boreal flâneurs'. Similarly a 'man lying prone with his history of bags' is the ostensible protagonist of 'Cold' (1991: 34), pitted against the circumstances in which

> They have opened the holds of the trawlers,
> The dozen not sold off or scrapped,
> And cold has been released into the city.

We are told ironically to 'Forget him', a person partly troubled and partly sustained by the

terrible promise, the one they can almost remember
From childhood, an atlas of oceans
That sounds like a mouthful of stones.

The poem's effect is not to forget but to record, humanising the tramp through its narrative of disenfranchisement, from the dismantled fishing fleet to the reference to Demosthenes.

5 Treatments and uses of history

O'Brien's claim to realism derives partly from the historical perspectives which make his people and places multi-dimensional. His depiction of the contemporary world is typically conscious of the past, usually treating the present as being 'after' some other period of greater glory, hope, importance, vitality or interest. There is is an atmosphere of disappointment in, for example, 'From the Whalebone' (1991: 39) and particularly 'A Corridor' (1991: 49), which traces the 'ghosts of the dead opportunities whose failures haunt English culture in the present' (Woodcock 1998: 44):

when we were much smaller
And quickly impressed by the minor displays
Of the State which would aim us
From cradle to grave (1991: 49).

Like '[t]he northern master Grimshaw', O'Brien 'underst[ands]/Belatedness: the passing of an age/That does not pass' (2007: 66). 'Everything is afterwards' (1995: 12); and that 'afterwards' is a habitual historical setting. It is a temporal equivalent of his landscapes' marginality, and therefore an essential element of the aesthetic which finds such places (and times) attractive even as it traces their role as symbols of disappointment and historical neglect.

The question of what was 'before' is a complex one. It might be that the depiction of afterwards doesn't go beyond the expression of a contemporary mood, the feeling of 'after' whose historical accuracy or derivation is not the poem's concern. For example, in 'The Disappointment', the statues of 'The Great' and the metaphor of music ending but continuing to echo gesture towards a historical contrast, but the poem's interest is not in making a detailed comparison but in expressing the contemporary *mood* as downbeat, mundane and ambiguously elegiac:

From windy plinths The Great outstare
The disappointment of their will

As dusk elaborates the park.
A duck-guffaw, a lacy hem of frost,
A salesman reading *Penthouse* in his car,
Pianoforte being taught and loathed –
Its sweet unwarranted effects,
Not brave enough for sorrow but still there (2002: 8).

'A salesman reading *Penthouse* in his car', in spite of (indeed, in virtue of) being resolutely contemporary, invites a contrast with a grander, more virtuous or at least less seedy past, but doesn't specify that past. Similarly, the speaker of 'Late' is 'embarrassed to have stayed/So long and on so little and for this' (2002: 12). 'Autumn gives way to midwinter once more,/As states collapse, as hemlines rise, [...] we miss both' (2001a: 1). These poems don't proceed to explicit historical comparisons or analyses. What matters is not so much the reality or otherwise of a view of British imperial history, as the way post-imperial material contributes to the evocation of a mood and the generation of an aesthetic, the expression of the speaker's lugubriously affectionate attitude to the contemporary landscape. 'Afterwards' is the historical equivalent of O'Brien's favoured geography, just as the outsider is the equivalent figure.

But it would be disingenuous to suggest that the past enters O'Brien's work only as a backdrop to the present. The elegies for the working life in 'Souvenirs' (1987: 24), 'Terra Nova' (1987: 25) and 'Dry Sailors' (1991: 35-6) do not describe the present moment's *feeling* of coming after another period, but the fact of doing so and the feelings which result. The poems, taking place in 'the era of unwork' (2007: 13), regret that 'now the [shipping] lines have all vanished' (1987: 24), that 'No lines of mileage link us now' (1987: 25) – noting incidentally that 'craft on the river [are]/Bound outwards from elsewhere to elsewhere' (1987: 25), bringing a further sense of marginalisation. But they also proceed to meditations of the history responsible for both the past and the present – i.e. to something less nebulous than feelings. 'Terra Nova', describing the 'new world' of a landscape without its industry, uses an extraordinary image of 'De La Pole coated in white' – a snow-covered statue of a member of the Hull family of merchants –

Facing inland, his arms by his sides,

Like a man among men in the queue
For the card, for the insult called
History, that won't pay the rent. (1987: 25)

The image reverses the polarity of pastoral representation, using an artificial aristocrat to stand in for the real working-class subject rather than an idealised shepherd to stand in for the real courtier. It also complicates the elegy, acknowledging that the heyday of working-class endeavour depended on capital interests no less than its decline. The poem ends by associating a history of working-class vitiation with England itself, and rejecting it:

Then I wished the whole place would embark,
The schools and mills and hospitals and pubs
In a team of all talents, a city of lights
Singing *Sod you old England, we're leaving*
For work, heading out on a snow-boat
To sail off the compass for home (1987: 25).

This expresses the defeatist yearning for blankness which occurs in several of O'Brien's poems, like the interest in maps and atlases, as we shall see below. But though the poem has spoken eloquently in justification of the anger with which it concludes, one might argue that the rejection of 'England' is a surrender of that term, or worse, the creation of a straw man. 'England' may have imperial associations, but it has others too, and evacuation of the contested territory may not contribute to its reconstruction.

The 'afterwards' used to generate a mood and that suggesting a historical thesis may not be easily separable, as in 'The Era' and in 'The Brighton Goodbye' (1991: 17). The latter is partly an expressionist sketch ('everyone seems to be leaving'; 'It is suddenly late. The afternoon yawns/And continues'), but elements of the sketch suggest a specific political agenda:

They cancel the hours with freesheets
Whose Gilbert and Sullivans, dogtracks
And fifteen quid bargains are clues
To a culture they've never known
Time or the passion to learn.

Agenda and mood work together to suggest each other. The technique's underlying

assumption is that 'politics and the private life... are inextricably bound up with each other' (O'Brien quoted in Woodcock 1998: 38), not only for the poems' subjects but also for the poet, whose work is always both expression of mood and espousal of political and/or historical viewpoint. This licenses not only the use of historical perspectives in depicting and elucidating personal lyrical concerns, but also the bringing to bear of personal lyrical impressions on historical problems, even if the latter looks a more problematic move. O'Brien's politics are inscribed not only in the historical perspectives of his poems, but also in the tone and imagery of his lyricism.

Even if the history that O'Brien's poems happen 'after' is a personal vision, the question remains what that vision is. Individual poems might fit various descriptions of the era O'Brien, like his mentor Douglas Dunn, is writing in, 'a coda or postscript to either the end of Empire, the collapse of the post-war consensus or the project of the Enlightenment' (Kennedy 1996: 31). But David Kennedy deals convincingly (1996: 51) with the 1940s and 1950s as the source period of O'Brien's sense of 'before'. The poems' ostensible contrast between English 'myth' and 'reality' is also a contrast between the world described in artistic and political narratives of the period (including empire, the post-war consensus and the Welfare State) and the world as experienced by O'Brien as a child. The picture is complicated by a further contrast between that past and the present world of O'Brien's adulthood. Such personal bases do not invalidate the poems' historical scope but must be acknowledged as a factor both vivifying them as poems and limiting them as socio-historical analyses.

6 'Not on the O.S. sheet'

It is clear that O'Brien's interest in landscape extends to questions of legal and cultural ownership. The map and atlas are his enduring symbols of empire and imagination. 'The redblooded atlas/ The empire bequeathed [him] to play with' (1987: 16) represents a wider world 'Made of names which are cold and exciting to say' (1991: 47) in contrast to a drab and distinctly un-imperial reality. In other words, the map symbolises not just empire *and* imagination, but imagined empire: the imperial versions of Englishness which the poems evoke and challenge are mediated, naturally, but by the speaker's earlier self as much as by the culture at large. It is partly this distance from personal experience – the quality which undermines their claim to represent a universal English identity – which makes them seductive.

The map invokes what Bruce Woodcock calls a 'mysterious sense of "elsewhere"' (1998: 41), representing for O'Brien's personae an imaginative world beyond the cold realities they inhabit. The speaker of 'Kingdom of Kiev, Rios das Muertes' spends '[a]ll afternoon, [while] the streets are deaf with snow' (1987: 60) entertained by '[l]ies concerning geography' (1987: 60) such as '*The Kingdom of Kiev is colder than Hell/And Los Rios das Muertes are many*' (60). The poem inscribes a love of trivia, but also suggests a complex imaginative relationship between the child-speaker and his home landscape. The cold, riparian Hull environment is suggested by the lines just quoted, vaunting it into the realm of imagination and validating it *as* a place (a validity often represented, as we shall see, by being named on a map); at the same time the landscape's casting as 'colder than Hell' and built on a 'River of Death' works to efface the place's identity, as against the richness of imagined places. The 'pointless collection of facts' (1987: 61) – literally the trivialising of history and geography, the sublimation of reality into trivia – is one of what Leela Gandhi calls 'the compelling seductions of colonial power' (Gandhi 1998: 4), but also a means by which the real identities of places and people become ignored. When the father '[c]ome[s] home bearing gifts from the blizzard', the speaker's home landscape has been almost entirely blanked out; and the final lines –

> The telephone won't ring, but if it does
> I'll know until I pick it up
> That the atlas has finally called (1987: 61)

– complete the seduction by which the speaker re-values his home and self in terms of an official record. O'Brien has commented that '"Kingdom of Kiev, Rios das Muertes"... is really what it purports to be, an elegiac celebration of general knowledge and the sense of possibility that the possession of useless information could give you when you were a kid, the sense of the scope of the world' (Watt 1991: 181); but the elegy's impact depends on the adult's perception of that sense of possibility as chimerical. Compare a similar effect in 'House', where the incantation of the names of Yorkshire rivers is a (quasi-magical) part of learning an identity and, literally, a place in the world:

> we recited
> Our tables, or *the Nidd the Ure the Aire*
> *The Wharfe the Calder and the Don.*

We examined our Flags of the World. (1995: 18)

These poems describe the subtle conditioning of English identity in 'the era of General Knowledge' (1987: 60), for instance how one can learn a great deal and yet remain politically innocent. 'Notes on the Use of the Library (Basement Annexe)' (1991: 27) describes 'the body of knowledge at rest', outdated and therefore no longer useful to political and historical forces. At the same time the recurrent interest in both maps and general knowledge helps place the period and milieu of the childhood whose idealisation stands at the centre of O'Brien's pastoral vision.

If maps are the tools and symbols of imperial power, presence in the empire is determined by presence on the map, and O'Brien's habitual landscapes and people are not on it. 'Where are we now?' asks the speaker of 'Ravilious', and answers himself, 'Not on the O.S. sheet' (2001a: 14), while in 'Terra Nova' 'home' is somewhere 'off the compass' (1987: 25). A speaker who is 'frightened and wrong/On a permanent basis' has a 'plan [to] escape the map' (1987: 62), i.e. to escape the 'official' England from which he feels excluded. 'From the Whalebone', a mediation on ageing and disappointment, ends with the speaker going to the seashore

> to be sure how it [the sea] stands,
> Grey-green, coming in, the horizon in place
> And the atlas beyond it unopened. (1991: 39)

The association of the sea and atlas with imaginative possibility is striking. It is the same feeling that complicates the elegies to lost shipping lines in 'Dry Sailors' and 'Souvenirs' – the end of Empire may be welcome, but its absence reduces the possibilities, both literally and imaginatively.

7 'Thalassa! Thalassa! Railways! Railways!'

Literal forms of transport are the habitual means of O'Brien's imaginative journeys, usually into an English myth and often taking place in, or back to, childhood. Several poems use real points of departure for their imaginative journeys (though often from where actual journeys are not possible), from the tramps in the bus station of 'Cold' to the disused docks of 'Dry Sailors', 'Le Départ' (2002: 15-6), 'Souvenirs' and 'Terra Nova'. The delicate balance between home and the exotic, the one's claim to authenticity and the other's to transcendence, is expressed in *HMS Glasshouse*'s

ambivalent epigraph, a Debussy quotation which describes a childhood memory of 'the railway passing in front of the house and the sea stretching out to the horizon. You sometimes had the impression that the railway came out of the sea or went into it – whichever you like' (1991: viii).'Working on the Railway' is provoked by a book, '*Lost Railways of England,*/Whose dust of the forties, the fifties,/Is making you sneeze' and indeed has a psychotropic effect, powering a daydream which becomes an imaginative journey to 'An hour of silence that seems to be England' (1991: 40). Note both the specification of period and how the word 'seems' recognises that the equation of England with an idyll is illusory. The railway has been a favoured device for O'Brien's meditations on English myths and history, for travelling into '*L'Angleterre profonde*, which does not exist' (2001a: 73). Partly this is a matter of the railway's association with particular landscapes and therefore with O'Brien's sympathy with such places and aesthetics of the marginal (see above). 'The Railway Sleeper,' whose title hints at the dreamlike, and hence idyllic, quality of the railway in O'Brien's personal mythology, stakes a claim for it as home with its echo of Xenophon: '*Thalassa! Thalassa! Railways! Railways!*' (2001a: 75). But the prominence of the railway as pastoral device also stems from its physical reality.

First, the train passenger is both in the landscape and isolated from it, able to view the country s/he is crossing without being an actor in it. The distance thus created makes the rail journey an occasion for meditation on the state and nature of the landscape being traversed. The train is a physical manifestation of pastoral artifice, the poet and reader temporary visitors looking through the frame of the train's windows. Larkin's 'I Remember, I Remember' (Larkin 1988: 81–2) may thus be considered a technical precursor of O'Brien's 'Special Train' and 'Working on the Railway', particularly for the way reality falls short of myth.

Second, the railway is literally a line across the landscape. It ranges across rural and urban areas, counties and compass points, facilitating great breadth of subject. The railway poem can therefore be an 'England' poem; the most famous example is Larkin's 'The Whitsun Weddings' (Larkin 1988: 114–6), although the first section of MacNeice's 'Autumn Journal' (MacNeice 1979: 101–3) is a more sustained use of this device. The sense of completeness this device generates can be an illusion. The 'Unmitigated England' of Betjeman's 'Great Central Railway: Sheffield Victoria to Banbury' (Betjeman 2001: 256–7) ranges between 'old' and 'new' money, and sees the factory

gate, but not the factory workers themselves or their homes. The poem appears to juxtapose fading idyll with modern reality, but actually substitutes a new idyll of national unity and prosperity. It might sometimes be the case that O'Brien's rail journeys perform a similar sleight of hand. The journey of 'Special Train' between idyll and 'reality' is actually one between two opposing idylls; and it treats the two destinations as wholly different places, with no suggestion that there might be a landscape between the two which combined aspects of both. In 'Working on the Railway' the separation of myth from reality is one of 'trivial, infinite distances', a lyrical paradox which better reconciles the peculiar relation between the two than 'Special Train's either/or.

Some O'Brien poems (e.g. 'Valentine' (1995: 25) and 'Propaganda' (1991: 12–13)) take rail stations as the point of departure for imaginative transports. David Kennedy has pointed out (1996: 49) that the setting of 'Propaganda' in a deserted station recalls Edward Thomas's 'Adlestrop', where a stupefied and indeed depopulated country idyll comes to stand for the whole of England. (Again, the idyll is reached from the present across a distancing no-man's-land, 'the whole abandoned stretch [of] bricked-up arches, flooded birchwoods'.) Though threatened with invasion, O'Brien's idyll (based on the propaganda war film) is hermetic and secure: the invasion occurs within, rather than shattering, the idyll:

> It's here that Germany in person calls
> By parachute, at first confused to death
> By Brough and Slough, by classroom spinsters
> Jumping on the hand-grenades. Their dull reports
> Alert the author sleeping at his desk,
> The curate and the mower in the fields. (1991: 12–13)

The conventionalisation of danger which propaganda performs – an extreme case of myth's conventionalisation of reality – is comforting. Yet such comfort is achieved at the expense of meaningful commerce with the world, and the poem ends with the suffocating realisation that 'no one will leave here tonight' (13).

Artifice and convention underlie the idylls that O'Brien interrogates. Peter Barry points out that for the speaker of 'Dry Sailors',

> the sense of personal dissatisfaction is induced by *images* of the sea in art and

> literature, for instance, by Atkinson Grimshaw's glamorous moonlit dockside scenes, and by the sea stories and narratives of Conrad, Melville, Coleridge, Poe and Verne, all of whom are cited in the poem, either by name or by a well-known motif from their work (2000: 121; Barry's italics).

The same genre is used in 'Dundee Heatwave', whose reference to '[n]orthern tropics' (1991: 23) is distinctly Conradian, and which also mentions 'young Hawkins and Hannay', explicitly conjuring the colonial sea-adventure story. 'Dundee Heatwave' represents a typical O'Brien response to artistic myth-making. (See also 'Symposium at Port Louis' (2007: 35–8) for an extended discussion of colonialism and its art.) The 'brittle old men' exist comfortably through 'still afternoons/In the cool of their money' but disappointed by the failure of life to live up to 'the promise' of the literature they grew up on. But the poem's re-imagining of 'the remote interiors' also recalls the colonial Gothic of Conrad's 'and this also has been one of the dark places of the earth' (Conrad 1991), casting doubt on the familiar by treating it as unfamiliarly other. The application of genre to atypical material (here, the marriage of colonial adventure and contemporary realism) is similarly estranging. The Gothic is a recurrent feature of O'Brien's work.

8 The Gothic

O'Brien's work, particularly of course the collection *Ghost Train*, has habitually touched on the topic of ghosts and haunting. O'Brien's characteristic technique of mixing realism with imagination – of transfiguring the real using devices of unreality – is also typically Gothic, as is the poems' 'celebration of the irrational, the outlawed and the socially and culturally dispossessed' (Hughes & Smith 2003: 1). 'Ghosts and the dead haunt' (Woodcock 1998: 43) a number of poems: dead Latin scholars (1995: 20); 'an old legal family' (2001a: 62); the ghost train of 'Special Train' (1995: 6–7); a pupil inhabiting an old grammar school (2001a: 33); and trespassers in the grounds of a stately home (1995: 24). The ghost-like character 'no one' actually looks rather like someone, specifically the 'people we claim to have loved,/Whose faces, when we study them, are yours' (1995: 23).

Ghostly figures provide a means for thinking about the relation between present and past, not just for 'journeys which... go into the past [but also,] more bizarrely, through which the past journeys into the present' (Woodcock 1998: 43). At the simplest level the

ghost provides a metaphor for comparing past and present, as in 'Autumn Begins at St James's Park, Newcastle' (1995: 9), where, '[m]ortgaged to football, the underclass raises/A glass to the ghost of itself/In a world without women or work'. But more often it takes on a greater imaginative reality. Woodcock notes that in O'Brien's poems '[t]he past comes back to haunt the present in strangely unsettling ways, as a familiar spirit almost co-existent with the present, and as an exiled land of lost or missed opportunities' (1998: 43). Perhaps the best example is 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright' (2007: 49–50), which begins by announcing that

> There are miners still
> In the underground rivers
> Of West Moor and Palmersville.

The underground location serves several purposes here. It is literally the ground which was mined and now provides graves for the dead, and figuratively the underworld into which the ghosts of the miners are 'going down in good order,/Their black-braided banners aloft'. But it is also a socio-political 'underground' which the working-class (ex)miners inhabit, invisible to contemporary England. And although they may be dead, they persist as history under the surface, not off the imperial map but behind it. 'The living will never persuade them/That matters are otherwise, history done'. Their presence in history is threatened with being 'sealed once for all', but it nevertheless gives them a sort of parity with the living in the business of defining a landscape more complicated than official topography allows. It is a clear example of what Peter Barry calls 'double visioning' and defines as 'the attainment of a multi-layered chronological perspective which typically superimposes one historical period upon another, so that the viewed entity becomes radically trans-historical' (46) – meaning, presumably, that the entity's historicalness is productively illuminated. But the use of ghosts to effect 'double visioning' is part of a Gothic treatment of the city, in the tradition of Eliot and Baudelaire, of which Barry is critical (48–52); '[i]n the derelict landscapes of O'Brien's childhood, the city had a Baudelairean glamour' (Woodcock 1998: 41).

'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright's representation of the underground landscape as hell is the most striking aspect of this Gothic treatment, which is also evident in, for example, 'Cities' (2001a: 34-5), 'At the Wellgate' (1991: 21), and a number of poems in *The Drowned Book* which connect water with death and waterways with the

underworld. 'The river road led to the end of it all' (2007: 20) and is inhabited by the dead. 'By Ferry' (2007: 10) treats the Humber of O'Brien's childhood as one of the rivers of Hades; just as those rivers converge in the Stygian marsh, so Hull 'is a city invaded by water, I mean in effect it's built on water so you're used to areas of standing water, and in fact the cellars flood at certain times of year and so on' (O'Brien, *Third Ear* interview quoted in Woodcock 1998: 41). The landscape of 'Water-Gardens', where 'Water looked up through the lawn/Like a half-buried mirror/Left out by the people before' (2007: 4), is specific to Hull even while it conjures a general post-imperial condition:

> We stood on their lino
> And breathed, and below us
> The dark, peopled water
>
> Was leaning and listening.
> There on the steps of the cellar,
> Black-clad Victorians
>
> Were feeding the river with souls.
> They left us their things.

Similarly 'River-Doors' (2007: 6) takes place in a landscape of 'Barges, drowned dogs, drowned tramps', specifically naming the Hull locations Drypool and Scott Street, and features 'the exciseman's ghost'.

It should hardly be surprising that *The Drowned Book* draws heavily on images of the underworld, published the year after, and written concurrently with, O'Brien's translation of Dante's *Inferno*. 'Drains' are 'where we are sunk for Barbaricchio's crew [the Malebranche of Cantos XXI–XXIII]/To heft upon their tuning-forks' (2007: 11). But the depiction of Hull as Hades is not merely hellish. The same poem appeals, 'Re-edify me, drains. Give me again/The under-city's grand designs' (2007: 11), combining the imaginative power of maps and of the underground. 'Water-Gardens' ends by telling us that 'In King Death's rainy garden/We were playing out.' (2007: 5) The demotic 'playing out' indicates that the speaker feels at home in such a landscape. The same strange balance of death and homeliness occurs in 'Eating the Salmon of Knowledge from Tins', where 'The water, if you glimpsed it, looked as thick/As jelly from a tin of Sunday ham… – But it was water so we fished' (2007: 8). Here O'Brien goes some way

to revisiting the idyll of 'Of Origins' and the notion that childhood idylls do not require idyllic settings. Meanwhile the innocence which thought that 'the murderers/Came from elsewhere' (2007: 9) and failed to register that 'TV['s] facts in black and white' – facts of 'polio', '[s]ick districts' fishers of children [and] Bradys-in-waiting' – might happen *here*, is related to 'Kingdom of Kiev, Rios Das Muertes's interest in trivia and general knowledge divorced from worldly experience.

O'Brien explains his fascination with the 'under-city' and its 'grand designs' by saying that:

> the city is what preoccupies me, and the idea of the city as a place – without putting it melodramatically – a place of simultaneously extreme pleasures and extreme terrors and extreme miseries interests me more and more (quoted in Watt 1991: 174).

These poems suggest not so much a gamut – the city as microscosm – as extreme ambivalence, the same place as both Hell and Paradise, the former identification for its physical attributes and history, the latter for its role as home. That role is taken up in 'Grey Bayou', where the 'mud-kingdom' becomes the speaker's Elysian fields:

> I would like my fire-ship to nose ashore
>
> Beside the sheds near Little Switzerland
> In memory of lust among the quarry-pits
> A thousand years ago, before the bridge (2007: 23).

(Little Switzerland is a disused quarry, now a 'Country Park', by the north side of the Humber Bridge.) Again Conrad's estuarial settings (Conrad 1998 passim) are evoked, particularly the traffic of the Thames in *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1991):

> I would like a flotilla of tar-coloured barges
> To happen past then, inbound for Goole,
> The odd crewman furtively smoking and staring (24).

The speaker's sympathy with the inscrutable crewman may be accounted for by the fecklessness which echoes 'Of Origins's 'I sat inside the culvert's mouth/Past teatime, smoking' and which adverts his outsider status even as his calmness shows that he is at home – *belongs* – in the landscape. But it may also originate in his silence, the opposite of the education ('Donne and Henry James' (1987: 47)) which estranges O'Brien's

speaker from that landscape. For the fire-ship's dissolution and absorption into the landscape represents both the speaker's death (the dissolution of his self) and his homecoming to 'the place…/In which nothing need happen especially'. The removal of historical indebtedness for which O'Brien's speakers yearn is achieved here by the removal of subjectivity, a living person becoming one more dead object in a landscape:

> A boat burning out on the flats
> Belongs with one more fording on horseback,
>
> The first cries of love in the elder-grove,
> Dark mild and cigarettes, the Mississippian
> Expanses of the unknown Grey Bayou,
>
> Its grey-brown tides, its skies
> That dwarf the bridge and with their vast
> Indifference honour and invoke the gods (24).

The same weary longing motivates Ryan's wish to become a worthless curio behind the bar (1987: 35–6); and equivalence of subject and object lurks in the background of 'The River in Prose', in which 'a barge [which] ceases to be unvisited and at rest and becomes derelict' (2007: 15) corresponds to the dying subject at the moment of death ('*here is a dream of extinction*' (2007: 16)). That moment is 'not officially recorded', like the lives of the people with whom O'Brien identifies. The barge's history is imagined:

> Say: *it carried coals from Selby, bashing through the swell like a Merrimack boat, part perhaps of Zachariah Pearson's dream of blockade-running empire... from the city whose MP was the abolitionist Wilberforce... The reformer stood at the end of his garden,... while round the corner the barge or its ancestor was going out to work in the cause of money.* (2007:16)

Zachariah Pearson, Mayor of Hull 1859–60, was a shipowner who built and owned blockade-runners for the South in the American Civil War. A pub in Hull and, more significantly, Pearson Park, the numinous location of several O'Brien poems, are named after him. The barge is imbued with a working-class subjectivity through its own history of 'work[ing] in the cause of money'. Its dereliction (death) serves to remove it from its historical context (it is '*so* "much decayed" *as no longer to merit a name*' (2007: 16)) into a purely aesthetic one, just as the speaker of 'Ryan's Farewell' aspires to 'step

through myself like a mirror,/To enter the index of air and have done' (1987: 42–3). It's worth noting too that this notion of the barge as ahistorical is the product of childhood innocence: 'You come here in 1959, in perfect ignorance' (2007: 16); note how the apparently 'realist' and even 'contemporary' depiction of the scene is again historical and idealised. The last section of the poem again evokes Conrad via '[c]annibals in skiffs' (17) and 'Belgian Symbolism' (17), with the latter also alluding to O'Brien's and Peter Didsbury's treatment of Belgium (Didsbury 2003: 135, 203; O'Brien 2000: 240) and Hull (Didsbury 2003: 199) as inherently comically absurd.

The correspondence of place and personality is confirmed by these remarks of O'Brien's: 'Place is very important in my writing; I'm very concerned to give, as it were, a dramatic sense of being in or being from a particular place, and various districts where I lived or spent time figure both overtly and subliminally in the poems a good deal. They provide... a kind of climate for the poems' (quoted in Woodcock 1998: 41). Pearson Park in particular provides the titles of two of O'Brien's collections (Woodcock 1998: 33) and a setting for a number of poems. Woodcock points out how (in 'The Park by the Railway') 'place is used to express a state of mind' (1998: 42) – not just in the sense of using the pathetic fallacy for lyrical effect, but also in the expressionist sense of having the speaker's state of mind reflect his environment and wider social circumstances. The identification of a person with the place they belong to implies a view of personhood as the product of social and historical forces, and underlines the fact that O'Brien's use of the Gothic is not merely an instrument for evoking mood but a device for thinking about English identity.

'A Coffin-Boat', O'Brien's elegy to Barry MacSweeney, imagines the dead poet's funeral barge (cf. the fire-ship in 'Grey Bayou'), '[p]acked up with books and manuscripts and Scotch,/In his box from the Co-op, a birthright of sorts' (2007: 12), passing along waterways which are simultaneously those of Newcastle (the Ouseburn (2007: 13) and the Tyne (2007: 14)) and those of Hades/Hell. The poem explains its interest in location, specifically a location neglected by the present and cut off from history, as a means of speaking about MacSweeney himself:

> This place
> Will be nothing, was nothing, is never, its tenses
> Sold off one by one until at last the present stands
> Alone like a hole in the air. But still

This is history, this silence and disuse,
This non-afternoon, and it must also serve
Biography – to whit, your man's (2007: 13).

'A Coffin-Boat' ends with the ghostly persistence of Barry MacSweeney's 'rage… by the waters of Tyne' (2007: 14), as if rage were the addition to place which constituted MacSweeney's personality. The same sort of effect occurs in 'AWOL' (1995: 21–2), where the speaker's absence from the past paradoxically becomes a sort of muted presence:

Between the main hall where I'm not
And the corridor's end where the milk-crates are stacked
By the hot-pipes and stinking already,
Where too I am not (1995: 21).

On the one hand this asks to be read as a ghost story. On the other, it is about how the speaker's actual identity diverges from that bestowed upon him historically, like the 'Plain facts of the matter/Which do not respond, being absent themselves' (1995: 22) – absent, that is, from a narrative through which the speaker has sought to understand himself.

9 'The England we speak for'

Several O'Brien poems concern themselves with speaking for those neglected by what he has called 'top-down history' (quoted in Watt 1991: 179), those whose identity is rendered precarious (ghostly) by that neglect. 'No One' (1995: 23) dramatises the 'general effacement' (1987: 58) of English people's identities, specifically those people who are left out of official historiographies. In 'Revenants', they, 'the unimagined/Facts of love and disappointment' (1995: 3) 'reassemble' as ghosts in a park. Although the poem asserts that 'We are the masters now', I'm not sure it manages to advance beyond grievance towards expanding on the nature of 'the England/We speak for', and this failure is recognised in the desperate reason given for gathering: 'As if there were something to add'. The lack of a clear definition of 'the England we speak for' – a lack which O'Brien's work partly attempts to rectify – is the result of other 'Englands' dominating the national imagination. (The poems are intermittently aware of their own presumption in attempting to speak for a class from which O'Brien's education has partially removed him (1987: 20, 47; 1991: 40).) 'Somebody Else' (1995: 1–2)

demonstrates how the subject is occupied by idylls, rather than the other way round:

> You live here on the city's edge
> Among back lanes and stable-blocks
> From which you glimpse the allegations
> Of the gardening bourgeoisie that all is well (1995: 1).

'It is somewhere you thought you had seen/From a train', and moreover, 'somewhere... you wished/You could enter', without realising that 'you already had' (1995: 1). The place is static and closed, comfortable yet sinister,

> The good place, unencumbered by meaning.
> For hours no one comes or goes:
> The birds, the light, the knowledge
> That this place is endlessly repeated –
> Is the known world and the elsewheres too –
> Will do the living for you. Were you moved
> To halve a gravestone you might find
> That *England, 2pm* was written through it (1995: 1),

and it fails to encompass the subject's living reality:

> You search the catalogue
> Of the Festival of Britain
> Repeatedly for evidence of you
> And think it must have been mislaid.
> When will you learn? What could it mean,
> Conspiracy, when everyone conspires
> Against themselves and does not know it? (1995: 2)

(Note how the poem's subject – 'you' – is historically specified via the reference to the Festival of Britain, but its thesis is universal – 'when *everyone* conspires/Against themselves' (my italics).) But the problem with English idylls is not only that they misrepresent the English, but also that they are compromised by the history of Empire, so that the contemporary English may not *want* to be associated with them. Yet rejecting 'Empire' involves rejecting history, what *has* actually gone before. When O'Brien elegises

> Coal and politics, invisible decades
> Of rain, domestic love and failing mills

That ended in a war and then a war
Are fading into what we are (2002: 4),

what's being regretted is not just the passing of working-class history, but also that history's implication in the wider machinery of empire. Elegiac feeling about lost working-class history is complicated by its ambiguous relationship with empire.

The wish to be free of historical complications is expressed quite clearly in 'Geography':

Out there is home, a hammered strand
By some unvisitable sea,
Beyond all empire and all sense,
Enduring minus gender, case and tense (1987: 64).

'Home' seems again to look rather like death. The 'will-to-forget', which Leela Gandhi describes as 'symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start – to erase painful memories of colonial subordination... is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter' (Gandhi 1998: 4). O'Brien shows us that the more thoroughly the colonial encounter is erased, the less a meaningful historical identity remains for the postcolonial subject to assume. The choice he offers – an either/or which may simplify the historical reality for dramatic effect – is between an anachronistic English identity or an identity which, in cutting itself free from imperial associations, also cuts itself free from its own history and loses its purchase on the world: to be haunted or to be a ghost.

10 Childhood, politics and quietism

The Gothic intrusion of imagination on the real is a central O'Brien trope; but it is not the only genre to intrude on his pastoral poems. Since the English idylls he recognises are 'all inventions, works of art, or forms of entertainment' (quoted in Watt 1991: 183), it is not surprising that his interrogations of those idylls have drawn on relevant artistic genres. England is imagined through a number of artificial mediations, particularly those of black-and-white film culture and the thriller/detective novel.

The role of genre in constructing, and constricting, the notion of England is explored in 'Propaganda', the nightmarish 'Thrillers and Cheese' (1991: 5–6), 'Entertainment' (1991: 11), and 'Boundary Beach' (1991: 15–6). The noir tone of these poems and their

casts of criminals accentuate O'Brien's habitual tone, painting the contemporary landscape as dystopian and at moral risk. Most interesting is 'The Genre: A Travesty of Justice' (2001a: 78–85), a long poem in which England is examined through the lens of the English detective novel. The setting is part idyllic and part sordid small-town reality ('are these our gnats in suspension/Above the canal, and is this our melancholy/Born of contiguity and quiet[?]'); the poem interrogates the acquisition of myth ('Your honour, I must now refer to those/Small bitter towns at the heart of the fifties') and the role of class in the detective novel genre ('The murdering-murderee classes of England'). While the poem's parody of its source genre is both comic and affectionate, its critique of the detective novel's simplifications, taken as a paradigm of the artificial English idyll, is quite serious.

The way poems like these respond to the rhetoric of 'England' – 'Applause, and then a shock of shame/At all that's irremediably done' (2001a: 10) – is consistent enough to suggest they represent a sustained interest in, and critical attitude to, the imperial nation. Yet we should not be misled into accepting the poems' ostensible contrast between artificial notions of England and the 'indifferent/Grey-green reality'. Their central opposition is not between myth and reality but between conflicting constructions of England, both mythical and idealised even if one is derived from cultural tradition and the other from remembered personal experience. 'To the Unknown God of Hull and Holderness' (1991: 51–2) elegises and mythologises a 1950s childhood, cataloguing 'the windy corridors of board-schools and clinics… the green MAIL and ... Queen of the South and Stenhousmuir… the teatimes of 1958... drains and bombsites… fathers on forty a day… comics and encyclopaedias… school-dinners and Blackjacks… [and] white dog-turds not found since the fifties'. Its ending, which refers to 'the book and the start of the trouble', gives a sense of O'Brien's difficult adult relationship to such material; '[l]ike the pastoral of rural life, whose essential characteristic is that it is written at a distance from the country and from a sophisticated point of view, the pastoral of childhood requires the adult perspective' (Marinelli 1971: 131). 'O'Brien's obsession with the world of the late 1940s and 1950s' (Woodcock 1998: 44) is in evidence in childhood idylls presented or referred to in 'How Ryan Got His Start in Life' (1987: 33), 'The Amateur God' (2002: 28), 'In the Fifties' (1987: 58), 'The Dampers' (1987: 11), 'Eating the Salmon of Knowledge from Tins' (2007: 8–9), 'Water-Gardens' (2007: 4–5), 'Praise of a Rainy Country' (2007: 76–7), 'Sports Pages' (2001a:

50–8), 'The Allotment' (1987: 20), 'Special Train' (1995: 6–7), 'House' (1995: 18), 'Of Origins' (1995: 19), and others. Although the historical and political implications of O'Brien's work are clearly seriously meant, the pastoral opposition between childhood innocence and adult disillusion is as important as the one between national idyll and local reality. He speaks for himself but also on behalf of a cultural and social set which his poems attempt to reconfigure from a confused variety of sources. Paradoxically, the confusion inscribes precisely a sense of identity garnered from a disparate range of myths and experiences. The personal, lyrical aspect of the work does not negate, but depends on, the political, social-critical aspect as its motivating force.

Nevertheless, the urge to see the locations of his own real childhood as idyllic may contradict the sense of political injustice. This tension lies at the heart of O'Brien's treatment of England. When not kept in balance it may become obvious and problematic. 'Unregistered' (1987: 23) depicts a landscape which is empty because of the Miner's Strike:

> Six cranes where Baltic vessels come
> As if home to the flatness of the land
> Which is only not water by virtue
> Of no one agreeing to drown (1987: 23).

It's hardly Merrie England, but the lugubrious comedy of these lines and others ('Six cranes for which nowhere/Is far too precise'; 'That's the street, that's the pub/And the poster of Showaddywaddy'), while preventing the tone from being either sneering or desperate, also draws the teeth of the political conclusion:

> Six cranes where Baltic vessels come
> With coal to break the strike.
> *Does Mr Scargill think we think*
> *The revolution starts like this?* (1987: 23)

It's an oddly unsatisfying ending, because its seriousness makes the reader wonder whether she has misread the preceding material, whose joking tone is no longer quite appropriate. The discrepancy comes to light because the political content is so overt and so abruptly introduced. Elsewhere it is better accommodated through the power of O'Brien's rhetoric.

While a sense of political injustice clearly motivates many of the poems, one might ask

whether the correction of those injustices is served by what constitutes a pastoral quietism. The margins are to be valued precisely because they are devoid of political and mythological power, but it's difficult to see such an evaluation as an act of resistance rather than simply a capitulation. The problem may be exacerbated by my reading above which may seem to make the politics merely part of the lyrical apparatus, eliding their capacity to effect real change still further. But publishing a poem is not the same act as marking a ballot paper. O'Brien might question whether it is the business of a poem to stake a claim for power, or just to celebrate those places and moments which cannot be made powerful:

> The birds, as they pin out
> Their musical maps
> On the blue and gold air,
> Make England respectable, almost.
> ...
> We find ourselves at home
> Amid this uninspected calm
> Too large to call an accident
> Or any use to man or beast,
> Except, tonight, for living in (1987: 55).

This is not the same as saying nothing can be done. If O'Brien's occasional reaching for an ahistorical identity recalls the 'gesture towards a realm beyond the social and historical' which Seamus Heaney observes (1988: 19 & passim) in Larkin, O'Brien's attitude to such a retreat has more misgivings. (More generally, Larkin, Douglas Dunn and O'Brien show a progressively more complicated realist practice, alongside significantly different attitudes to their common subject, the gap between provincial British identity and declining British imperial mythology.) 'The Ideology' (2001a: 8–9) is dismissive of 'the desire/To pause, to repose, like a white-trash Horatian/Instructed in death as in what comes before it'; and 'Betweentimes' (1991: 30) is explicitly conscious of the tension between anger at a place's history and a fondness for the place itself. This tension might be problematic but it is also fruitful, and typically pastoral. It motivates much of O'Brien's work, stemming from two incommensurate responses to the world, the one cognitive and political, the other aesthetic:

> This is how waiting turns into a life,
> In the hour it seems would explain

If the mind could forget what it thinks
About failure and history and money, and watch
How aesthetics takes leave of its senses,
In love with the facts of the matter,
The blue light and derelict happiness (1991: 30).

Chapter 3: Peter Didsbury's pastorals of rhetoric and religion

Peter Didsbury's work has been described as 'a kind of tatty or compromised pastoral' (Jenkins 1987), and this must be largely an allusion to the landscapes his poems usually inhabit. Those landscapes are broadly similar to the settings of Sean O'Brien's pastorals, though they are different in some significant details. For example, O'Brien's locations tend to be public in character (parks, pubs, railway stations) whereas Didsbury's tend to be private (gardens) or experienced alone (bus journeys, walking to work). Both poets draw heavily on Hull and Humberside, and demonstrate a similar aesthetic of landscape. But this is not the only pastoral aspect of Didsbury's work. In this chapter I shall discuss not only Didsbury's attitude to landscape but also his engagement with pastoral's generic features, and his recurrent interest in religion and rhetoric, both of which are essential to the pastoral he writes.

Didsbury shares with O'Brien not only a similar attitude to a similar landscape, including specific features such as rain (e.g. Didsbury 2003: 63, 82, 107, 131–2) and railways (e.g. Didsbury 2003: 26, 38, 63), but also an interest in history. Yet that interest takes a very different form, making only oblique comparisons with the present and insisting on continuity and the value of tradition, in spite of the fact that Didsbury's technique is markedly non-traditional in some ways. Like O'Brien, Didsbury interrogates old idylls and creates new ones, writing into the tradition an identity – a social, historical and linguistic milieu which is at once 'civil, moral and spiritual' (Didsbury 2003:12) – on whose behalf he speaks. And like O'Brien, Didsbury does so partly by blurring distinctions between subject and object, person and landscape, idyll and reality. But Didsbury's work rarely utilises childhood idylls in the way that O'Brien's does; 'Truants' (Didsbury 2003: 103) is an exception. The typical Didsbury pastoral does not present a contrast between utopian past and dystopian present, but rather imagines the present as strikingly, if fleetingly, utopian, in contrast with the usual pedestrian view of it, 'find[ing] the visionary in the midst of urban squalor' (Greening 2003).

1 Subverting genre

Sean O'Brien's description of Didsbury as having 'a way of seeing for which most contemporary categories are meaningless' (O'Brien 1988a) – echoed in John Osborne's comment that 'It is as though Didsbury has resolved to write his way out of category restrictions... His poems, so to speak, won't toe the line' (1988: 7) – rightly insists on Didsbury's originality, not to say peculiarity, but the claim that categories, contemporary or otherwise, are meaningless in relation to Didsbury's work is false. In fact genre is essential to many of the poems, from the parody of the medieval lyric which David Lloyd (1995: 588) points out in 'A Troubadour' (Didsbury 2003: 56) to the cartoon/film-noir setting of 'The Devil on Holiday' (Didsbury 2003: 74–8). Here I am interested in two genres, mainly pastoral, which I shall argue represents Didsbury's characteristic mode; and the Gothic, which, as in Sean O'Brien's work, plays an important role in Didsbury's pastoral re-imagining of the world.

It's true that Didsbury rarely plays by the rules in his treatment of genre. His allusions to pastoral tend to be subversive, or at least to apply pastoral forms and images through the filter of his peculiar imagination. 'Whichever way one applies the term [*genre*], Didsbury's writings constitute a positive means of making trouble, a challenge to complacent habits of thought and assumption' (John Osborne 1988: 24). For instance, in the pastoral retreat of 'Pokerwork' (Didsbury 2003: 86), the speaker rejects idyllic kitsch, preferring to 'rent the only shack/on the whole damn mountain/that wasn't called *Cloudy Pines, White Smoke Table*,/or *Iron Moon-Kettle Madly Boiling Over*'. 'The Romance of Steam's elegy for steam engines (Didsbury 2003: 26), not only the famous ones but also those that will 'take no… part in any kind of history', obliquely recalls Gray's 'Elegy'. 'The Village, or, Festive Schadenfreude' (Didsbury 2003: 27) presents the collision of a contemporary village with its various ideal forms as determined by local history, the 'Heritage' industry and the dangerous folk-imagination of the speaker. 'A Bee' (Didsbury 2003: 92) shows self-conscious pastoral artifice, as does the Sterne homage 'A Winter's Fancy' (Didsbury 2003: 106). An interest in artifice is also evident in 'In Silence' (Didsbury 2003: 45) and especially 'Pastoral' (Didsbury 2003: 23), where a comic treatment of the genre (in the manner of Didsbury's theology poems; see sections 4 & 5 below) generates a passive or even narcotic idyll, where 'Deer stand motionless underneath the trees,/cardboard cut-outs, staring, unwieldy', and

> Steaming cattle stand and dream in the byre. Lofts groan
> with meat and bread, berries, polished fruit. Spilt grain
> lines the trackway verges with gold. And all things
> are content, all are at rest, sing their small still song
> of contentment, and of rest (Didsbury 2003: 23).

Both 'The Sleepers' (Didsbury 2003: 158) and 'Building the Titanic' (Didsbury 2003: 174) draw on the notion of 'cold pastoral'; Didsbury's note to 'Building the Titanic' reads,

> The 'Grecian Urn' syndrome. These workers are fixed as irrevocably, in a well-known contemporary photograph, as Keats's 'marble men and maidens overwrought' on the sides of the urn. A 'Cold Industrial' (Didsbury 2003: 216).

These two poems both speculate about their ostensible subjects in order to reflect on artistic artifice itself. (Peter Barry's 'reductive and wrong-headed reading' (Wheatley 2001b) of 'Building the Titanic' (Barry 2000: 112–6) is based on his assumption that the poem is performing a cold-pastoral imagining of the photograph's subject, rather than self-consciously meditating on the genre itself.) 'The Restoration' (Didsbury 2003: 164) applies the notion of cold pastoral to film, where the idea of running the film backwards raises the possibility of returning to childhood idylls: 'Birthday candles... could be seen to go back on the cake.//And brutal clowns... could by invisible hawsers be recalled':

> There could be restored, in the cinemas of time,
> even from splinters of wood and ruined foods,
> the many morsels of glistening bright gâteaux,
> the luminous frames we imagine preceded the action (Didsbury 2003: 164).

Such examples show a playful and ingenious interest in the pastoral genre: while the poems do not submit to convention, they utilise it to generate meaning. But the pastoral element of Didsbury's work is not exhausted by this sort of device. His poems are the expression of a pastoral sensibility, one whose most striking characteristics are its relation to a particular contemporary landscape, its depiction of that landscape as the idyllic setting for religious experience, and its pastoral retreat into a sheer delight in rhetoric.

'Elegiac Alternatives' (Didsbury 2003: 97) plays with the pastoral genre in offering a choice of two idylls, an ostensibly drab contemporary landscape and a historically-tinged Romantic landscape. The latter, where 'Rabbits graze the edge of a cornfield at dusk', is given a sense of period comic unreality by the presence of 'A wicker bath-chair [which] hangs in the top of a tree'; and this unreality underlines, and undermines, the artifice and Romantic commitments of the elegiac climax:

> Flame goes aloft in the rigging of the thorn
> to view the sun as its sinks below the hill.

The 'alternative' Didsbury offers is less comic, and less indebted to genre. Although it would be too crude to suggest that the reader is intended to reject the Romantic idyll in favour of the contemporary one, it's clear that the presentation of the two together is meant to insist on the viability of the contemporary landscape as an idyllic place.

That landscape is recognisable as Humberside, Didsbury's home region: it is conjured geographically by 'the river' and 'the distant wingspans of ocean-going birds' and historically by 'the hull of an unladen barge', punning on Hull and evoking the city's post-industrial malaise. Both elements work towards a mood of flatness and emptiness (The figure of the empty barge recurs in 'The Shore'; see section 5 below) which may be supposed appropriate to the Hull landscape (cf. Sean O'Brien's 'Grey Bayou', 2007: 23–4). The passage's status as elegy might be conferred either thematically by the disappearance of industry (of industrial *life*, as it were), or formally by the delicate and metaphysical tone (e.g. 'glimpsed at the moment of their sudden coalescence/into one great pensive Form'). But whereas O'Brien might make more or less explicit a connection between the two – the historical subject and the tonal means of expression – Didsbury leaves the reader to wonder. What's important here is not a historical critique but the presentation of the two passages together as two distinct and possibly contradictory aspects of Didsbury's sensibility; the urge to see the contemporary landscape as idyllic and the fascination with idyllic depictions of the past.

In the early poem 'The Flowers of Finland' Didsbury declares 'I think I am moving towards some kind of expressionism' (Didsbury 2003: 196), and one way in which this

might be true is his capacity to make the reader accept his attitude to place as properties of the place perceived:

> The rain is thinking of stopping
> but the sky can't be bothered to clear.
> ...
> There's the sound of a bell.
> A far-off train.
> The cries of marshbirds (Didsbury 2003: 44);
>
> First the estate with its daft new names,
> then the suburbs with their daft front doors,
> then the ruined Town, with its sweet daft secrets. (Didsbury 2003: 199)

Both these examples are faintly comic, but participate nevertheless in the same muted and elegiac tone of poems like 'Three Lakes by Humber' (Didsbury 2003: 176) and 'One Mile Wide', which celebrates the 'Way it gets dark here./Down by the water/the sky turns out its pockets/and goes to sleep in the grass' (Didsbury 2003: 98). The landscape is characterised by exhaustion and emptiness; the poems focus on its everyday aspects:

> A truck full of shingle
> crawls past our window
> on its way from the river
>
> Its headlights are on
>
> and it has the words
> Ocean Derived Aggregates
> printed on its side
>
> I did not see this yellow truck
> just heard you tell me of it
>
> I was looking at the rain,
> watching the water
> bouncing off the pavement
> and sluicing down the drains (Didsbury 2003:107).

Rain is a recurrent motif in Didsbury's work (e.g. 'I always loved the rain' (Didsbury 2003: 63); 'a fellow pluviophile' (Didsbury 2003: 82); see also 'The Rain' (Didsbury 2003: 131–2)), and a suitably downbeat symbol of ordinariness. The opposition of 'shingle' to the inflated 'Ocean Derived Aggregates' embodies the speaker's pastoral attitude, preferring the traditional word and mocking the spurious contemporary alternative (a typical Didsbury device). Note also how the truck's contents subtly evoke Humberside's shipping industry.

Similarly 'The Pub Yard at Skidby' (Didsbury 2003: 169) lies in an Eden whose 'cow parsley and... dock' are 'marvellous' precisely in being unassuming and commonplace, botanical analogues of the marginal place 'on the borders of somewhere "very large"'. For that reason 'significance floods in'. Sean O'Brien points out that '[t]he expansion of the mundane here-and-now into something rich with possibility is characteristic' (O'Brien 1998: 140). And 'The Pierhead' (Didsbury 2003: 129), whose tone and subject recall Roy Fisher's *City* (2005: 27–44) as distinctly as the mixture of free verse and prose, dramatises the same tension between complaint and celebration (as well as taking a similar subject) that I identified in the work of Sean O'Brien:

> The name of the goddess of arts and trades is written on a board, painted in the livery of one of the old railway companies. The windows of the pub beneath it stare at the empty shore a mile away, at other windows, jugged with grey light. Mute and opposite hostelries wear faces like slices of meat, haslet for example, and wait for Byron to swim between them, for the ticket office is locked,
>
> the last ferry has gone. (Didsbury 2003: 129)

'Queen Victoria's Chaffinch' (Didsbury 2003: 46) is set, like many of O'Brien's poems, in Pearson Park in Hull, in an area known as the Avenues which has attracted both writers throughout their lives (O'Brien, 2007, pers. comm,, 1 March; Didsbury, 2007, pers. comm., 29 March).

The question whether such landscapes and landscape features hold particular value in the work is more complicated. O'Brien has suggested (2007, pers. comm., 1 March; 1998: 145) that Didsbury's work idealises and elegises a specific milieu, though specifying that milieu is a business which needs must reduce the poems' delicacy and preci-

sion. It may vary from poem to poem. Generally speaking Didsbury's poems celebrate (for a large number of them *are* celebrations) a life basically domestic and personal – 'the presiding muse is a domestic one' (John Osborne 1988: 32) – though they are also informed by the landscape and history of Hull, by English poetry and history, by various forms of religion and by Didsbury's interest in trivia, arcane and general knowledge as embodied in his professional activity as an archaeologist. Critics have been keen to discover the theoretical and socio-political aspect of that celebration – for example how 'The Hailstone' (Didsbury 2003: 146–7) opposes its civic lower-middle- and working-class England of 'the aproned pluvial towns' to the implied Thatcherism of the 'woman sheltering inside the shop/[with] a frightened dog/which she didn't want us to touch' (John Osborne 1988: 25; Kennedy 1996: 94; see also Wheatley 2004: 50). The contrast between the speaker's benevolent civility and the woman's hostility provides the ground for what O'Brien calls 'a waking-up to the ordinary' (1988b: 49), the realisation that

> It is all still true,
> a wooden drawer is full of postal orders, it is raining,
> mothers and children are standing in their windows,
> I am running through the rain past a shop which sells wool,
> you take home fruit and veg in bags of brown paper,
> we are getting wet, it is raining (Didsbury 2003: 146).

The poem's epiphanic celebration of 'the ordinary' is a pastoral retreat from the ideology inscribed in the incident with the dog, and this oblique comparison is one of the reasons the poem is more than 'mere nostalgia' (O'Brien 1998: 145). Although, as we shall see, the social-critical aspect of Didsbury's work is limited, his celebration of ordinariness implies a critical attitude to what is not ordinary (the powerful, the grand), and in this sense it draws on a classic function of the pastoral tradition. David Wheatley is right to point out that 'in "The Hailstone" Didsbury is not raising questions of politics or community only to turn from them back to lyric quietism' (2001a: 56), but his argument that the poem 'show[s] how concepts of politics or community have begun to drift out of earshot in Thatcher's Britain' (2001a: 56) misses the extent to which the poem listens for and reclaims those concepts in the minutiae of ordinary life. It rediscovers social values precisely in its retreat.

Didsbury might argue that the external circumstances of his life and the poems' composition are coincidental and unimportant (e.g. he has remarked that 'one very prosaic rea-

son' for his recurrent interest in gardens 'is that for much of my life I never had enough money to be anywhere else' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46; see also Williams 2007: 7). But the success of a poem like 'The Hailstone' in 'restor[ing]… the original vividness of relations with local and domestic culture' (O'Brien 1998: 145) depends on the reader saying, with O'Brien, 'These are the bits and pieces we're made of' (1988b: 49). The 'authentic' ordinariness that the poem returns to and celebrates consists in that 'local and domestic culture', that is, the identity which the poem conjures for its speaker. As with the landscapes of O'Brien's childhood, Didsbury's 'ordinary' is more mediated than it might appear. The 'waking up' which the poem represents is the substitution of one milieu for another. The one is traditional (e.g. the high-street shops), provincial in a non-pejorative sense ('aproned pluvial towns'; Didsbury's whole aesthetic is provincial in this sense, as is O'Brien's), with concomitant values of civility and plain-spokenness ('shingle'); the other is ideological ('something to do with class'), metropolitan in a pejorative sense (the rare Didsbury poems which take place in London, e.g. 'The British Museum', are uniformly critical of the centre), with concomitant values of ownership and grandiloquence ('Ocean Derived Aggregates'). (As with O'Brien's contrast between 'myth' and 'reality' in, for example, 'Special Train', the dichotomy may be simplified or exaggerated for rhetorical effect.) To the extent that a reader assents to the 'we' of O'Brien's 'These are the bits and pieces we're made of', the substitution of milieu provides a *sense* of waking up to an authentic ordinariness. The literary substitution of poetry cast in a certain idiolect and drawing on a certain milieu for the 'unexamined cant' of 'withered rationality' (O'Brien 1988b: 49) recreates for the reader the speaker's 'momentary experience of the uncanny' by which 'the mind wakes up to its own contents' (O'Brien 1998: 145). But some sharing of mental contents – of idiolect and milieu – may be required. The reader's assent may depend on the reader sharing aspects of Didsbury's class, nationality, region, education and historical period. But this difficulty illustrates how Didsbury's landscape are not mere background for the poems; on the contrary the identity of self with landscape, and the relations between the two, are habitual subjects of poetic enquiry.

3 Gardens

Those relations are often complex, partly because Didsbury, claiming that 'the discursive mode/is lost to me behind swords of conjoined fire' (Didsbury 2003: 124), is happy

for apparent obscurity to remain when the poem comes to an end. '[T]he poem's task is to note rather than define' (O'Brien 1998: 140) the poet's numinous experience of landscape. For example, 'Red Nights' (Didsbury 2003: 114) raises more questions than it answers about an observer's relation to a landscape, the means of observation and representation and the feelings and questions such observation provokes. Descriptive, emotional and abstract elements jostle alarmingly in the same sentences, and the poem refrains from separating them or allowing a single aspect dominance:

> The red industrial nights of summer
> are typed on the back of a frightening letter,
> one that will cause you an ongoing pain.
> And tell you as little of the reasons why
> as you'd expect from effete vernacular verses (Didsbury 2003: 114).

The cumulative effect is coherent and unified, even if the substance is not: the poem's subject is the complex relation between the landscape and the thinking, feeling observer which inhabits and/or imagines it. Similar complexities underlie 'Part of the Bridge' (Didsbury 2003: 57) and 'The Guitar' (Didsbury 2003: 122–3).

Often the role of landscape in Didsbury's meditations is simpler. The short poem which best illustrates how the landscape functions in Didsbury's work may be 'Upstairs' (Didsbury 2003: 187): its rebuke insists on the value both of marginal places and backwaters, and of the knowledge that attention to such places can bring:

> You say you are surprised
> by what lies behind walls,
> by allotments for example,
> and their networks of decay.
> ...
> You should learn to look
> elsewhere in cities.
> Behind that main street yesterday
> there were swans,
> on the newly cleared drain.

Didsbury is a Nature poet inasmuch as the self's observation of and interaction with his environment provides sustenance and solace. The presentation of that environment is not idealised, but it is nevertheless represented as idyllic. The downbeat tone and ordinariness of the subject matter – everyday events and objects in a neutral or faintly be-

nign municipal setting – underwrite rather than undermine the epiphanies to which they give rise. Such quietism brings a basically Romantic device closer to the classicism of Horace:

> Trees conceal
> a lake with water-birds.
> ...
> A simple song of impoverishment
> is streaming like warmth
> from the surface of the planet (Didsbury 2003: 54);
>
> A dog runs forward barking
> through the cold conjubilant air and birds
> of a springlike winter morning (Didsbury 2003: 45)

The Horatian comparison is one of subject matter and location, tone and technique. Domestic settings and especially gardens are important Didsbury locations, in which he 'cultivate[s] his wise passivity on an anti-heroic scale' (Wheatley 2001a: 52). Meanwhile 'Horace is the uncommon Common Man: the mago who distills... great poetry out of what seems to be the most prosaic thinking... with endless patience he transmutes the commonplace into uncommon grace' (Alexander 1999: xvii–xviii). In places the work also shows an affinity with that of Andrew Marvell. Didsbury has said that 'I share [with Marvell] the belief that "the garden" is a very proper place for the human being to inhabit, a boundary location between culture and nature, the wild and the sown' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46). Indeed 'Back of the House' (Didsbury 2003: 175), whose dreamlike pastoral meditation alludes to 'The Garden's 'Annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade' (Marvell 1976: 101; see Wheatley 2004: 45–6), backs up that allusion by referring to Marvell by name ('A pile of brushwood makes flagrant promises/to Andrew Marvell'). (Note how Didsbury's poem, like Marvell's country-house poems, takes the real house of a friend as its subject (Wheatley 2004: 46).)

'Back of the House's interrogation of pastoral artifice, gardens and Englishness makes it 'a darker place than Marvell's garden' (Didsbury quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46; note also 'Home Town' (Didsbury 2003: 115), where the pastoral–municipal setting bears a Gothic tinge in the manner of O'Brien). Indeed, Didsbury notes that the naming of Marvell takes place 'in relation to public burning, an attendant possibility in his day' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46), and that '[i]n this poem, [the garden is] an enclosed place

where I can safely indulge in some indolent imaginative speculations about Englishness and then step away from them' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46). It starts with the premise, 'Sick of England, but happy in your garden', before going on to demonstrate the ways in which 'England' and 'your garden' are implicated in each other, qualifying the claim not only of being happy in the garden but also of being sick of England.

A number of shorter poems (Didsbury 2003: 67, 95, 111) show a less problematic relationship to the garden, which provides an arena for the self to forget its public obligations and be at leisure. But the garden's privacy is balanced against its status as place of retreat, so that it always recalls implicitly the public life which it disdains. It therefore allows some delicate and resonant celebrations of civil society:

> The rules are exciting:
>
> I may not dump night-soil,
> I may not boil soap,
> I may not erect steam roundabouts.
> Very old and exciting. (Didsbury 2003: 205)

Didsbury's garden poems are therefore related to his domestic (Didsbury 2003: 96, 154, 185, 190) and municipal poems in contributing to a vision of pastoral ordinariness. Poems which see the poet at large in public parks (Didsbury 2003: 45, 54) and streets (Didsbury 2003: 15, 126–7, 133), on buses travelling to work (Didsbury 2003: 16, 39, 50, 82, 187), place his private meditations delicately inside the public sphere. The suggestion of a social context prevents his pastoral retreat becoming total. This balance is exemplified in 'A Natural History' (Didsbury 2003: 18) where 'the formal necessity/of the months of May and June, the fact of the gardens/which lie behind the street in which I live' are used as a means of gesturing towards shared understanding in the face of the realisation that 'What that means to you I can never know'. The uneasy and paradoxical relationship of public tradition with private experience has been one of Didsbury's most fruitful themes. The tension is expressed in the pairing of epigraphs to *That Old-Time Religion*: '"Things we make up out of language turn into common property" (Roy Fisher); "Still, individual culture is also something"(Arthur Hugh Clough)' (Didsbury 2003: 52). Although the concern with private, epiphanic experience links Didsbury with the Romantic tradition, the everyday world he celebrates as giving rise to such epiphanies is

always socially contextualised and not simply 'natural', so the celebrations always imply claims of value about the social setting.

4 Religious experience

The experiences which the garden poems record are not random. The first section of 'Jottings from Northern Minsters' (Didsbury 2003: 94–5) describes a minster as 'limestone jazz//woodland clearing/with stiff-leaved clarinet', a theme taken up in the fourth section where the poet, drunk, 'staggers down to the end of his garden./Directs a stream of piss at a clump of bluebells' only to have a vision of the garden itself as a cathedral, 'the lunar chalice... spilling its silver light/through the delicate tracery/of his neighbour's mountain ash'.

The religious terms of this transfiguration are significant. The garden becomes the scene of religious experience, and in Didsbury's pastoral the locations and events of everyday life are the stuff of epiphany. 'The Butchers of Hull' (Didsbury 2003: 178) likens butcher's shops to 'Catholic shrines, like Walsingham':

> I stopped on their streaming forecourts, all across the town.
> I read their 'beast heart', and felt my own heart fill.

The vernacular 'beast heart' emphasises that the mundane is constructed through a specific milieu – which is itself accordingly sanctified by the epiphanic experience ('Beast heart' also echoes Daniel 4:16, 'Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him'). Sean O'Brien has written of Didsbury's 'powerful grasp of the particular (especially of place) which gives equal attention to the mundane and the numinous' (1998: 139); in fact the two are typically treated as identical, not just present together. The fantasy of 'Two Urns' (Didsbury 2003: 206), another cold pastoral, is insistently embedded in a 'specific garden', and the transformation involves treating muted pastoral images ('the flight of birds, woodsmoke, silence') as equivalent in value to the vast and impressive ('white fire', 'the tracks of this or that slow planet').

In 'Two Urns' a narrative mechanism explains the transformation of the mundane: the urns are totems which 'come [alive] at night'. But not all poems present 'the sacrament/of the present moment' (Didsbury 2003: 15) in terms of magical or meta-

physical transformation. They may be as straightforward as 'realis[ing] how good it can feel/to allow the cold/its claims upon your warmth' (Didsbury 2003: 38). But they remain mysterious and 'keep on happening':

> The rain can contain them,
> Or whatever is lush –
> They make abandoned holdings fertile,
> And are often to be found
> Alongside the derelict (Didsbury 2003: 171).

The connection of religious experience with the mundane tends to treat items as totemic and places as holy:

> His in-trays are everywhere, like the mouths of Avernus.
> This month, my prayers have all gone down
> through that jar on the hearth, whose green glass wall
> collects intransigent air, and tells tales
> of the life of the Buddha. Why complain?
> ...
> The anguish of a single human soul
> may flow into the world's receptacles,
> jars, boots, boats, words, hollow logs and
> emptied bottles of mineral water,
> and therefore I invoke them all (Didsbury 2003: 124).

The 'mundane epiphany' of 'Cemetery Clearance' (Didsbury 2003: 32) rehabilitates the notion of a holy place. But the Catholicism of 'Our Lady of the Bolt-Croppers' is tempered in an agnostic conclusion:

> To *whatever* is able to will to invest
> with such an image of the fitness of things
> even this sorry enterprise
> honour and praise is forever abundantly due [my italics].

The ambiguity between general religious feeling and specific teaching is typical, and raises the slippery question of whether the poems individually or collectively adhere to a particular religious position.

Sean O'Brien, drawing only on Didsbury's first two books, catalogues more than sixty religious references (1988b: 48). Some items are only tenuously religious ('phantoms',

'the moon', 'Basho on death') and others are abstract ('redemption', 'damnation', 're-pentance', 'the soul'), but the rest name or allude to an array of religions, including the gamut of Christian denominations as well as paganism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Tao and at least one of Didsbury's own invention (the 'new kind of god for the northlands' (O'Brien 1988b: 48) of 'The Rain' (Didsbury 2003: 131–132)). Meanwhile a number of conspicuous comic poems make mockery of theology and literalist views of religion. 'That Old-Time Religion' (Didsbury 2003: 64–5) and 'The Devil on Holiday' (Didsbury 2003: 74–8) both mix their theological subjects with incongruous generic features, those of 'a Noel Coward play' (Didsbury quoted in Smith 2000: 186) and 1940s American film culture respectively. (The role of genre in creating humour is important here; as John Osborne points out, 'rather different are those poems, like 'Staff Only' [(Didsbury 2003: 85); also 'Cosmological' (Didsbury 2003: 84) and 'Therefore Choose Life (Didsbury 2003: 50)], in which a theological discourse collides with an apparently mundane reality so that each exaggerates and interrogates the other' (1988: 29) – with less comic and more philosophically complex effect.)

In view of these anti-theological pieces and the omnivorous breadth of reference catalogued by O'Brien, it might be tempting to conclude with John Osborne that '[a]ll religions are adjudged to be of equal value, in the sense that they are fictions designed to facilitate the living of life in accord with our small aptitude for the spiritual' (1988: 28). But the inference from breadth of reference to equivalence of value is questionable and depends on the interpolation of what looks like Osborne's own view of religion as a 'fiction'. (Didsbury himself has expressed irritation at the notion of 'the spiritual' divorced from an explicitly religious context (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 48; Williams 2007: 7–8).) This impression is confirmed when Osborne talks about Didsbury as being [a]ware that *our present atheism* estranges us from any truth left in these archaic symbolisms' (1988: 28; my italics).

Osborne is quite correct in talking about the poems 'dislocating' the theological lexis (1988: 28) inasmuch as Didsbury removes religious language and imagery from its theologically proper setting and puts it to use in a literary one. Moreover his talk of 'secularizing', while incorrect in the intended sense of dismissing belief while retaining an ostensible but nebulous spiritual content, is apt because Didsbury's identification of the mundane as numinous represents not the secular disarming of religion but the expansion

of religion into secular life. And one of the effects of Didsbury's attention to the everyday is to vaunt to an idyllic and even holy status the particular milieu – including 'a powerful sense of a *civilian* England' (O'Brien 1998: 144, my italics) – which his persona typically inhabits. In 'The Jar' the deified figure of 'that master grocer in a brown shop-coat/who postures as my psychopomp' (Didsbury 2003: 124) personifies the rich entanglement of secular and religious elements in his thinking. When David Wheatley talks of the image of the moon at the end of 'The Hailstone' as 'an evanescent but powerful point of connection between writer and landscape, or writer and the unnamed, quasi-mystical presence behind the landscape that Didsbury lets us intuit' (2001a: 56), the cautious acknowledgment of a religious element (registered also in John Greening's description of the poem as 'devout drench' (2003)) shows not that 'The Hailstone' is a primarily religious poem, but that the heightened experience of ordinary life it celebrates deserves notice as a religious experience, not in spite of but partly because of its secular and culture-specific terms. Didsbury's poetry refuses to separate the life it examines into its historical, religious, geographical and cultural elements. This holistic attitude recalls his lesson from John Ashbery, that 'it was OK to put everything in' (2007, pers. comm., 29 March). The Swedenborg quotation that forms one of *A Natural History*'s two epigraphs reads 'For love and wisdom are not abstractions, but substance… and so is everything civil, moral and spiritual' (Didsbury 2003: 12). Though very different in technique, Didsbury's insistence on a religious temper and content to cultural heritage recalls the work of Geoffrey Hill, for example in 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' (Hill 1985: 152–164). In the following passage, note the role of object as focus for religious feeling (see section 5 Smells and bells, below), and the integration of religious, cultural and landscape elements:

> a signet-seal's unostentatious gem
> gleams against walnut on the escritoire,
>
> focus of reckoning and judicious prayer.
> This is the durable covenant, a room
> quietly furnished with stuff of martyrdom,
> lit by the flowers and moths from your own shire,
>
> by silvery vistas frothed with convolvulus,
> radiance of dreams hardly to be denied. (Hill 1985: 159)

What makes Osborne's analysis of Didsbury's technique 'mistaken' is indeed the attempt 'to disarm [its] religious dimension' (O'Brien 1998: 142), but more specifically the assumption that 'the deity' must be 'replaced' as the object of veneration 'by the lovely delible fact of now and here and this' (John Osborne 1988: 28), when it's clear that for Didsbury the 'lovely delible fact' is the deity itself, not displaced but recognised in its most immediate and least mediated form. O'Brien remarks *contra* Osborne that 'to expose the workings of the machine does not presuppose the absence of a ghost' (O'Brien 1998: 142), arguing that Didsbury's 'understanding of meaning and value does not confine them to the sphere of human production: they exist in relation to an order or power – the universe beyond them – which language celebrates rather than invents' (143). Didsbury clarifies his position:

> I don't take the Christian myth as history or cosmogony which is accurate/true in ways which are only appropriate to other kinds of discourse. But it still compels me to attend to it and, I hope, act accordingly. Beyond this, I think one ought to be reticent (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 48).

Hence, perhaps, Didsbury's mockery of theological niceties. This religious quietism also concurs with the aesthetic of landscape I have described above. The religious epiphany dormant in mundane places and events is an analogue of the aesthetic value Didsbury attaches to his muted landscapes:

> It sinks the Marist Church
> in a soup of such communion that its dedicated bell
> can honour with one mouth the entire eroded coast (Didsbury 2003: 145).

The question of political quietism – whether the poems' pastoral attitude is an evasion of social problems – is complicated but ultimately I think a misdirection. Didsbury's interest in Catholicism and his antiquarianism make a *prima facie* case for his being politically conservative, but as in O'Brien's case the association is possible rather than necessary. Didsbury himself points out in this connection that 'I'm all for smells and bells in the interests of helping one stand before the unknown. It isn't part of a larger package, though, as it was for Eliot. I'm neither a Royalist nor a Conservative' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 48).

5 Smells and bells

While there's no denying the breadth of religious reference in the work, certain religious images and ideas recur. The shops-as-shrines trope in 'The Butchers of Hull' is made explicitly Catholic in that poem with its mention of Walsingham, but the same sensibility underlies all those poems in which mundane places or items become the focus, but not the object, of 'acts of homage or worship' (O'Brien 1998: 140). The claim that '[t]here are temples everywhere' (Didsbury 2003: 135) contributes to the 'strong whiff of Catholicism' that David Wheatley detects in Didsbury's work (2004: 48); a Protestant turn of mind, for example, ought not to need external objects to mediate its religious experiences. A similar conclusion is urged by O'Brien's argument that '[a]rt, whether it be the decoration on a caravan or a sophisticated poem, is always adjacent to an urge to worship in Didsbury's work' (1998: 140). This chimes with Didsbury's interest in religious iconography (2007, pers. comm., 29 March), which is Catholic or even Orthodox in character and connects in turn with his interest, as poet and archaeologist, in the later Roman Empire (see section 7 below). It would even be possible to regard the short poems that record epiphanies as the literary equivalents of icons. The equivalence is not one of style or content but one of function; consider Lawrence Nees's account of an icon of Christ the Saviour as a description of Didsbury's technique in the short epiphany poems:

> The image functions on one level as a site of 'desire', of absence, of longing for the divinity it represents, but also entails a new kind of presence effected by an image (Nees 2002: 138).

It may be ambiguous whether 'image' here is equivalent to the poems themselves or to the configurations of objects, places and events they record, but the underlying experience – expressed in Nees's paradox of simultaneous presence and absence – is clearly similar. Indeed 'Part of the Bridge' (Didsbury 2003: 57) dramatises that very paradox in terms of an inanimate material apprehended as sentient and a mass apprehended as absence:

> The enormous mentality
> of the south bank abutment's
> embedded concrete block
> is not impassive
> ...
> To enter its zone on an evening in July

> is to speak the word *temple*
> in as emptiness-sanctioned a voice
> as is used among the mountains.

In the longer poems of an explicitly religious nature the role of art in Didsbury's treatment of Christianity becomes both more overt and more complicated. 'Eikon Basilike' (Didsbury 2003: 126–7), his poem on or ostensibly by Charles I (the only saint canonised by the Anglican Communion, thanks in part to the success of the original *Eikon Basilike* in 'promulgating the myth of Charles the Martyr' (John Osborne 1988: 33; note the Greek title), is not really about Charles at all:

> The important figure in the poem is [the poet William] Cowper, for whose soul the poem declares itself to have been written. Or rather Cowper's three pet hares ['Tiney, Puss and Bess'], who take me on this odyssey through the frozen city. I've always felt rather a kinship with poor, mad Cowper, who believed all his life that he was damned (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 49).

It is not my purpose to offer a full reading of the poem here, except to say that it seems to me that it dramatises Didsbury's puzzled and emotionally committed exploration of the mysteries (presumably the ground of his felt kinship), rather than offering a conclusion. But several things are worth pointing out. First, the way that the historico-literary-religious dream is played out in Didsbury's own physical and imaginative landscape:

> I noted the resemblance that my home now suddenly bore
> to a level Baltic town, its frozen gardens, and its
> bright green civic domes. (Didsbury 2003: 126)

Second, how the impression the poem creates of religious substance happens through its literary materials, not only Cowper, but also Charles and the original *Eikon Basilike* text, not to mention the linguistic expression of 'my sad and emotional erudition' in the interplay of contemporary and archaic vocabulary, syntax and idiom ('bricky', 'thrupping', 'thee' and 'thou', 'aegis', 'a Vulgar Latin sentence which my guts were scarcely screwed to', 'it was a case of etcetera etcetera'). Osborne traces some of 'Eikon Basilike's literary references and influences in detail (John Osborne 1988: 32–9) in a discussion which recognises it as both a dream sequence and a spiritual portrait of Cowper (John Osborne 1988: 39), without explicitly recognising that the two together constitute a spiritual portrait of Didsbury himself (indeed, Osborne's determination 'not to let the

content of the dream distract [him]' shows how far such a recognition is from his critical programme).

Didsbury has written approvingly of 'the silence of which/all liturgies are afraid' (Didsbury 2003: 41) – an image which speaks against 'excessively wordy' religion (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 54), but also hints at his interest in the Buddhist idea of things being 'marvellous but empty, empty but marvellous' (Williams 2007: 6). Osborne explores (John Osborne 1988: 32) the use of this idea in 'Death of Pan' (Didsbury 2003: 113), where 'The small still life on the chopping board' – which could be any of Didbury's iconic arrangements of mundane circumstances and objects – 'is nothing more than "marvellous and empty"'. Similar ideas are at work in 'Passing the Park's 'simple song of impoverishment' (Didsbury 2003: 54) and in 'The Shore' (Didsbury 2003: 3):

> How empty things are;
> ...
> The world of phenomena gathers at the surface
> of a system of unity powered by emptiness.
> Hills. River. Line of winter farms.
> A barge coming down the navigable channel
> from somewhere inland, with nothing in its hold.

The figure of the empty barge, as in 'Elegiac Alternatives' (Didsbury 2003: 97), 'concretis[es] that "empty but marvellous, marvellous but empty" thing' (Williams 2007: 6). Note again the use of landscape to express religious–philosophical thought, and the subtle interpolation of social history as a formative element in both (the barge is empty because of the cessation of industrial transport on the river, while 'impoverishment' in 'Passing the Park' connotes the dilapidated atmosphere of twentieth-century English parks).

6 Imagining empire

Such interpolations support the view that 'Didsbury can descry history in all things' (John Osborne 1988: 12), exemplifying one type of historical content in his work, the effaced detail peeping through. (The other type is the grand historical fantasy, which I shall look at in more detail below.) Note, for example, the 'disused railway tunnel' in 'The Shorter "Life"' (Didsbury 2003: 63), whose allusion to the Beeching cuts contrasts

with O'Brien's more overt and detailed treatments of the same subject. O'Brien's own comment that 'A Daft Place' 'is only marginally a work of social criticism' (1998: 139) applies generally to Didsbury's work. Though O'Brien praises the political content of 'A Shop' (Didsbury 2003: 138), it is as usual oblique. Osborne (1988: 25) lists other oblique political or social commentary in the earlier poems. One poem declares 'We're busy dreaming ourselves political' (Didsbury 2003: 148), and both of the most obvious interpretations of this statement ('we wrongly think ourselves political' and 'we become political by an imaginative leap') provide clues why the political dimension of Didsbury's work might be bound up with questions of mind, imagination, artifice and historical knowledge. Didsbury's imagination of history tends to be mediated through texts and through his professional practice as an archaeologist. Though he protests that '[a] lot of my poetry was written before I became established as a professional archaeologist' (quoted in Smith 2000: 188), he has also commented that some of his work is 'about inventing an imaginary archaeology… I'm someone who's constitutionally fascinated by myth and the weight of the past' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 44; see also 'Next' (Didsbury 2003: 93)), and that

> I'm more interested in the past in many ways than I am in the present or the future. It's just something constitutional. I suppose it's equivalent to Auden's fascination with geology. For something to interest me it simply has to be ancient, ancient or natural. I'm very interested in natural history. I would be much more interested in a valley with a heap of tumbled stones in it than a valley without, although the valley would still speak to me (Williams 2007: 9).

O'Brien speaks of Didsbury as being 'entranced… by the image of England as an imaginative possibility, something capable of outliving the nonsense done in its name' (1998: 144). His poems tend to celebrate those possibilities rather than exploding the nonsense (as is more often the case, as we shall see in chapter 4, with Michael Hofmann) or juxtaposing the two (as is more often the case in O'Brien's work). As such they may sometimes lack satirical bite, though this is to criticise them for what they don't attempt.

In any case Didsbury's particular historical concerns are not unrelated to the contemporary historical period. Showing 'the rise and fall of civilisations' (John Osborne 1988: 11), he prompts the reader to consider the current cultural moment's position in such a cycle. A number of poems look back at the Victorian period of high Empire, usually

with the purpose of interrogating the relations between imperial idylls and realities (e.g. 'Victorian Angels' (Didsbury 2003: 33), 'The Residents, 1840' (Didsbury 2003: 210–211)), but also sometimes the survival of imperial furniture into the contemporary world (e.g. 'Queen Victoria's Chaffinch' (Didsbury 2003: 46)). Other poems combine historical materials with a powerful but elegiac rhetoric, imagining England as a failed or failing imperial power. The dreamlike pastoral 'The Globe' (Didsbury 2003: 149) allows its contemporary imagination to claim and inhabit a late-imperial historical idyll:

> Men are not gods. They just hold the same things in common.
> Climbing the stairs to our bedrooms in the dark,
> or idly gazing at landscapes from early albums,
> crouched in a plastered outhouse of a summer evening
> where it's cool and quiet and the light has failed,
> we harvest the truth of those tentative statements
> which were formed in the mouth of the bakelite wireless,
> for its plummy plurals have continued to reach us
> wherever we are in the house.

The Second World War casts its shadow over a pre-war aristocratic world of 'French cricket' and 'Edifying Lectures at Dusk' through a reference to 'paper planes'

> whose bombload is held to resemble
> the light reflected from jams in the pantry,
> pear halves stacked in syrup in jars,
> the breath of apples in the air raid shelter
> and the sound of the clock in the hall that is ticking like fruit.

Yet the setting is not static. The evening in question stands for the evening of Empire ('the outspread palm of the evening is holding up the house'), and the experience of watching both is evoked in an extraordinary visual image of change, distortion, diminishment and mediation:

> Please ask me nothing. A globe of inky but translucent glass
> is slowly inventing itself, and turning into a sky.
> The yellow panes of a window expand upon it and curve
> like four birds flying away from a centre.

It is as if the poem is looking at its own materials through such a window. The era of the dream advances as quickly as the dusk: the landscape mutates, the servant bells are 'stopped with paint' and '[a] towel rail hums in the bathroom'. The poem's elegiac end-

ing hardly constitutes either an endorsement or an indictment of empire, but rather demonstrates Didsbury's attunement to a late-imperial rhetoric and imagery, and the effects it is capable of after survival into a post-imperial period:

> and trolley bus tickets with different owners
> flutter like moths in the back room we shared,
> just glimpsed, as I open the door with love
> to gaze at the absent inmates on the grass,
> flying back to their piles on the dressing table,
> and alighting in serial silence, like the days (Didsbury 2003: 149).

'Back of the House' (Didsbury 2003: 175), which I have already discussed above, uses a similar conceit, from its 'awareness of the relatively recent massive violence of the 1943 blitz' (Didsbury quoted in Wheatley 2004: 46) to the image of the 'punkah wallah [who] has gone to stand/in the shade'. In this poem the absurdly overt artifice and literary references ('That large bird was running away/from a poem by Keats') invites the reader's scepticism, yet once again the poem's ending, in which the poet 'know[s] [he] leave[s] [him]self behind/in the coloured window, in the Byzantine/back of the house' acknowledges the speaker's inextricable involvement in the 'English garden'. The play on the word 'house' to mean, among other things, 'dynasty', a device also used in 'Glimpsed Among Trees' (Didsbury 2003: 134–6), even manages to suggest an ending ('*back* of the house').

7 Rome and Byzantium

The reference to Byzantium is also fortuitous. The 'Byzantine/back of the house' evokes the jutting outhouses and chimney-breasts, the elaborate and asymmetrical brickwork at the back of a grand, Victorian Hull terrace; and it also historicises the building as belonging to a period of ostentatious empire. Didsbury's interest in the Romans has been remarked (Wheatley 2004: 44), and while Didsbury himself protests that 'I suppose there are half a dozen or so poems which refer to the Roman world, but for very various reasons' (quoted in Wheatley 2004: 44), the potential parallels between the Roman period and the period of the poems' composition are worth exploring. Most Roman references in the poems are to later Roman history, the period of the decline and fall rather than the Republic. 'The Coffin Factory' (Didsbury 2003: 72) likens an 'offcut of veneer' to 'those dragon-banners'

which Ammianus describes as having been borne
by the household troops of the Emperor Constantius [II]
when he made his vicennial advent into Rome.

The incongruous pairing is the heart of the poem. The dragon-banners inject life and imagination into the drab pastoral landscape, insisting on its essential wonder as a place where 'the European fauna' yet contains some surprises. But is also relates that landscape to the late Roman world of Constantius II, in which the outward signs of Empire, such as the banners, are not matched by imperial accomplishment (Gibbon 1995: 603–4 & passim). 'The Coffin Factory' obliquely invites us to consider 'the gutters and dusty grass/of our semi-industrial suburb' as belonging to such a world, and to consider the speaker as an analogue of the household troops, proceeding about his daily business encumbered by, literally tripped up by, a florid imperial rhetoric which is both alien and seductive.

The connection between the late Roman and late British imperial periods is made more explicit in 'A Riddle' (Didsbury 2003: 212), where the dying moments of the Emperor Justinian (responsible for the last blaze of Roman glory) are mysteriously connected with those of 'a navigator… slowly bleeding to death in the back of a doomed [WWII] bomber… over Aachen'. Parallels are drawn between the business of state and the navigation of a warplane, and between the death of the body and the death of the state. Mention of Byzantium is also made in the fourth section of 'Scenes From a Long Sleep' (Didsbury 2003: 121); and Didsbury's professional interest in 'monographs on Roman pottery/of the first to fourth century' is referred to in 'A Letter to an Editor' (Didsbury 2003: 69–70). Meanwhile 'In a Gothic Yard' (Didsbury 2003: 6) conjures a period at or after the collapse of empire. I come back to this poem, and Didsbury's attitude to classicism, in section 9 below. First I consider the role of tradition generally in his work.

8 'That walking-frame called tradition'

Didsbury's taste for the antiquarian, particularly his interest in etymology (Williams 2007: 2, 9), is evident throughout his work. But the effect is rarely of mere historical pastiche, because archaism is contrasted explicitly or implicitly with the contemporary and the vernacular, as in this piece of comic anti-pastoral from 'A Winter's Fancy':

A red-faced lout leaned over my gate

and instructed me curtly to Sodding Sod Off.
He was full of choler (Didsbury 2003: 106).

'Cider Story' (Didsbury 2003: 137) uses both the archaic 'sire', 'thee' and 'thy' and the modern 'litre', and the demotic 'just about'; see also John Osborne (1988: 13) on the use of the word 'disanoints' in 'Cat Nights' (Didsbury 2003: 198). The use of archaic words and historical material plays an important role in Didsbury's imaginative transformations of contemporary materials, which like O'Brien's work often draw on the Gothic. It is important to register the extent to which Didsbury is 'just having fun' (Williams 2007: 5), but to do so does not negate the poem's capacity to shed light on the world. Alan Jenkins comments that 'some of his invention is pure play, some hints at a rich, humane vision of England' (Jenkins 1987); but the two should not be separated: even Didsbury's 'pure play' represents a pastoral retreat into a linguistic England that stands in implicit contrast and rebuke to the England of contemporary habitation.

Antique language and materials are used to generate the absurd pastorals 'He Loves to Go A-Wandering' (Didsbury 2003: 90) and 'The Experts' (Didsbury 2003: 170). The latter poem 'celebrates a fantastic ordinariness in an eighteenth-century language that is neither pastiche nor lifeless reproduction' (O'Brien 1998: 141), but more interesting in this context is the way it depicts the experts' antiquarian pursuits as themselves idyllic. They swap antiquarian 'banter' in a static pastoral setting, 'a place where the men can fall asleep after lunch' (O'Brien 1998: 141). The identification of antiquarian knowledge and archaic language as idyllic is highly significant. John Osborne has described Didsbury's device of juxtaposing 'Anglo-Saxon deriv[ed]... monosyllables' with 'recherché [polysyllabic] words of classical origin' (1988: 12), and remarks on 'the use of words so recondite or peculiar... that the reader has recourse to a ... dictionary. In effect, he is getting language to deny its transparency, so that words usurp their subjects and themselves become the focus of attention' (1988: 8). While I wouldn't argue with the substance of these claims (and Didsbury, with his declared interest in etymology, can hardly be unaware of the effects he is creating), I think the theoretical foregrounding of language (emphasised by Osborne as part of his analysis of the poems as postmodernist) is of only secondary critical importance. More interesting is the way that linguistic idiosyncrasies connote a historical and cultural identity – a linguistic idyll – which invites comparison with contemporary standard usage and contemporary standardised versions of cultural identity. That idyll is 'a rich, humane vision of England'

(Jenkins 1987) in which shingle is called 'shingle' (Didsbury 2003: 107) and tar 'tar' rather than 'bitumen' (Didsbury 2003: 88–9). In 'The Tar on the Roads' calling the tar 'bitumen' is implicitly related to a series of discordant communities, from the queue at the bus stop and the occupants of the bus to the 'several million people' addressed by the newsreader: it is a symptom of the lack of cohesive historical and cultural identity. Even at the simplest level the spelling 'shew' for 'show' (Didsbury 2003: 62, 150) is – notwithstanding Sean O'Brien's irritation (1988b: 48) – not merely pedantic but part of an imaginative mapping of historical 'Englands' over a homogenised contemporary one.

There's no doubt that Didsbury's delight in language is a form of pastoral retreat, though not necessarily a conservative one. The point is brought out in 'The Seventeenth of June' (Didsbury 2003: 82), where the description of landscape is superficially frustrated by the use of obscure dialect, archaic and technical terms, but ultimately enriched by their connotative power:

> I hoped that when the evening finally came, as it has,
> I might find some words about English coastal parishes,
> each with its beacon, spire, gallows,
> ragstone tower or en-hillocked elm as landfall,
> to be battered towards by crumster, cog and barque
> through stillicidous arras or wrist-wraithing bone-racking sea-roke.

(*Crumster* is an Elizabethan sailing ship; *cog* is a vessel used for local commerce on the Humber and the Ouse; *stillicidous* means falling in drops; and a *sea-roke* is a fog.) The words *are* the pastoral retreat into a version of the landscape both richer and more joyful than the one the reader is used to and understands easily. It may partly be that the hurdle of difficult words denies both language and landscape their usual transparency (John Osborne 1988: 8). But more interestingly, the ornamental style and the specific words used invoke the baroque, through origin (*crumster*), allusion (*arras*) and style/register (*stillicidous, barque*), so that the landscape's historical aspect is richly suggested by the language used to depict it. A similar imaginative leap between subject and medium occurs in 'The Guitar' (Didsbury 2003: 122–3) with 'The sky is like an entry in the Oxford English Dictionary./The earliest reference for it is 1764,/in Randall's *Semi-Virgilian Husbandry*' (note the pastoral allusion).

Didsbury's 'indulgence' in rhetoric (Williams 2007: 5) is not limited to the use of archaic words; in a number of longer poems both the thematic content (e.g. visions of England) and the formal rhetoric (e.g. metre) engage in a complex conversation with literary, historical and contemporary identity. 'The Hailstone's means of re-approaching 'local and domestic culture' (O'Brien 1998: 145) include a traditional vernacular ('the kind of rain we used to call a cloudburst'; 'The rain was "siling" down'; 'Someone could have done us in flat colours') and the corresponding thematic substance of 'the greengrocer's awning', 'a wooden drawer... full of postal orders' and 'the aproned pluvial towns'. (Also present, less strongly here than in some other poems, is the 'high' register which refers to Jung and Mahler and speaks of 'one sign of a usable language getting used'). But there is also a corresponding rhythmical voice whose allusions to iambic ('for all our elemental loves') and dactylic ('mothers and children are standing in the windows') metres supply grandeur to, and even embody formally, a form of modest domestic Englishness with one foot only in the dominant tradition.

This last element, the metrical allusiveness of Didsbury's rhetoric, is noticeable in the rhymeless ballad 'Braxy-Hams' (Didsbury 2004: 40), and in 'A Winter's Fancy' (Didsbury 2003: 106), in which Douglas Houston points out 'the musical fourfold repetition of anapest/iamb… a burst of bright rhythm as if soul clapped its hands and sung against the advice of circumstances' (Houston 1988: 45). A more sustained version of the same effect occurs in 'Glimpsed Among Trees' (Didsbury 2003: 134–6; see Williams 2008 passim); ostensibly free verse, the poem continually alludes to metre in a way that renews the prosodic tradition, just as the poem reappraises its thematic materials, the individual and his house (where house refers both to a physical and a cultural edifice). The distribution of binary and ternary stresses and the coincidence of line-breaks with syntactical breaks promote a rolling and unashamedly elegant rhetoric, and this effect is bolstered by overt rhetorical devices such as the classical elision of a verb in 'the month being March and the time of day noon' and the Biblical repetitions 'which the kneeling man has knelt to cultivate' and 'is only waiting for the dancer to come, whose coming was delayed'. While Didsbury's use of tradition often sets the classical or traditional against the contemporary in order to create tension (see section 9 Classicism, below), 'Glimpsed Among Trees' uses its borrowed language with a straight face.

Such formal allusions disprove Osborne's claim that 'no matter how dizzying the vista, [Didsbury's] verses decline the use of that walking-frame called tradition' (1988: 7), without necessarily refuting his thesis, shared by most critics (Osborne 1988: 7–41; Kennedy 1996: 79–109; Gregson 1996: 209–237; Barry 2000: 107–117), that Didsbury is to be seen as a postmodernist. Yet such a categorisation may be misleading (O'Brien 1998*:* 141–142; Jenkins 1994: 128) in that it leaves insufficient room for the role of tradition as a key to understanding and celebrating experience in Didsbury's work. For example, 'Didsbury's interests and rhetorical skills equip him for kinds of memorability and closure (and occasionally grandeur) to which [John] Ashbery does not seem to aspire (O'Brien *1998:* 141). Didsbury has acknowledged Ashbery's importance in his own development (2007, pers. comm., 29 March; see also Gregson 1996: 222–223); other key influences include Christopher Middleton and Roy Fisher (Gregson 1996: 215, 223–225). O'Brien relates these two poets to Didsbury's search 'for an imaginative locus in which to work, one that would bypass the well-made… poem of the day (1998: 141), i.e. to his attempts 'to show us a world before literature gets at it' (1998: 146). But the means for doing so is often literary and/or historical, which is to say that it draws on traditions, for example the personification of the sun as Phoebus (Didsbury 2003: 85, 118). So it is important to register the extent to which Didsbury's re-imagining of the everyday does not so much bypass or cut off tradition as reconnect us with it, or replace banal contemporary traditions (the 'withered rationality which mistakes its unexamined style for a way of seeing' (O'Brien 1988b: 49)) with rich historical and/or literary ones.

The use of tradition to animate private experience motivates 'The Village, or, Festive Schadenfreude' (Didsbury 2003: 27). Historical detail and fairy-tale cunning come together to replace the contemporary horror of 'A patch of scrub and a sign enjoining/a Merry Christmas, done in coloured bulbs' and 'a board,/with glossy graphics and "Heritage" in its title', with a richer and more interesting idyll. That idyll itself is not saccharine: the speaker, in whose imagination it exists, relishes 'spinning dark tales about foxes and water birds', hinting at a point where the artifice of pastoral approaches that of Gothic.

8 The Gothic

Indeed Didsbury's imaginative estranging of everyday experience, for all its 'Postmodernist playfulness' (John Osborne 1988: 26), is strikingly Gothic. *The Classical Farm*'s epigraphs make quite clear the importance for his work of the connections between pastoral, Gothic, imagination and landscape:

> ...which is a most parkely ground and Romancy pleasant place: heretofore all horrid and woody...
>
> John Aubrey
>
> ...the richness and extent of Yorkshire quite charmed me. Oh! what quarries for working in Gothic!
>
> Horace Walpole (Didsbury 2003: 100)

A number of strands in the work draw on the Gothic, from the monstrous world of 'Hare's Run' (Didsbury 2003: 159), 'Strange Ubiquitous History' (Didsbury 2003: 177), and 'The Drainage' (Didsbury 2003: 194), the magic of 'Chandlery' (Didsbury 2003: 98), to the nightmares of 'Giant Forms' (Didsbury 2003: 47) and 'Night Moves' (Didsbury 2003: 108). (Dreams generally are a recurrent feature (e.g. Didsbury 2003: 50; 148; 120–121).) The Gothic commitments of 'Glimpsed Among Trees' are obvious, from the notion of the sentient house (used again in 'The Classical Farm' (Didsbury 2003: 128)) to the references to *Wuthering Heights* (i.e. Mr Lockwood and the oaken closet; 'yell was not ideal' is a direct quotation); their metafictional quality places Didsbury in a tradition of Gothic parodists (Jones 1998: 271).

As in O'Brien's work, a typical Gothic conceit is the presence of the past alongside the present (i.e. the ghost story). Didsbury himself characterises the technique as 'Multiple exposure,/the living and the dead' (Didsbury 2003: 21), and in his work it typically provides 'a comprehension of the ancient embedded in the present' (Lloyd 1995: 588). It is used in 'The Summer Courts' (Didsbury 2003: 180), 'The Green Boy' (Didsbury 2003: 24) and also 'Old Farms' (Didsbury 2003: 133), where '[o]ld farms/swallowed by town/remain as gateposts/brick paths/and sheds' (see also Didsbury 2003: 69–70), providing a sense of landscape as haunted by its previous identities. But whereas O'Brien's work offers comparisons of past and present emphasising decline and discontinuity, these poems of Didsbury's (particularly 'Old Farms') tend rather to show their continuity.

9 Classicism

The continuity between past and present is not always literal: a number of poems transform their contemporary materials and landscapes by applying historical or, especially, classical ideas and images. The most striking such transformation may be in 'The Coffin Factory' (Didsbury 2003: 72), where an 'offcut of veneer' becomes a 'dragon-banner'. Two tendencies work in tension with each other: the attempt to infuse contemporary material with classical language, imagery and values, and the subordination of the classics to the poet's contemporary concerns. Classical allusion is part of Didsbury's imaginative transformation of the everyday, implying an equivalence or continuity (and sometimes contrast) between the contemporary world and the golden age of antiquity. In this sense it is profoundly traditional. But its application to contemporary ordinariness – to mundane items such as veneer offcuts – is conspicuously postmodernist in its levelling of cultural hierarchy. ('These old high cultures want to get in everywhere/and don't care how they do it usually' (Didsbury 2003: 183).)

Didsbury's omnivorous attitude to his sources is demonstrated in 'Country Alembic' (Didsbury 2003: 119), which mixes 'Saxon and classical, trivial and noble, modern and archaic... dominant and subordinate dialects' (John Osborne 1988: 14). The poem conjures a matrix of traditions and tensions which provide a cultural and historical context to ground and ultimately ennoble a contemporary landscape in which a man sits bored in his car – the transformation of the mundane through an act of literary and cultural imagination. Yet it does so not by claiming particular authenticity for a local dialect but 'positing a multiplicity of Englishes without an imperial centre' (John Osborne 1988: 14). The clinching image of the man blowing raspberries through rolled-up corrugated cardboard, described in terms of the shape of one of the wonders of the classical world, co-opts the mundane present into a classical tradition while simultaneously collapsing the claim of that tradition to 'seriousness' and 'importance'. David Wheatley, discussing 'The Rain'(Didsbury 2003: 131), comments that 'Out of the cowpats on the classical farm grow the shoots and stalks of our contemporary utterance' (2001a: 55).

Didsbury has commented that the classics, and 'education as such – the whole of the language, the whole of English literature stretching out behind you' are a means of expressing the 'the things that make me write poems [which] are quite inchoate, a sensory kind of longing, excitement' (Williams 2007: 2). Tradition provides structures (both formal and thematic) against which experience can be measured and understood

afresh, a paradox which lies behind O'Brien's argument that Didsbury, an 'extremely literary poet', tries 'to render perception at a stage before literature has a chance to interfere' (1988b: 49). The best example of such a relationship is 'The Classical Farm' (Didsbury 2003: 128), in which a sunset reflected in the windows of a school provides a figure of the school as a 'massive antique stove' containing Promethean fire:

> Small fires smoke on every allotment below
> but the source of the incandescence
> is in the big red eyes of the Academy.

The poem's epigraph is from Horace's *Odes* 3.18 ('*vetus ara multo fumat odore*': 'the old altar thickly smoking with incense') and the small fires on the allotments are smoking altars like the one in Horace's celebratory ode. Note the pastoral setting and the pastoral conception of the fire built by the speaker as 'a working model of its great Platonic master'. An allotment-holder is referred to as a 'colonist', making an etymological connection with the *colonus* of Virgil's *Georgics* (see Wilkinson 1982: 22–3) whose idyllic life is thereby claimed for the present, for 'men who translate Horace in their sheds'. This last phrase may be understood as referring to Didsbury himself translating Horace literally (Williams 2007: 2) or freely (the poem itself is a 'small fire' modelling the ode which is its 'Platonic master'); or it may be understood figuratively, considering the business of working an allotment as the expression of Horatian sensibility. The 'old man' who 'stands sagely folding polythene' has 'come by wisdom'.

Such a complete embrace of a classical model may be a misleading example. 'From the Top Floor of the Library' (Didsbury 2003: 48) expresses a more ambivalent attitude to the relationship between 'culture' and 'barbarism'. The library building represents the position of classical culture in a non-classical world:

> Not an ivory tower these afternoons in spring
> but an engine for serving the rarely glimpsed horizon

(Note how the tradition's capacity for 'distilling || liquid essences...' is not impeded but facilitated by its historicalness ('...from the smell of dusty || window glass').) The library's civilisation is contrasted with what lies outside, a world patrolled by the wolf-like

> drunks who daily stumble the perimeter

Yet the treatment of the dichotomy is ambivalent; the poet is clearly at home in both worlds; indeed, the library's usefulness lies not in itself in solation but in its capacity to illuminate what lies outside it, 'an observation point...from which to look out/and see things that are interesting'.

The relationship of classicism and barbarism is also explored in 'In a Gothic Yard' (Didsbury 2003: 66), which conjures a period at or after the collapse of empire, in which imperial objects and traditions persist in the barbarians' world, retaining their associations yet also transformed. The Gothic yard of the title was once a Roman piazza:

> The tables here are the upturned hooves
> of ruined equestrian statues
> ...
> We wait for our foaming maplewood bowls
> (of mare's milk, sometimes blood)
> and pass an hour attempting to bring to mind,
> out of courteous silences,
> the plashing of civic fountains.

Here classical learning survives changed; the yard is Gothic not only in historical period but also in its transformation of perception. The statues-as-tables, like the offcuts of veneer in 'The Coffin Factory', demonstrate that classicism, and tradition in general, is not a closed book but is able to shed light on the present when treated robustly as a resource rather than a monument.

Chapter 4: Michael Hofmann: 'A profane language'

Michael Hofmann is a very different poet from both Sean O'Brien and Peter Didsbury. His prosaic, ironic style and mordant tone derive from Robert Lowell and the modern German tradition, mainly eschewing the English lyrical and metrical traditions which inform O'Brien's and Didsbury's work. But he shares their interest in society, politics and history, in ideals, utopia and dystopia, and in elegy. O'Brien offers more or less explicit comparisons between remembered or artificial idylls and an un-idyllic present experience, as well as idealizing the scenes of his childhood. Didsbury idealises the present moment and the civil ordinariness of everyday life, while showing a recurrent fascination with English mythology and rhetoric. But Hofmann depicts a historicised contemporary landscape as dystopian, leaving the reader to supply the second term of his pastoral comparison, the values of liberal humanism to which his cynical persona clings. He has spoken of his style as 'low, low' (quoted in Hugo Williams 2000: 230), but much of the interest in his work comes from the collision of high and low, of high-cultural vision with low-cultural landscape. His poems about childhood are not idyllic.

1 Tone and landscape

The tone of Hofmann's work expresses his speakers' states of mind, presenting similar downbeat landscapes to O'Brien and Didsbury in a less celebratory, indeed nihilistic light.

For example, several poems depict down-at-heel riverine landscapes (see O'Brien 1991: 35–6; 2007: 23–4; Didsbury 2003: 129) of

> Clouds, oil barges and airliners blow down the Maas
> ...
> where emigrants camped out in the Thirties,
> ...
> the clipper ship weathervane, the tubby warehouses,
> taking it in turns to eat and sleep and talk,
> the wind blowing the money out of their pockets,
> their morale out of the window, their lives in a flat spin (Hofmann 1999: 41);

or describe

> the long walk by the concrete-bedded river,
> the Sempt, whose tributaries arrive in pipes,

the heavy July whiff of river and linden,
low water, weeds, a few fish (Hofmann 1999: 8)

Yet details which for Didsbury are joyous are for Hofmann simply banal:

It struck me I was exactly the person
to write the life of the pink shopping bag
hovering irresolutely
on the triangular intersection below (1999: 67).

Whereas in 'The Restoration' (164) Didsbury uses the conceit of a film playing backwards to indulge nostalgia for childhood, Hofmann's treatment of a similar device lingers on the chimerical status of such pleasure:

The choreographed car-chase is ruinously exciting,

but the wheels turn very slowly backwards,
to convince the viewer that, far from wasting time,
he's recreating himself. (*Corona* 23)

And in the tellingly titled 'Gomorrah', scenes which O'Brien refashions as idyllic (e.g. O'Brien 1995: 19) remain for Hofmann merely seedy:

and you and I
hand in hand
looking for shade

and an untenanted
patch of grass
close to the railway line

with the new stand
at Stamford Bridge
going up behind us (1999: 68-69).

When the speaker does identify with the landscape, there may be a lugubrious humour but little affection: 'These are my own crows in a mechanical flap...my slat marsh smelling of vomit...my stone-scabbed beach...my soft low cliffs...my big skies...my jellyfish that you trod on in your sensible shoes' (1999: 53).

At times, Hofmann's dismantling of the pastoral image can take it towards nonsense, as if to undermine completely its power to symbolise ideals. 'The idyllic lilac tree has scorched/to beehive, to beeswax, to *Bienenstich* [a traditional German cake, literally 'Beesting cake'], a spongy cack' (Hofmann 1986: 40); here the idyll degenerates almost by a rhetorical version of word association, to something amorphous and valueless. In 'Pastorale' (Hofmann 1993: 32) this device takes centre-stage. The beginning is intelligible enough, the speaker setting the scene and tone and warning us of the contrary attitude he's going to take:

> Where the cars razored past on the blue highway,
> I walked, unreasonably, *contre-sens.*

Several features of this poem recall O'Brien's and Didsbury's work. The choice of a paradoxically 'green' and ambiguously public motorway verge as location for the idyll, the speaker's persona (a 'slewed census-taker', literally marginalised on the edge of the road) and the substance and prosaic manner of the enumeration of objects ('a hedgehog's defensive needle-spill... henna ferns and a six-pack of Feminax,//indecipherable cans') might well combine in O'Brien's hands, in particular, to express a fondness for the place. But Hofmann's description of the natural world in terms of a technological society, and the inextricable mixing of the two categories, work to undermine any real pastoral opposition between the marginal location and the wider world: the pheasants are 'bullet-copper and bullet-steel'; the ferns are described in terms of a fashion item; discarded cans are 'indecipherable'. But the 'snout and tail//of a flattened rat' are 'cursive' and lie 'under the floribund ivy'. Here there are wry hints at both symbolic meaning and ornament; the suggestion of lush growth somehow intensifies, rather than alleviating, the grimness, partly because of the pun on *moribund.* The sense that the rhetoric is increasing without taking us anywhere – that the point of the poem is specifically to shake apart, not to reconfigure, the pastoral mode – is confirmed in the last, nonsensical couplet, which, though it nods vaguely to the agriculture which Hofmann has elsewhere (1986: 29) identified as a source of fascination and unease, degenerates into a gobbledygook of pastoral and modern-technological words, determined more by their sounds than by their contribution to the sentence:

> the farmer's stockpiled hayrolls and his flocks,
> ancillary, bacillary blocks of anthrax.

But Hofmann's reduction of pastoral doesn't usually take place at such a basic linguistic level. More often, anti-pastoral images are used to conjure anti-idylls, dystopian scenarios which give the lie to our remembered or imagined paradises. And then again, Hofmann's rejection of pastoral utopias and the idealism they represent isn't always as thoroughgoing as his ironic tone might suggest. At times the poems dismantle the pastoral mode in order to rehabilitate it. The first stanza of 'Impotence' (1986: 17–18) begins:

> The dry electric heat of Cornwall turned us yellow
> in a week… All that time, we didn't sweat
> and I never touched you. […]
> The honeysuckle in the lanes came from some tropics,
> and the strange, acidulous, blue-paper hydrangeas.
> Farmers strung up crows as an example to others.

The lack of action alludes ironically to the traditional pastoral notions both of the shepherd as contented worker, and of the garden as scene of repose. This idyll is anything but fecund. The poem proceeds to depict the speaker's alienation from the social group he lives among:

> Most evenings, I was aphasic, incapable of speech,
> worn down by tolerance and inclusion. My arm twitched
> as though my shirt had been the shirt of Nessus…

I discuss the notion of identity and alienation in more detail below. For now, I want to point out how the speaker's mood is played out via the pathetic fallacy, with 'some old wasps', similarly sluggish, 'drag[ging] from drainpipe to window, as if it didn't matter' – as the beloved might say of the speaker's impotence. The downbeat conclusion draws solace from nature's regenerative power:

> and your three wooden municipal garden seats are just anywhere
> in your concrete garden, where by some providential freak
> a wild strawberry plant is leaping about in the cracks.

It is a subdued ending, which rather suits the attenuated nature of the consolation: the supposed redemption of the speaker's worldly exhaustion by the power of nature is not so much achieved as whistled for, a wishful capitulation in the face of the very nostalgic mechanisms that the poem has been at pains to dismantle.

2 Hofmann's version of pastoral

Given the cynical voice which inhabits these poems, it should be no surprise that their most obviously pastoral feature is their anti-pastoral tone and imagery. Hofmann's landscapes are usually dystopian, and critics have suggested (Robinson 1988: 49–50; O'Brien 1998: 237) that the work is limited by its unremitting irony and nihilism. That such a claim is partly justified is demonstrated on the one hand by a slight (and intermittent) softening of tone in Hofmann's second two collections (1993, 1999; O'Brien 1998: 239), and on the other by the lack of a new full collection since 1999. O'Brien's comment that 'this kind of extremism presents a serious challenge to the poet's determination. If what he says is true, can the work be worth the candle?' (O'Brien 1998: 239) echoes Hofmann's own pronouncement on the work of Gottfried Benn:

> Given a synoptic nihilism like this, where is there to go? (2001: 77)

The comparison is apt because Benn, one of Hofmann's great enthusiasms (Brearton 1999), is a nihilist poet *par excellence* (Benn 1987: 99–114 & passim). In fact the resemblances to Benn's work (which I discuss in context below) suggest that readings of Hofmann must take into account his work's relation to the modern German tradition, which may not judge pessimism so harshly. Hofmann quotes approvingly Benn's statement that 'the modern poem is monological, it is a poem without belief, without hope, it is a poem consisting of words, which you arrange in a fascinating way' (2001: 76). The refusal to espouse positive values actually has a moral motivation:

> If Hofmann writes about compromise, his poems, cold and inert as they can seem, clearly seek to resist it. The antidote to a certain complacent nihilism is a determination to set it down accurately (O'Brien 1998: 239).

Such a determination implies a commitment of some sort to ideals, and while Hofmann's landscapes and dramas may appear relentlessly dystopian (e.g. 1983: 22–3, 43, 44; 1986: 14–5, 19, 26, 28, 32–3, 34–5, 37, 40, 45; 1993: 20–1, 31, 32, 33, 34–5, 39–55; 1999: 23, 28, 36, 41, 53, 60–1), what energises their anger and disappointment is the sense that things could or should have been otherwise. It is the relentless fidelity to the dystopian vision which makes the poem what Ted Hughes called (in relation to the work of Vasko Popa), 'a small ironic space... in which [his] humanity can respect itself' (Hughes 1969: 11). Hofmann's practice accords with Adorno's dictum that 'a profane language could only approach the sacred one by distancing itself from the sound of the holy, instead of by trying to imitate it' (Adorno 2003: 8).

The cynical depiction of the contemporary as bankrupt implies a social vision to set against the contemporary. But, to some extent unlike O'Brien and Didsbury, Hofmann has no authentic or stable 'home' identity as a source for such a vision. Instead, as I show below, it is usually drawn from a melange of cultural sources. At times Hofmann seems dissatisfied that life does not measure up to art. Whether the mere implication of moral and social visions and values is enough to save the poems from a charge of nihilism remains to be seen. That might depend partly on the success or otherwise of individual poems, but might also take into account their cumulative effect.

Hofmann's treatment of pastoral, then, makes use of anti-pastoral and dystopias, whether or not it implies contrasting ideals. He refuses to be seduced by 'natural' imagery:

> Someone brought me some cigarettes from America
> called *Home Run*, and they frighten me half to death
> in their innocuous vernal packaging, green and yellow (1986: 38).

His version of the pastoral retreat is the villa of a deposed president (1993: 45); stasis is not comforting but oppressive (1993: 26). Pastoral innocence exists to be shattered:

> A freshness about your eyes suggests you are
> newly hatched, like Eve, in an unfamiliar world (1983: 12).

Whereas O'Brien's childhood idylls may be or claim to be utopian, Hofmann's are dystopian and shown in cynical retrospect:

> The car got a sun-tan while my father worked
> in its compound... Mixed with the cicadas,
> you could hear the fecundity of his typing
> under the green corrugated plastic roof.
>
> My mother staggered about like a nude
> in her sun-hat, high heels and bathing-costume.
> She was Quartermaster and Communications.
>
> My doughy sisters baked on the stony beach,
> swelling out of their bikinis, turning over
> every half-hour. Still, they were never done.
> ('Family Holidays', 1983: 27)

Occasionally ideals are allowed a fragile survival beyond the loss of innocence, as in 'The Magic of Mantovani' (1983: 28). The 'happiness in those globe-trotting tunes… porous with associations,/[which] played in the dimness before the ads' is factitious; as witness, the 'regular constellations of stars [which] twinkled/on the ceiling while daylight wasted outside'. But it extends in the memory to infuse also the loss of innocence itself with a bittersweet, ambivalently idyllic flavour:

> Ice-cream was no longer on sale in the foyer –
> the end of kindness… I thought about mortality,
> and cried for my father's inevitable death.

If 'Family Holidays' prefigures the bitter portrait of Hofmann's father in Part Two of *Acrimony* (1986: 49–70), 'The Magic of Mantovani' prefigures Part One of *Approximately Nowhere* (1999: 5–22), the series of elegies which complicate and partly refute that portrait. It would be a mistake to understand Hofmann's work as simply cynical, a sophisticated anti-pastoral scorning value of all kinds. His ironic voice is constantly disappointed to find the world failing to live up to the humanist tradition it speaks from. Its cynicism stems partly from an underlying idealism: in a sense Hofmann is a simple-hearted shepherd playing the sophisticated courtier, loathe to discard a discredited vision. His focus on metropolitan nihilism implies a contrasting world of values, offering a rebuke to the metropolitan world and giving emotional depth to the nihilism.

Although Hofmann may appear to be offering nothing but bleak social realism (a nihilism of both style and content), in fact his work functions at one end of pastoral's range, as a ruthless social criticism which is the last refuge of the dissenting humanist. 'The pastoral is an ironic form, based on a perceivable distance between the alleged and the implied. It lets us know either that its point of view is significant largely because it contrasts with some other point of view, or that its real subject is something in addition to (or perhaps even instead of) its ostensible subject' (Ettin 1984: 1). Though the speaker's social vision is denied much room in the poems, is derided for its inability to come about or subverted as grim dystopia, it remains an idea motivating the cataloguing of reality. The vision draws on European culture from the classics to the moderns, particularly on artistic and literary sources. Ultimately the poems in their sophistication and erudition become the last, desperate response of a humanist intelligence to a world which diverges from that vision. O'Brien and Didsbury are provincial poets in their deification

of marginal locations and persons. Hofmann is metropolitan not only in the mundane sense that his locations are often London suburbs (as often as they are provincial or rural) but also in the specific sense that marginality is for him a source of horror and a symbol of how far contemporary life as he has lived it diverges from the tradition he is trained in and which provides his characteristic tone of voice.

Yet part of Hofmann's metropolitanism is his international reach; the talk of 'tradition' here refers not to a dominant narrative of Englishness, imperial or otherwise, but to a range of disparate technical, thematic and historical influences from Europe and America as well as Britain and Ireland. Blake Morrison comments that 'His poetry ranges globally for its imagery and ideas' (Morrison 1987: 204), and it would be fair to add 'and its techniques'. This chapter will discuss some of these influences in more detail in the relevant sections below. But European culture, in particular, is a source not only of images, ideas and techniques, but also of the social visions which Hofmann holds up against the world. As with O'Brien, cultural mediations are often the source of Hofmann's idylls. For example, his elegies for his novelist father (1999: 5–20) involve a pastoral contrast between the tradition of the European novel, used as a means of understanding and ordering experience, and the recalcitrant nature of such experience.

These considerations hint at the importance of style in Hofmann's depiction of landscape. In the sections below I discuss some of Hofmann's most important settings, landscapes and locations, including ironic childhood 'idylls'; historical and historicised contemporary landscapes, often rural and often reflecting national and international historical conditions; and suburban landscapes and interiors, often serving as temporary homes for Hofmann's permanently temporary personae. Before doing so I want to discuss in more detail the working of Hofmann's pastoral, with reference to O'Brien and Didsbury and to its reliance on a metropolitan style ranging over a number of registers, cultures and languages rather than on an authentic, provincial or 'home' idiolect or identity.

3 The homeless style

Hofmann's poem 'Ingerlund' (1999: 25) is typical, not only in its opposition between middle-class pastoral idealising and a brutally anti-pastoral countryside, but in the way that the speaker's self-deprecating awareness is the source of the poem's humour:

The fat boy by Buddha out of Boadicea
with the pebbledash acne and half-timbered haircut
sitting on the pavement with his boots in the gutter,

we must have made his day when we pulled over
and asked him for the site of the Iron Age fort
in his conservation village.

The poems continually poke fun at their own sophistication, using it for the task of showing how useless it is. The superior tone's contempt even for itself may seem rather self-satisfied at times. But in reserving its worst lashes for itself it acquires some measure of authority in dispensing with others. Sean O'Brien's judgment of Brighton as a figure of middle-class southern Englishness (1991: 17) draws its force from its implicit comparison with a working-class culture of 'Gilbert and Sullivans, dogtracks/And fifteen quid bargains' – in hierarchical terms, the speaker makes his judgment from a 'lower' but at least equally authentic cultural ground. In Hofmann's 'Intimations of Immortality' (1999: 30-31), a disdainful picture of moneyed stasis, it is the speaker's cosmopolitan sophistication which provides the necessary distance and leverage: he stands 'above' the scene. But unlike O'Brien, Hofmann does not offer an alternative set of values; there is no claim to authenticity, only a malicious pleasure in cold-eyed description of the scene:

this is retirement country,
where little old ladies

squinny over their dashboards
and bimble into the millennium,
with cryogenics to follow.

The contrasting deployment of the colloquial 'squinny' and 'bimble' against the contemporary–scientific 'cryogenics' refuses a social identity fixed by idiolect – the aim here is not authentic 'voice' but the arrangement of linguistic features from a position of distance. A similar technique is displayed in 'Cheltenham' (1999: 19), where the mixing of registers, the speaker's showy architectural literacy (see also 1999: 10-12 and 1986: 30–31) and the reference to the middle-brow spy fiction of John Le Carré produce a sense of wide-ranging cultural omniscience:

The nouveau oil building

spoils the old water town, spook town, old folks' town.
My old parents, like something out of Le Carré,
shuffle round the double Georgian square.

Where 'A Brighton Goodbye' demands authority on the basis of rhetorical force and an implicit claim to authenticity and *speaking-for,* 'Cheltenham' does so on the strength of style and tone. The description in terms of cultural and literary phenomena demonstrates the particular sense in which Hofmann's idylls are artificial. Meanwhile, the absence of any claim to authenticity is a significant feature of his pastoral as opposed to O'Brien's and Didsbury's. He does not erect new visions to replace those which are found to be inadequate, but rather goes on looking at the world through the old lens, observing its distortions.

The third section of *Corona, Corona* (1993: 39–55) is an extended portrait of Mexico as dystopia. Although the style and technique, and the international location, are different from those of O'Brien and Didsbury, a number of similarities are worth noticing, from the post-imperial historical context (1993: 39–40) and the critical attitude to a bankrupt polity (1993: 49–50) to the precarious nature of identity in a hostile landscape (1993: 54–55). There is also a striking use of the materials of western and film noir to convey a feeling about a contemporary place:

It was a raw town. The shoe shops sold mincing machines,
hats and aluminium buckets shared a shelf, paper and iron
went together – for the staking of claims, perhaps?
A town of radio shops and funeral parlours –
the dead travelled to the aquamarine graveyard
in station wagons, horizontal, to music;
the living, upright, on pickups, also to music (1993: 41);

Every shoe is a spurred boot, every hat is a stetson,
every car a Dodge pickup (1993: 47).

The treatment of landscape is not always simply negative. In 'Retrospect' (1993: 30) the speaker returns to old ground but feels no nostalgia. Like O'Brien, Hofmann makes the materials and mood of the landscape correspond to (express) the speaker's state of mind:

I remembered only the declivity

of St Andrew's Hill when I saw it again,
not the gloomy elderberry ravening in front of the house,
not even the address on Windsor Road,

an Edwardian nest of damp and peckish students.

The student bedsit is an important location for Hofmann, for whom geographical homes seem to be as temporary as cultural identities. By implication the lack of memory in the present is related to a lack of identity in the past: the speaker can't remember having a home here because as an exile, a foreigner, he never *was* at home. He spent his time worrying about 'the *Fremdenpolizei* [immigration authorities] come to repatriate me./I still worshipped a blue acute Anglia/for the name and the brainy space in the back'. The poem ends with a contrast between the alienated speaker and the blind man 'so very much at home there, he stopped at the gate/to crumble his white stick into his pocket'. The blind man's disability is significant inasmuch as it contrasts with the speaker's omniscient manner, suggesting that Hofmann's sophisticated historical and cultural awareness ('I climbed the street again, with the carpetbagging/eyes of a yapping estate-agent') may be a barrier rather than a help in living happily and at home in a given landscape.

The sense of distance from the landscape inhabited also motivates 'The Machine That Cried' (1986: 52–3), describing the 'sudden lurch into infancy and Englishness' of the German expatriate. The narrator asks, 'Was there perhaps some future for Christiaan Barnard[?]' – the surgeon who carried out the world's first heart transplant – but the shift in allegiance is not easy, leaving the narrator adrift from both identities. 'My first-ever British accent wavered/between Pakistani and Welsh' and 'It *seemed* I had engineered my own birth in the new country' (my italics); the new identity has something lifeless about it, a fact underlined by the title. Again a striking feature of the work is the lack of a localised 'voice' or identity. What the style provides instead is 'a chain of discrete remarks which seems to emanate from a disembodied voice rather than a fully realised persona' (Robinson 1988: 49). I discuss below how Hofmann's ordering of multifarious cultural sources generates the sense of an ersatz or temporarily assumed identity.

4 Historical and contemporary landscapes

Hofmann's landscapes are typically afflicted by history. The depiction of place and of personal circumstance registers wider cultural and political circumstance, so that apparently personal situations are made to express public historical conditions. In 'Freebird' (1993: 20–1), violence provides the cultural climate at national, local, personal and linguistic levels:

> I was cuntstruck and fat. My tight chinos
> came from a Second Avenue surplus store
> that had an RPG dangling from the ceiling.
> Grenada had been; the campus killings came later.
> ...
> The frat boy overhead gave it to his sorority girl steamhammer-style.

'It Is Decided' relates a failing relationship to a failing idyll:

> Planetary weather. A glittering
> canopy of gas, otherwise not a cloud.
> The sweet creep of green this English summer.
> Trees addled by heast and monoxide
> put out panic shoots they probably can't afford (1999: 54).

The countryside is afflicted by senseless human occupation: quarries signify 'the mess of possibilities', and their products 'might be/transported along the coast, or to another coast./We couldn't have told it from by-product or waste' (1993: 25). 'Eclogue' explicitly discusses how the rural idyll is compromised:

> Industry undressing in front of Agriculture –
> not a pretty sight. The subject for one
> of those allegorical Victorian sculptures' (1986: 29).

The second sentence both discards previous treatments of pastoral as archaic and undercuts the poem itself as such a treatment. But the historical interaction of 'Pluto's hell-holes' and the 'orchards of Proserpine' is responsible for the contemporary landscape. His description of it recalls both Didsbury and O'Brien:

> Brick huts in the fields,
> barred mine entrances from the last century,
> narrow-gauge railways, powdery cement factories. (1986: 29)

The image of 'a quarry [as] an inverted cathedral: witchcraft,/a steeple of air sharpened and buried in the ground' (1986: 29) also shares the element of subversion in their pastoral sensibility. Meanwhile the 'brick ship of Victorian science' which 'steam[s] on, ivy beard, iron beams and stairs' (1993: 4) echoes O'Brien's image of the glasshouse as ship (1991: 33).

What Hofmann's work does not usually share with Didbsury and O'Brien is their idealising of landscape, particularly of provincial and suburban places. The depiction of Barnet is comic but not affectionate:

> There was Barnet, my glottal stop, trying hard
> to live up to its name, colloquial and harmless and trite.
>
> The place was sunny and congested, brick and green trim,
> it had the one-of-everything-and-two-butchers
> of a provincial town (1993: 27).

Similarly 'Myopia in Rupert Brooke Country' (1983: 20) resembles Didsbury's 'Elegiac Alternatives' (Didsbury 2003: 97) in observing generic artifice ('bulky men prancing about on slender hooves,/unconvincing as pantomime cattle'), but shows less indulgence of it:

> Forever England...
> A hot-air balloon sinks towards the horizon –
> the amateur spirit or an advertising gimmick?

The sinking balloon is a striking image of England's decline, and Hofmann's landscapes do reflect the history that shapes them. 'Shivery Stomp' (1993: 34–5), his elegy for the novelist Malcolm Lowry, draws on a vision of England – inescapable, factitious, poignant and suffocating – which recalls the 1950s England of O'Brien's imagination:

> sitting in an overwindowed 1940s lounge,
> the mousy seaside furniture, the natural gas, the Home Service,
> the long fourteenth, the links course, the South Coast.
>
> The whole town turned out by the same brickworks,
> one tailor and one sunset bolt of cloth.
> Brick and lichen, pruned willow, prunes and the WI.
> The England you fled and died in.

The bodiless wren, a tail and a teaspoon,
dipping down the street of cottage hospitals.
The Pied Pipe fried food van
belting out 'Greensleeves' in a poor estate.

Note how, again like O'Brien, cultural sources supply the idyll from which the landscape deviates, from the demolition of 'Rupert Brooke Country' to the van playing 'Greensleeves' and the tower blocks named, in an 'elementary deception', after famous figures in English literature: 'Dickens House,/Blake Court, Austen House, thirteen-storey giants' (1986: 34). In the same poem the same heavy irony envelopes a prostitute's card which says '*Joy, local*'; for Hofmann the falling-short of the particular and local is far from joyful. He is not so much interested in the local for its own sake as for how it reflects a wider national and international history. 'From Kensal Rise to Heaven' (1986: 34–5) 'assimilates people and objects into a common dehumanisation' (Robinson 1988: 49) which is implicitly related to the socio-political conditions of 1980s Britain: 'Old Labour slogans, Venceremos, dates for demonstrations/like passed deadlines'; 'Change and decay/—When change is arrested, what do you get?' Alan Robinson points out that Hofmann's 'point of view may be implicit in what draws his attention' (Robinson 1988: 50) – for example the references to the Labour Party and the opposition of East and West in which 'Clouds come over from the West' and 'skylights are angled towards the red East' – but that 'this is a dubious matter of inference... the task of reading the signs and projecting into them an emotional depth is very much the reader's' (Robinson 1988: 50). Indeed, Hofmann's 'desired movement towards social practice is forestalled by the absoluteness of his cultural pessimism... Hofmann's poetry has taken on the colour of the late-capitalist alienation in which it is steeped' (Robinson 1988: 52). There is something in this complaint, since a poem like 'Masque' (1999: 36; written 1994) makes clear Hofmann's lack of sympathy with the right-wing nationalism of 'toy bombs and toy vibrators and toy money/and toy cars and toy whips and a toy bottle of HP sauce', but the lack of a positive social vision in his work means that the cynical depiction of such ideology may simply reproduce it. Yet to speak of the 'urgency of [Hofmann's] commitment' (Robinson 1988: 52) as a measure of his work's success misses the extent to which political anger is accompanied and balanced by malicious glee. Hofmann's comment that 'I hope my poems aren't dismal; I think they're hilarious' (in Brearton 1999) makes clear that whatever his political commitments they are usually

subordinated to the poem's play, however mordant. So while Robinson's discussion of Hofmann's work in terms of socio-political context is useful, there remains a suspicion that the analysis is too lucid, and reduces the poetry into a form of cultural criticism.

Nevertheless Robinson's identification of Thatcherism and philistine nationalism as the history which informs many of Hofmann's landscapes is accurate. In poems like 'Albion Market' (1986: 32–3) the ugly subject matter is reflected not only by a cynical tone but also by a refusal of lyrical consolation which would excuse the history-makers:

> A man came down the street with the meth-pink eyes
> of a white rat, his gait a mortal shuffle.
>
> A British bulldog bowler hat clung to his melting skull.
> … Game spirits, tat and service industries,
> an economy stripped to the skin trade. Sex and security,
> Arsenal boot boys, white slaves and the SAS.

More ambiguously, in 'Campaign Fever' (1986: 45), cleared weeds return to create a pastoral idyll lying behind Thatcherite England:

> The fiction of an all-white Albion, deludedness
> and control, like my landlady's white-haired old bitch,
> who confuses home with the world, pees just inside the door,
> and shits trivially in a bend in the corridor.
>
> Mr Thatcher made his pile by clearing railway lines
> with sheep-dip (the millionaire's statutory one idea).
> When he sold his shares, they grew neglected,
> plants break out and reclaim the very pavements…
>
> I think of you trundling across Middle England,
> Peterborough, Leicester, Birmingham New Street –
> the onetime marginals – up to your eyes in a vigorous,
> delinquent haze of buttercups, milfoil and maple scrub.

The idyll is parasitic, since it owes its existence to the polity it rebukes. The neglected state of the idyll is on the one hand essential to its value, and, on the other a condition to be overcome:he poem enacts the same pastoral tension as is found in Sean O'Brien's work, simultaneously celebrating and protesting.

A number of Hofmann's poems take the Cold War and the threat of (particularly nuclear) war as their primary historical condition. The beach at Thorpeness (1993: 33) becomes a metonym for the nation; its definition in nationalist and military terms ('Sizewell', 'roaring waves of fighters', a 'set of three-point lion prints', 'a red ragged square of John Bull plastic') implies a similar reduction in the national culture. The ludicrous mixture of cultural sources, both traditional and contemporary, is also representative: ' a dry tushing rustle/from the liberal-democratic Aesopian bullrushes,/and an ill-tempered creaking from Christian oaks'. The poem ends with an allusion to Churchill ('Jaw jaw. War war.') which underlines the militarised context of the landscape.

The conceit of 'Aerial Perspective' (1986: 24) allows a militarised re-imagining of England, 'where the picturesque collides with the strategically/important, in some dog-eared, dog-rose corner/of Cornwall or Suffolk'; the title's pun on 'overview' insists on the poem's objective, historical distance. There is something ominous (delivered through the heavily ironic 'reassuring') about the 'big AWACS aircraft' which the speaker 'can only hear',

> but no doubt they can see us as blips, as they can see
> the blind gophers chewing up the putting-surface,
> and the discarded copy of *Pull* or *Weapon* lying in a hole
> in the road: men at work, a reassuring sight.

Poems like this recall Ian Hamilton's observation that Robert Lowell's work deals with personae who 'are doomed to nuclear extinction, ... [and] must crack up, or take to drink, or cling in desperation to the imagery that can merely measure their plight' (Hamilton 1973: 103). Hofmann's enthusiasm for Lowell's work is well documented (Thwaite 2005, Wheatley 2002, Brearton 1999, Hofmann 2003); his own description of Lowell's 'sardonic epithets' as style forever wanting to stop and bury itself in a kind of articulate hysteria' (2001: 38–9) echoes Hamilton's. Julian Stannard enumerates some of the ways Lowell has influenced Hofmann:

> Lowell has left his finger prints all over Hofmann's poetry. Not only does Hofmann's writing enjoy that laidback, prosy solidity, the very notations of his punctuation – lapidary hyphens, elliptical withdrawal – not to mention the adjectival clusters, the tell-tale triads, all speak of Hofmann's familiarity with the American poet (Stannard 2003).

One of these features, the ellipsis (used on all but five pages of Hofmann's first collection), plays an important structural role in 'Shapes of Things' (1983: 39), which observes the threat of nuclear war in terms of 1950s culture. The poem's interest in the power of ideals, symbols and myths obviously participates in pastoral, an impression strengthened by the playful and ironic interest in the roles of artifice and genre:

> We are living in the long shadow of the Bomb –
> a fat Greenpeace whale, simplified and schematic
> like the sign 'lavatories for the handicapped',
> its whirling genitals a small outboard swastika…

Two sets of symbols couple perversely and playfully, as if visual resemblances between symbols implied connections between the things symbolised. This is one of the places where a Hofmann poem seems doomed to the cul-de-sac down which it has travelled: although the connection between disability and Nazism is arbitrary – and funny precisely because it is arbitrary and inapposite – it's difficult to see where the poem can go from here. It's the same *ne-plus-ultra* nihilism which Hofmann points out in Gottfried Benn's 'Morgue' poems (Hofmann 2003: 77). He gets out of it by using an ellipsis to conjoin what would otherwise be a non-sequitur; because the first stanza trails off, the fact that the start of the second is like a second run-up at the poem is disguised:

> I saw the rare Ava Gardner, the last woman alive,
> modelling her check workshirts in *On the Beach*.
> As the wind drove the heavy clouds of fallout
> towards them, there were no ugly scenes of anarchy –
>
> only revivalist preachers and the Salvation Army band..
> She admired the *esprit de corps* of her husband
> as he went down in the last living submarine –
> an obsolete nuclear cigar, doused in the bay.

The syntactical disjunction is partly responsible for the poem's static argument; as in O'Brien's 'Propaganda' (1991: 12–3), the poem's drama is held securely distant by its idyllic artifice.

In 'Fürth i. Wald' (1983: 40), the political ideals which generate conflict have faded, leaving only the boundaries which result. On one side are 'the lonely heartless villas of the guards'; the other, marginally more heroic, tries to hang on, but

Der Neue

Tag dawns only twice a week nowadays. With its
Nazi-sounding name and millenarian ideals, still
holding the fort for a dwindling readership…

5 Literary influence and literary identity

One consequence of Hofmann's way of writing without the idiolectal ground of 'a fully realised persona' (Robinson 1988: 49) may be that '[i]ntellectually and emotionally... his poems depend largely on what the reader projects into their absences and elisions' (Robinson 1988: 49). Sean O'Brien points out that 'the prospect of DIY poetry might not seem much of a bargain' (O'Brien 1998: 237), before going on to discuss 'Nighthawks' (Hofmann 1986: 30–1) as a poem which generates 'a more fully dramatised sense of the poet's disengagement from his own materials' (O'Brien 1998: 237).

In fact this dramatisation does not depend on the introduction of 'authentic' personal detail or elements of a 'voice' associated with a particular identity; artistic mediations and mixed registers remain the means by which the poem depicts the landscape. But several historical periods are invoked simultaneously, most obviously the 1940s America of Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks* ('hamburger heaven', 'sundaes') but also interwar Europe ('a laughing-gas victim', 'tubercular'), and this invocation enlivens the depiction of a contemporary landscape as dystopian. In comparison the resolutely contemporary materials of 'Albion Market' and 'From Kensal Rise to Heaven' lack historical resonance; it isn't the disengaged poet who is dramatised more energetically in the '*poem noir*' (O'Brien 1998: 239) of 'Nighthawks', but the landscape.

The European allusions of 'Nighthawks' are less obvious than the American ones, even apart from the title, but they are extremely significant, because early twentieth-century Europe is an important source for Hofmann both technically and thematically. Alan Robinson points out that Hofmann's allusions to the culture of early twentieth-century Germany and his use of its tones and techniques suggest a comparison between 'the decadence of the 1980s' and the 'crisis of capitalism of the inter-war years, which Hofmann's own version of *Neue Sachlichkeit remorselessly* records' (Robinson 1986: 52), or, as Julian Stannard puts it, 'Bayswater...

suddenly informed by Weimar' (Stannard 2002). See, for example, 'Pavement Artistes' (1983: 25), Hofmann's discussion of Otto Dix (2001: 172–3)and his comment that '[t]he poems about East Germany and Czechoslovakia—Mexico too, actually!—are partly metaphors for England' (in Brearton 1999). It is the same type of historical comparison we see in both O'Brien (2001a: 4–7)) and Didsbury (2003: 149), though achieved here neither by explicit juxtaposition nor discreet allusion but by selective adoption of tone and technique. Michael Hamburger's descriptions of the early Expressionists as providing 'an arbitrary concatenation of images derived from contemporary life' (Hamburger 1970: 272–3), with 'an irony that has the dual purpose of satirizing contemporary civilisation and of expressing a malaise, a premonition of doom' (Hamburger 1970: 275), indicate strong affinities with Hofmann's technique. Like Lichtenstein, Hofmann provides 'near-caricature, at once clownish and terrified' (Hamburger & Middleton 1962: xxv); while Gottfried Benn's '"transcendental" pleasure in art [which] is none other than the pleasure of fiddling while Rome burns (Hamburger 1970: 347) is also pertinent.

The last comparison is especially apt inasmuch as Benn and Hofmann show real technical similarities, even at the level of specific images (compare the dragonflies in Hofmann's 'On Fanø' (1983: 41) and Benn's 'Gesänge' (1987: 192–3)), and Hofmann has himself insisted on Benn's influence on his work (in Brearton 1999). The theme and structure of 'Nighthawks' – with its series of 'atomised and homogeneous' (O'Brien 1998: 238) portraits – closely resemble those of Gottfried Benn's poem 'Nachtcafé' ('Night Café'), which Hofmann himself has translated (Hofmann 2005: 20–1), and in which the persons portrayed are inhumanly reduced to unflattering physical characteristics. Hofmann's characteristic disjunctive style, which presents a series of images unconnected by argument or syntax to create a particular mood and effect, shows a clear affinity with Benn's Expressionist style here and elsewhere.

A comprehensive survey of Hofmann's influences is outside the scope of this chapter, but might include not only Lowell, Benn and the other German Expressionists but also Tom Paulin (2001: 149–151), Joseph Brodsky (2001: 122–3) and Eugenio Montale. Although Hofmann protests that 'I am not interested in making a sort of Arcimboldo self-portrait made of book reviews' (2001: xi), his critical prose illuminates the poetry in a number of ways, not least in that, consciously or otherwise, in his selection of material

for review he has built up a picture of a tradition to which he aspires. (Julian Stannard profitably explores the connections between Hofmann's work as a reviewer and editor and his poetry.). His description of Otto Dix – 'an impressive, unsparing and unlovable artist in the German tradition of accuracy, the sublime and the unbeautiful' (2001: 173) – may be thought applicable to himself, while his distinction between the functions of figuration in Dix and George Grosz encapsulates a central tension in his own practice, which seems constantly to vacillate between politically active symbolism and pessimistic realism:

> Where Grosz uses caricature and metaphor, Dix refers you to the reality of what he depicts. The prostitute is not a metaphor for capitalism but an actual prostitute. If the pictures are political, they are so in a less narrow and less purposeful way. In particular, their relation to change is very questionable. (2001: 174–5)

A reader looking for traditional antecedents for Hofmann's approach might be interested to hear that

> [w]hat interested Dix was ugliness, which seems to him almost like a creed. When he said, later in his life, 'I'm not that obsessed with making representations of ugliness. Everything I've seen is beautiful…', he only succeeds in confirming its importance by suggesting a kind of *ésthetique du mal*, which I've argued is close to German art and writing anyway, in the poetry of Georg Trakl and Gottfried Benn. (2001: 179)

What is significant about Hofmann's enthusiasms is the extent to which they serve as sources and models for his social visions, so that even those landscapes which might be characterised as 'realist', 'contemporary' or 'brutal' remain highly literary. The supposed contrast between 'idyll' and 'reality' is complicated by the fact that not only Hofmann's idylls but also his 'realities' are envisaged through the imagery and techniques of a range of cultural sources.

6 Suburban landscapes, interiors, and temporary homes

Many of Hofmann's dramas are played out in suburban settings (1983: 21; 1986: 37; 1993: 30; 1999: 60–1, 63), often not so much domestic as shared (1983: 21; 1986: 26; 1999:56–7), sometimes hotels (1983: 44, 45; 1986: 19; 1999: 26, 41). His personae are guests (1986: 14–5, 17–8), tenants or temporary occupants (1986: 40, 41–2), and their occupancy is anything but secure (1986: 36).

The metropolitan speaker of 'On the Margins (1986: 14-5), like that of 'Impotence', inhabits a rural idyll uncomfortably, 'Stuffy and centripetal.../talking, offering "help", sitting on tables/or leaning ungraciously in the doorway'. His 'evil whispers' contrast with the gardener's 'rustic burr... whistling and crooning happily'. But Hofmann's speakers are no more at home in suburban surroundings; indeed, 'home ground' is defined as 'cageyness, stasis, ennui' (1986: 21). The poems catalogue objects in the suburban landscape, often dwelling on images of emptiness, factitiousness and decline, such as 'the pubic scrub of this street I am growing to hate,/with its false burglar alarms and sleeping policemen' (1986: 37), 'the dead-end street' with its 'slowly declining roof' and 'an electricity meter [which] clung to life by a few threads' (1986: 26). These are landscapes of 'high-rises and multi-storey garages... the corner pub... the health centre padlocked and grilled like an offie,/the prefab post office... bank... undertaker... idealistic delicatessen' (1999: 60–1), which the metropolitan Hofmann ambivalently, ironically, describes (quoting Robert Lowell's mother (Lowell 2003: 124)) as '"barely perched on the outer rim of the hub of decency"' (1999: 60).

Temporary occupation of place becomes the basis on which Hofmann parcels up his life, with situations invoked by the names of roads: 'Lewis Hollow Road' (1999: 63); 'Malvern Road' (1999: 60-61); 'these months of transition/in a room on the Harrow Road' (1999: 76). In the latter poem, 'Litany', Hofmann for once comes close to an idealisation of the squalid landscape, as a setting for sexual or romantic feelings in the manner of O'Brien's 'Of Origins' (O'Brien 1995: 19):

> goslings and baby coots without the white stripe as yet,
> attack dogs defecating on the grass,
> the occasional putter of narrow-boats, industrial
> and bucolic as canals are industrial and bucolic,
> ...
> the steel doors and squats of Walterton and Elgin
> from the days before pastel paint, a hulking umistakable school
> on the light industrial skyline, barbed wire, coupling pigeons,
> yellow brick and corrugated Homebase prefab, living for nightfall
> and the bus that took me round the houses
> to heaven.

Both 'Litany' and 'Malvern Road' are poems of a single long sentence – in the case of 'Malvern Road', an extraordinary long sentence over eight six-line stanzas of long lines

– as if each location were to be contained, or summarised, in a single utterance. David Malcolm points out that the speaker of 'Malvern Road' 'constantly uses objects and landscapes to express feelings that belong to him':

> The vocabulary is predominantly one of objects, and there seems a relative absence of expressed emotion on the part of the speaker. The poem is, in a real sense, only a list of things connected with a place – the street, the maisonette, the buildings, the stairs, the furniture, the businesses and a tree (Malcolm 2005: 71).

Place is thus as important for Hofmann as it is for O'Brien and Didsbury; but whereas they idealise the 'home' landscapes of certain identities, Hofmann typically uses dystopian and temporary homes to reflect the temporary and problematic identity of alien, exile, and metropolitan. The idealising 'Litany' ('Dear God,/let me remember...') grasps at one of a series of temporary homes – identities – in a desire to make it permanent.

Alan Robinson argues that the detached and helpless observer, the speaker of what he calls Hofmann's 'lodger poems' (Robinson 1988: 58), is a central figure in the work. The lodger Voorman in the poem 'Disturbances' (1986: 40), and the narrator's anxiety about him, provide the material for an analysis of the disillusioned individual's relationship with society. Voorman alternates between impotent rages in which he 'throws fits, shouting and swearing,/punching the walls, putting us in fear of our lives' (1986: 40) and periods of 'maladjusted withdrawal' (Robinson 1988: 59) in which 'He's even more remote than I am, curtains drawn,/stopping the plug-hole with his hair-loss' (1986: 40). Robinson sees such behaviours as analogues of the individual's two possible responses to Hofmann's vision of the world, 'apathetic anomie and a frustrated rebellion' (Robinson 1988: 59).

The occupants of shared houses live in isolation, next to each other but not together, and this makes them powerful symbols in the landscape of 1980s–90s Britain:

> I was afraid I might frighten my neighbours,
> two old ladies dying of terror, thinking
> every man was the gasman, every gasman a killer... (1986: 26).

In 'White Noise' (1983: 21) the speaker's knowledge of his neighbour 'two floors away' is stolen ('I've seen it through the open door sometimes') and superficial ('You hoover

twice a week'), hardly a substitute for intimacy. The speaker's fascination turns him into a voyeur or stalker:

> Your reveille is at six: you go downstairs
> for a glass of water with your vitamin pills.
> Then back to your room, and your light stays on
> till late. – What do you do to kill the time?

The observed subject's sickliness ('accident-prone/and painfully thin in your sepulchral clothes./Reality filters through your tinted spectacles') is repeated in 'Against Nature' (1986: 43–4), where Huysmans's hero is updated as an anorexic woman:

> Des Esseintes himself would have admired
> her fastidiousness – anorexia, years in hospital –
> as he gloated over his own peptone enemas...

The invocation is significant because Hofmann bears comparison with Huysmans/Des Esseintes at a number of points. There is the interest in interiors (Huysmans 2003: 11–26 & passim). Des Esseintes's approving description of the *Satyricon* of Petronius could also describe Hofmann's work:

> analysing with smooth finesse the joys and sorrows of these loving couples, depicting in a splendidly wrought style, without affording a single glimpse of the author, without any comment whatever, without a word of approval or condemnation of his characters' thoughts and actions, the vices of a decrepit civilisation, a crumbling Empire (Huysmans 2003: 30–1).

There are grounds for seeing Hofmann's style as drawing on that of the Decadence, for example in the rarefied aesthetic, range of cultural reference and taste for enumerating detail – compare the catalogue of household goods in 'Zirbelstrasse' (1999: 14-15) with those of Des Esseintes (Huysmans 2003: 11–22) – but especially in the restless way he assumes an identity constructed out of cultural and literary models.

7 Temporary and factitious identity

The speaker of 'A Brief Occupation' (1986: 26) spells out Hofmann's equation of temporary homes with temporary or fragile identity: 'I was not myself. I was just anyone.' The occupants of bedsits cling to their rooms as to the vestiges of themselves: 'The

house is breaking up, and still I'm hanging on here' (1986: 40). 'Freebird' (1993: 20–1) takes an epigraph from DH Lawrence: 'One forms not the faintest inward attachment, especially here in America'.

The persona that Hofmann's poems build up is cosmopolitan, consisting in large part in quotation, allusion, fragments of other languages, markers of sophistication such as architectural literacy (Robinson 1988: 61) and 'sociopolitical terminology' (Robinson 1988: 52), and mixed registers arranged cleverly to generate comedy, tension and insight. Cleverness is an integral component; although Hofmann uses irruptions of demotic and low culture ('Tell it to the Marines!' (1986: 17)), there is always a sense of a detached intelligence choosing and ordering the materials. No poem more than any other works in an idiolect that appears to be Hofmann's own: his poems perform linguistic identities in a way which calls into question the possibility of 'authentic' identity and voice.

David Wheatley has described Hofmann as a 'magpie, down to his stippled, piebald vocabulary, twitching with German tags' (Wheatley 2002). He himself has spoken of his interest in '[a]ssemblage or collage or bric-a-brac' and 'trying to get *things* to sing and dance' (in Brearton 1999):

> I've felt able to chuck the kitchen sink at the poems [in *Approximately Nowhere*], as it were. Dip into German, dip into American, use asides—'ask Steiner'!—bits of French, lots of London landmarks, lots of abroad, one poem from Ovid that has Kafka in it, another that condenses one of the most famous speeches in Latin—Lowell has an essay about it—into a single filthy line of English. The American 'whatever'. (in Brearton 1999)

Such a programme has some paradoxical ramifications. On the one hand, retaining fragments of other languages preserves their sound and cultural connotations, insisting on their specificity to a milieu and socio-historical context. On the other, one noticeable effect of Hofmann's mixing of registers, idioms, milieus and indeed whole languages is a kind of cultural flattening, where the 'ironic permanence' (Hofmann in Brearton 1999) into which items are rescued pays no regard to cultural values; all is grist to the ironic mill. The urbane register of foreign-language fragments (the titles of poems alone draw on German (1983: 22, 26; 1999: 14), French (1983: 9; 1993: 43; 1999: 18, 64) and Spanish (1993: 41, 44, 47)), casual classicism (1993: 7; 1999: 16) and Germanic

compounding (1983: 22; 1999: 42) is deliberately undermined by collisions with obscenity, banality and low registers which push the poems' moods constantly towards bathos, bleakness or both. 'In the Realm of the Senses' (1986: 28) combines English like 'fuck' and 'mushy' with '*consommations*' and *'café au lait'*, a reference to *'Ariane*, the unmanned European rocket' with '*Gruppensex*'; it closes with what could be a description of the persona's own voice:

> Our cat has sprayed the house to greet us.
> Lust hurts him into eloquence, almost speech—
> like the rabble-rousing live music on the record player,
> cynical, manipulative, knowing where it wants to go.

The danger of assemblage is that either its appropriation of items, or the items themselves, may be fraudulent. Hofmann's depictions of late modernity are simultaneously desperate and gleeful, as in 'Postcard from Cuernavaca' (1993: 39–40) , with its absurd catalogue of ersatz and appropriated cultural ingredients. Note how identity is assumed or spuriously conferred by clothing and objects, and again the collision of registers (e.g. 'rondure' vs 'humpity'):

> A Mariachi trumpeter, wearing just his old pesos,
> trilling drily into the gutter. Ostensible Aztecs
> stitching their silver Roman-style tunics *im Schneiderstiz* ['cross-legged'].
>
> There's a band
> hidden in Eiffel's unilluminated iron snowdrop bandstand –
> bought by the Austrians here to cheer them up
> when Maximilian left the scene – giving it some humpity.
> The rondure and Prussian gleam of the horns –
> I sit and listen in the Café Viena.
> Anything north of here goes, and most things east.

The poems' assemblage of registers and fragments seems like a series of assumed identities, none of them finally *echt* or permanent. David Malcolm's reading (2006) of 'de passage' (1999: 18; the French phrase means 'of passage' as in 'bird of passage', i.e. 'only temporarily present') shows the speaker learning to try on identities, paradoxically to try on the identity of exile:

> to talk to the stallholders
> in something approaching their language

...
and not to go abroad in the garden suburbs
we've temporarily lucked into

without a pair of scissors in our pockets.

This poem, which stands amongst the elegies for Gert Hofmann in part one of *Apporximately Nowhere*, sees Hofmann coming to terms with his parents' (and his own) status as 'bourgeois gypsies' (1999: 14). It's from this standpoint, the cautious outsider who thinks of himself as passing through, that his ambivalent usage of his cultural materials should be viewed. Elsewhere the notion of an exile or stateless person occurs in talk of the 'vaunted sod/under my feet [which] is rolled up like a piece of turf or a blanket' (1999: 70) and of 'indigents and fellow aliens and oddballs in the street' (1999: 76). 'Guanajuato Two Times' (1993: 54–5) records that 'the bells tolled, not real bells/but recordings of former bells,/and never for me'.

Whereas for O'Brien and Didsbury seductive idylls – cultural mediations – might be replaced by more localised idylls constructed from their home milieu, for Hofmann no such replacement is possible because his metropolitan milieu has no local home. His means of understanding the world are primarily cultural and literary; his descriptions order the world in terms of authors: 'Des Esseintes' (1986: 43), 'something out of Dostoyevsky' (1986: 43), 'something out of Le Carré' (1999: 19), 'Tolstoyan purpose' (1999: 20). One of the most important pastoral contrasts in his work is between art and life, and their inability to measure up to each other.

9 Classicism

The collision between an artistic milieu and a reality which may not submit to the terms of that milieu has been a productive one in Hofmann's work, and a point of contact with Peter Didsbury. It is a variant of the mock-epic, with non-contemporary themes and texts rendered in contemporary Britain, usually for comic or bathetic effect. A straightforward example is 'Seele im Raum' (1999: 56–7), which appropriates Rilke's title for a poem about the interior of a bedsit: 'I could probably/just about have swung a cat/in that glory-hole'. Bathos attends the contemporary scene, but Rilke too is being gently mocked by the application of his high-minded style to a concrete situation. Similarly, references to Werther's 'inordinate self-pity' (1983: 32) and to Goethe's

'future as an abominable father' (1983: 33), and the bathetic reduction of Romantic *Weltschmerz* ('Whenever he felt sad, he headed for the Rhine/and made a conquest of one of the maidens' (1983: 33), reduce the source period of Romanticism to the terms of the speaker's nihilistic present. The satire is double-edged, not only deflating its Romantic subject but also rebuking the glib poise of its own contemporary voice. Note how Romanticism is yet another cultural source of ideals for Hofmann. His disillusionment involves not only the failure of ideals to match up with brute reality, but also the failure of art to match up with life. Hence when he sketches the Romantics in, and as products of, their historical contexts (e.g. when Kleist is pictured pontificating in pastoral ease (1999: 32–34)), Hofmann is not merely mocking his subjects; there is also the bitter realisation that their ideals, and all youthful ideals, are the product of circumstances.

The same device is at work in many of Hofmann's classical references. The effect may vary from gleeful recognition of banality (1986: 18; 1993: 21) to something more nuanced, such as the illuminating contemporised vision of Rome in 'Lament for Crassus' (1993: 3):

> Crassus, the pioneer of insuranburn,
> with his architect slaves and firefighter slaves,
> big in silver, big in real state, big in personnel.

There is no shortage of examples (1983: 26, 40; 1986: 29; 1993: 21, 22, 51; 1999: 33), but the most lucid and sustained occurs in Scylla and Minos (1999: 37–39), where classical material is delivered in the language of the tabloids:

> Then one day I saw him. That changed everything.
> ...
> By Jupiter out of Europa, apparently. I thought: gimme!
> ...
> I thought of the word Argive—or were we the Argives?

Again, the mock-heroic mixture of style and subject is not only comic, reminding the reader that the classics too can be lurid and obscene, but also delivers a satirical point about an admittedly easy target, the militaristic tabloid idiom and attitude ('our boys'; 'blow jobs'; 'Fuck you, Minos, your wife does it with bulls!').

9 Childhood 'idylls'

Perhaps Hofmann's best-known poems are those in 'My Father's House', the second half of *Acrimony* (1986: 49–79). While they primarily constitute a (far from flattering) portrait of Gert Hofmann, his novelist father, they do so through a series of remembered childhood scenes which are far from idyllic. Whereas O'Brien's poems of childhood range over landscapes and register little sense of parental presence, Hofmann's are claustrophobic, revolving around the family circle and especially his father, on holidays (1986: 49, 50–1 60–1), and at home(s) (1986: 54–5, 56, 62–3, 66, 68–9, 70). His father's work (1986: 49, 57, 58, 65, 66, 68, 73–6, 79) and marital indiscretions and absences (1986: 54, 67, 68, 79) provide material for the underlying themes of Hofmann's difficult relationship with his 'baffling and incommunicable' (1986: 70) father and his anxieties about inheriting his identity:

> By now, it is almost my father's arm,
> a man's arm, that lifts the cigarettes to my mouth (1986: 77).

The identification is physical – he puts up his hands 'and feel my father's head' (1986: 78) – but also cultural:

> Who could have said we belonged together,
> my father and my self, out walking, our hands held
> behind our backs in the way Goethe recommended? (1986: 54);
>
> I picked up just enough politics to frighten my mother,
> and the slick, witless phrases I used about girls
> were a mixture of my father's and those I remembered
>
> from *Mädchen* or *Bravo*... Nothing quite touched me.
> I put on weight, smoked Players and read Dickens
> for anchorage and solidity (1986: 62);
> I have the radio on as much as ever my father did (1999: 59).

Literature, Gert Hofmann's (and later Michael's) business, is also the means by which they (fail to) communicate, and which provides the son with material with which to 'engineer' (1986: 53) his identity. 'I coincided/with the publication of your firstborn, *The Denunciation*' (1986: 57):

> You gave me a copy of your second

with the dedication: *Michael,*
something else for you to read.
Your disparaging imperative

was too much resented for obedience...
You were a late starter at fiction,
but for ten years now, your family
has been kept at arm's length (1986: 58);

Once, you offered me your clippings file – the human touch! (1986: 69).

Literature becomes a substitute for real communication. Novels are 'dialogue by other means' (1986: 74); the son leaves 'some lines of Joseph Roth/bleeding on your desk: "*I had no father – that is,/I never knew my father*"' (1986: 77) and complains of art squeezing out life: 'A performance, like everything else... What's the point?' (1986: 76)

The same themes are taken up in the series of elegies for Gert Hoffman that opens *Approximately Nowhere* (1999: 3–20). Starting from a position of silence ('some months before, a choleric note dashed off to me/cutting me off, it would once have been said'), 'Epithanaton' (1999: 10–12) considers last words—what the dead man's might have been, and what the poet's last words to his father should be. The poem is also larded with fragments of German, conjuring the idiom the two might have used in conversation ('part of your *Krankheitsbild ['syndrome']*, I suppose'; 'A tantrum, I thought, tenderly, pityingly, *kleiner Papa* [little Papa]'). But the conversation is both facilitated and obstructed by the language of art: the poem tries on various ways of communicating, none of them satisfactory. The speaker speculates that his father's last words were probably

nothing articulate, grandiose, bogus and spoken,
No Victor Hugo or Henry James, no *Je vois une lumière noire*
or *Ah, the distinguished thing*. When I was fifteen,

I told you about the Grateful Dead, and you liked that,
even tried it out in German, where it sounded, predictably,
a little swollen and implausible, *die dankbaren Toten*.

You looked, James might have put it, not ungrateful yourself.
Mildly bitter, thinner, wonderful actually
(I'm thinking of *deadish*, an old beer adjective),

> Russian, bearded, still more sharpness about the nose
> as the Russian (Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, ask Steiner) writes.

(The last words quoted are actually of Victor Hugo and William James, Henry James's philosopher brother; the literary critic George Steiner's first book was *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast.*) The mixture of register here suggests a sustained and difficult relationship between the two writers, made difficult not so much by crude differences of language, but by the difficulty of translating between idioms and the gap between idioms and reality. The pleasure which the speaker takes in 'not ungrateful yourself' is in part a pleasure in fictionalising his father in the manner of James; and the poem's wider perplexity is that of a pasticheur faced with the necessity of sincerity. Imagining himself in a novel, the speaker cannot translate his novelistic relationship with his father into an idiom suitable for the non-fiction he is faced with. The account of how 'we said our *Lebwohl* ['goodbye'] to you' is funny but also poignant, showing the speaker unable even at such a moment to quell his self-consciousness, the sophisticate's compulsion to view himself as a fraud, performing a cultural role:

> Like a cavalier swain, I speared my flowers at my feet,
> a no-throw, the *blaue Blume* of the Romantics, delphiniums,
> blue for faith, and turned on my heel.

It is a comic but also a desperate scene, in which the speaker's acquired identity proves inadequate to moments of real crisis. The whole poem, which floats on a web of cultural knowingness and allusion, eventually lays claim to an authentic depiction of experience precisely by recognising that inadequacy. This is the end is what separates Hofmann's version of pastoral from O'Brien's and Didsbury's. All three poets are concerned with the cultural mediations of identity and landscape through which we understand ourselves. But whereas O'Brien and Didsbury oppose the factitious narratives of nationalism, bureaucracy and power with visions which purport to be grounded in authentic cultural identity, Hofmann refuses to claim any identity as his own. In the end this refusal becomes a kind of identity – the exile's – and a solid ground from which to challenge cultural visions.

1 Preface

This commentary traces the links between the critical thesis and the development of my creative work. It covers both broad technical questions and the writing of individual poems. It is not systematic because the creative and critical elements of the project have not developed straightforwardly: they have informed and influenced each other repeatedly and in complex ways. The creative work did not develop in thrall to the critical element, or vice versa. But they are not independent, and in this commentary I discuss my creative development in terms of the critical thesis. The interests and preoccupations I discuss below may also shed some light on the thesis itself, for example, why I focus on the Gothic elements of Sean O'Brien and Peter Didsbury, and on Didsbury's interest in high rhetoric.

The creative work is split into two pieces, a collection of individual poems called *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street* and a separate long sequence called *Broken Tiles*. I have avoided treating the sequence as part of the collection for two reasons. First, the length of the sequence means it would overbalance the collection; in the writing *Broken Tiles* grew to a size beyond my expectations, demanding to be treated as a wholly separate piece of work. Second, its treatment of the pastoral images and forms I address in the thesis is technically very different from the approach I take in the collection. *Broken Tiles* is highly formal, and takes a homogeneous and unorthodox approach, whereas *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street* is, I hope, technically varied and more contiguous with pastoral traditions. So there is no doubt that the two are distinct pieces of work, offering different opportunities for exploring the thematic, technical and generic material. Both draw on the lessons of the thesis, and neither on its own could offer a complete response to the project.

This commentary is accordingly split into two parts, each dealing with one or other piece of work, though there are thematic and technical links between them. I begin with a discussion of *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street*, listing the various ways the thesis has influenced my creative work before moving on to discuss individual poems grouped by theme or technique, with discussions of relevant technical questions placed appropriately. The second part of the commentary covers *Broken Tiles* and the thematic and technical questions specific to it.

2 *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street*

The critical and creative elements of this project developed alongside each other, so the ways in which the one influenced the other are various and unsystematic. In what follows I trace what I consider to be the most important and/or interesting connections between the two. These are some of the forms those connections take:

Generic and broad thematic influences – for example, the ways in which all three of the poets I discuss use landscape to express personal and cultural identity, as a metonym for nation and society, and hence as a means of addressing social and historical questions. In the creative work I explore the idea of equating landscape with identity, and the thesis enabled this by showing that minute variations of identity can be described and associated with specific landscapes (e.g. Hofmann's metropolitan suburbia; O'Brien's half-public, half-private municipal locations), rather than simply regurgitating the country–city antithesis of pastoral convention. Similarly the ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes which the poets take towards their landscapes demonstrated that the contemporary pastoral idyll need not be presented as absolutely idyllic. Other thematic influences include the notion of a state of blankness, without either history or values, which O'Brien and Hofmann both gesture towards in their different ways; and the figure of a criminal, exile, outsider or transgressor used as a foil to the landscape or social setting which it at once inhabits and remains aloof from. A number of poems draw on the latter idea, which receives a fuller treatment in *Broken Tiles*.

Imagery and location – It is inevitable that the landscapes I depict and the imagery I use to do so should bear some resemblance to those of the poets I discuss, largely because I inhabit landscapes close in time and place to theirs and because my analysis of the contemporary historical moment treats their work as focusing on particularly relevant landscape features, for example post-industrial urban areas, municipal parks and suburbia, and on certain historical conditions, for example a contrast between imperial grandeur and contemporary dereliction. I am not interested in making either the creative work or this commentary on it into a personal document, whether a confession, a manifesto or an autobiography. But it is obvious and appropriate that my perception and depiction of landscape and of identity-through-landscape should reflect the tensions of my own identity – and indeed desirable if the creative work is to rise above pastiche

into original work in its own right. While this was not something I was specifically conscious of in the writing of the poems, it is striking on re-reading them how clearly they address a number of landscapes and express specific attitudes to them. Thus, the suburban landscapes are often dystopian; a rural idyll is treated as a distant, dreamlike (and sometimes nightmarish) childhood memory; and the provincial market town is treated as largely idyllic, as are derelict places. It would be reductive to translate this into biography (and to do so would also obscure the influence of the poets in the thesis, such as Didsbury's influence on my vision of the provincial town); but I see in retrospect how these various locations relate to my own history as someone born in a rural place who grew up in a small town before leaving to live in the city as an adult. Such illuminations clearly improve my understanding of my own work and provide a basis for future development which embraces and/or challenges the underlying assumptions and associations.

Technical strategies and devices – These include such general approaches as the use of landscape to express psychological states and cultural and social visions, various sorts of pastoral opposition and contrast, and the use of Gothic alongside pastoral. The latter has a number of uses. It can be used specifically to introduce historical material into a contemporary landscape in the form of ghosts and ghostly objects. It allows the everyday to be transfigured into something larger. This usage is particularly relevant because it relates to an important element of both Didsbury's and O'Brien's techniques, the introduction of strangeness or absurdity into a prosaic, realist, downbeat, everyday setting with two ends in view: the idealisation of that landscape into something both familiar and unfamiliar, and the supercharging of a poem whose subject matter may otherwise condemn it to dourness. In this sense the Gothic constitutes a variation on the MacGuffin, since it is the real landscape, however conceived, which the poet is ultimately interested in; the Gothic is a tool for re-imagining that landscape. Third, using the Gothic alongside the pastoral introduces complication where the realist impulse is dissatisfied with pastoral's conventions. Didsbury's 'The Village, or Festive Schadenfreude' spices its rural idyll with 'dark tales' (27). Poems of mine like 'The Winter Silage' make similar combinations of the idyllic with the nightmarish and grotesque; part of my interest in doing so lies in trying to express a place/identity which is not straightforwardly idyllic and conservative but also claustrophobic, truculent and often hostile. Like pure pastoral, such representations are stylised and even cartoonish

(Hofmann's 'Shapes of Things' (1983: 39) is also relevant here); but in going beyond the visible surface into dreams and nightmares they are better able to express a landscape's psychological and cultural identity.

I wrote a number of poems in the tradition of the Horatian ode, drawing on elements of all three poets from the thesis.

Lineation, metre, rhyme and tone – As well as generic and thematic influences, I also draw on the underlying technical resources of the poets. My approaches to lineation, metre, rhyme and tone all vary over the collection. Some poems show affinities with Hofmann in the downbeat, slightly prosaic tone, unmetred lineation and use of irony. Others use a more metrical and musical style, showing the influence of O'Brien and Didsbury. A number of strictly metred rhyming pieces demonstrate strong traditional links with, for example, Andrew Marvell via O'Brien, while a number of looser-metred, unrhymed pieces also resemble O'Brien's practice in some ways while sharing Didsbury's interest in rhetorical flourish.

Reading – The thesis influenced my own creative work not just through the work of the poets I discuss directly. The poets' own influences and enthusiasms became ground for further study. In particular, O'Brien's interests in Marvell and Auden bear on my Horatian odes and more traditionally formal pastorals; and Hofmann's relation to the German-language tradition was not only an important point critically; it also made me read more widely in that tradition and develop my own practice accordingly.

Main specific influences of each poet

Each of the poets contributed to my technical development in several key ways. I share O'Brien's view of the importance of place (also visible in his own influences, such as the work of the Midwest poet James Wright): 'Place is very important in my writing; I'm very concerned to give, as it were, a dramatic sense of being in or being from a particular place' (quoted in Woodcock 1998: 41). I also draw on his aesthetic of landscape, interest in conceits and his flexible approach to metre. From Hofmann I take elements of tone and style, use of irony, critical use of traditional resources and broadened horizons about what a poem is or should aim to do. From Didsbury I also take aspects of sensibility, particularly views of provincial Englishness, interest in religious iconography and terminology, critical use of traditional resources including rhetoric and rhetorical figures, and certain metafictional devices. Not all of these

borrowing have been conscious or straightforward, and I have not attempted to create an identikit style based on the three poets studied on the thesis, but to draw on aspects of their techniques in the development of my own mature style.

The poems

The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street contains a number of repeated locations; each sort of location is often treated in a similar way each time. Rural settings are often associated with dreamed or remembered idylls, as in 'How Good It Sounded' (140), an adaptation of Heine's 'In der Fremde' ('In Exile'). The change of title shifts the emphasis from exile to childhood; I also added the synaesthetic 'The smell of the woods sounded like laughter' as echoing formally the category mistake of 'das küßte mich auf deutsch, und sprach auf deutsch' (which I render as 'it kissed me in English'). Another short poem, 'For My Brother' (146) takes up the theme of disconnection from childhood idylls, while 'The Vision' (159) introduces religious iconography ('the dark mandorla of the pond') as a means of expressing the idealisation of childhood events. 'The Rubicon' (147), possibly my most Hofmann-like poem in terms of style, also takes up Hofmann's theme of the poet's relationship with his father.

'The Civil War' and 'Great Edwardian' explore historical dimensions of seductive idylls. The former poem mirrors its static summer subject matter with a relatively static delivery: the lines are mainly end-stopped and adopt a loose pentameter, and the short, relatively simple sentences eschew the complicated syntax I use elsewhere. The rhyme works across rather than within stanzas – Peter Riley uses the same device in a more prolonged manner in 'Sea Watches' (Riley 2007: 8–24) – so that it is inconspicuous yet ties the whole together; the effect on the ear is supposed to be dreamlike. The historical dimension of the final stanza maps tensions about English identity on to the seventeenth century, which is an important period for me imaginatively (see 'Izaak Walton's Flight' (204) for another exploration of it). The idyll described in the rest of the poem also purports to be a historical Golden Age, though without specifying period exactly. 'Great Edwardian's historical approach is different, portraying a fin-de-siècle ambivalence about Empire and its certainties in a historical setting rather than from a contemporary standpoint. Images of ending, decline and abdication are conspicuous ('Prospero', 'The meal is ended', 'He stubs his *Rey del Mundo*', 'his island has grown suddenly cold'), but less straightforward, I hope, is the attitude that poem and narrator take towards such things. The concern with luxury and interiors on the one hand and disillusion on the

other is meant to evoke the Decadence; the image of an Edwardian gentleman looking out across a garden, smoking, recalls Didsbury's 'That Old-Time Religion' (Didsbury 2003: 64–5), a resonance I did not intend in the writing but am happy to let stand.

The teasing quality of idylls is expressed in 'My Love' (171) through the figure of an idealised beloved; but in the last poem in the collection (206) I adopt Didsbury's figure of the house (both physical and genealogical), though with a different tone and approach to his in 'Glimpsed Among Trees' (Didsbury 2003: 134–6). While we both use Gothic elements, mine subordinates its ghostly presences to its lyricism; it is dreamlike but avoids the hint of nightmare in 'Glimpsed Among Trees'. In order to achieve this I use a relaxed, meditative tone and repetition of images and words, drawing on the practice of DH Lawrence (e.g. 'End of Another Home Holiday' (Roberts & Porter 1982: 174–6)) for both.

The notion of displacement from one's own identity or history also supplies the conceit for 'I Leave Myself' (141), a free adaptation of a poem by Tadeusz Nowak. Nowak's original (in translation Miłosz 1963: 126) is much shorter and less expansive; it presents a dense series of images without much in the way of explanation or framing narrative. The adaptation represents an attempt to tease out the various ideas suggested by the images. Rather than condense the result back down into something like the original, I leave in the various assays (e.g. the versions of 'leaving myself' in the opening section, the 'musk I exude, exhibit, which I am'), mirroring the wider structure of the poem, which claims and rejects a series of identifications between self and environment. This approach is supposed to support an analogy with jazz ('a little jazz medley'), giving the sense of an improvisation, as are the rhythm and lineation, both heavily syncopated. The line is roughly a conceptual unit – each line contains an image, idea, movement or phrase (although I am aware that such a claim is hard to substantiate) – and rather than smoothing the lineation where this principle causes unexpected line breaks, I allow them to stand ('...the open veranda/from where/the man's..', '..which is/singing across continents about/ matters...', ...the murk cobalt of a/landscape...'). The poem's argument also adopts obtrusive rhetorical effects, such as the transformation of the cosmopolitan priest from the term of a simile into one of the poem's series of subjects, and the rapid change of scale from the priest pulling at dead strands of honeysuckle to the telegraph pole 'singing across continents'. At the same time, coherence is maintained by repetition of words ('dust') and conceit (identifications between self and landscape).

The problematic identification of self with landscape clearly connects with the poems which look back on childhood idylls I discuss above.

The failure of such an identification motivates 'Gawain and the Green Shade', whose death-wish is the most direct treatment I give of Sean O'Brien's desire for blankness, an escape from historical identity. The poem combines the moment in *Gawain and the Green Knight* (Anderson 259–266) when Gawain goes to meet the Green Knight expecting to be killed with Marvell's 'green thought in a green shade' (Marvell 101) – the annihilation of self in pastoral contemplation, or the absorption of self into a landscape. The latter conceit is explored in relation to a provincial town in 'A Missing Person' (153). The identification of self and landscape also motivates 'Landscape for August Natterer' (151); Natterer's *Witch's Head* (Rhodes 2000: 39) is a landscape whose features form a profile of a woman – see the commentary on *Broken Tiles* for more discussion of outsider art. 'Gawain and the Green Shade' draws on O'Brien in the loose, mainly dactylic, four-stress lines; the Gothic elements ('the ghostly farm' – see 'Didsbury's 'Old Farms' – and the ambivalent presence of the speaker) also draw on the thesis. Though the setting, like that of 'I Leave Myself', is dreamlike and general, the reference to 'a cavernous hole' alludes to the limestone karst of the White Peak, the landscape I associate with childhood and therefore make the setting of several idylls (like Auden in 'In Praise of Limestone' (Auden 1979: 184–7)).

In contrast to these idyllic, dreamed or remembered idylls, a number of poems present their landscapes as dystopian. The influence of Michael Hofmann is apparent in both the choice of location and the dystopian treatment of it, for example in 'Pressure' (163), a depiction of a suburban avenue. The poem rehearses a series of images for the avenue's rowan trees – whales' exhalations, dots on a plan (note the debt to the diagram in Didsbury's 'Gimpsed Among Trees' (Didsbury 2003:134), as well as the similar device I use in 'White Peak, Abandoned Workings' (186)), leaks, vines and chandeliers. The slight flavour of Martianism may contribute to the heartless tone; in any case the poem's treatment of the suburban estate is unsympathetic: people are generally absent, the street is described in terms of 'banalities', 'the fruit of ignorance' and 'Hades'. It dissects the estate's pastoral artifice through the reference to 'the meadows [the grass strips between the trees] conjure' and to the 'faux-irregular arrangement of gables'. (I find roofscapes strangely evocative; see 'The Triumph of Orthodoxy' (199)) The tone recalls Hofmann, as does the prosaic style. For example, the lineation is guided partly

by a rough equivalence of length and partly by sense (each line is more or less a unit of sense); the lines are generally end-stopped, accentuating the down beat tone. But there are more direct debts to Hofmann's work: 'Pressure' recalls 'Is It Decided' (1999: 54), in which 'Trees addled by heast and monoxide/put out panic shoots they probably can't afford', and especially 'Disturbances' (1986: 40), which must be the source of the image of the cars parked under the trees, though the appropriation was not conscious. Meanwhile the 'reversing' of 'polarities of conscience', meant to express a distaste for suburban order (the cars being parked 'neatly' is supposed to imply a value-judgement, however obscurely) and sympathy with 'the local stray', brings in the trope of dissent and the outsider figure.

Another static, dystopian landscape is depicted in 'A Lowland Palsy' (164):

> This region's afflicted by the Mind of its inhabitants:
> behind the breezy kitchen stands an empty window
> stocked with dolls,
> the half-lives of abandoned dreams.

The main argument of the poem is of course the implication that the landscape ('the concrete town'; 'friendless arable') and the people living in it ('divorcees,/alcoholic couples, young families,/high-minded and emotionally dangerous') have a depressing effect on each other; but I also intend a more horrible undercurrent through the suggestion of evil agency in the dolls. (I discuss use of the Gothic in other poems below.) The stanza shape (making the poem recall the Horatian ode in form if not in manner) makes the syntax work in tension with the lineation, imparting tension to the deadpan tone; compare the final version of the first two stanzas with a flatter earlier draft:

> This region's afflicted by the Mind of its inhabitants:
> behind the breezy kitchen stands an empty window
> stocked with dolls,
> the half-lives of abandoned dreams.
>
> Stores of glass-eyed malevolence haunt
> their midnights and their waking too, divorcées,
> alcoholic couples, young families,
> high-minded and emotionally dangerous.
>
> This region's afflicted by the Mind

of its inhabitants: behind the breezy kitchen
stands an empty window stocked with dolls,
the half-lives of abandoned dreams.

Stores of glass-eyed malevolence
haunt their midnights and their waking too,
divorcées, alcoholic couples, young families,
high-minded and emotionally dangerous.

The pastoral value which O'Brien and Didsbury attach to down-at-heel and urban landscapes receives direct treatment in a number of poems, particularly 'The Looking Behind Walls Club' (189), 'The Corrugated Soul' (161), 'The Fence'(160), 'The Old Harlequin' (191) and 'The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street'(137). 'The Looking Behind Walls Club' recapitulates the fascination with absence and elsewhere in terms of unmapped and unnamed urban places ('a disused shed', 'the old canal', 'under the bridge'). The conceit recalls Didsbury's 'Upstairs' (Didsbury 2003: 187) with its interest in 'what lies behind walls', though the borrowing was unconscious. References to Bluebeard and *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* transfer notions of adventure and wilderness to urban England. The result is slightly bathetic and hence comic, but the approach of treating a familiar landscape as unfamiliar (as discussed in the chapter on Sean'O'Brien) can have the effect of re-valuing the landscape. It insists that nearby corners are worth exploring; but as in O'Brien's 'On the Line' (1991: 41), the definition of paradise in 'The Looking Behind Walls Club' as an *unknown* and hence only fleetingly attainable place complicates the emotional tone of the vision. 'The Corrugated Soul' implicitly connects a pastoral sensibility with places, materials and objects ('a shed', 'plastic sheeting', 'a bitumen roof') via the notion of economic worthlessness, a trope I pick up again in another garden shed poem, 'In Praise of Tinkering' (197).

The style of both 'The Looking Behind Walls Club' and 'The Corrugated Soul' is downbeat and fairly prosaic, approaching at times a jokey patter, a quality I develop further in the odes on 'Sand' (138) and 'Gravel' (187). 'The Fence' takes a different approach to similar material, an unrhymed loose pentameter. The effect is a relatively plain one, but internal rhyme makes this a less prosaic-sounding poem than the previous two. Its subject is repeated in 'The Corner of Arudel Lane and Charles Street', where the elegiac attitude towards an old fence is widened in scope to cover all derelict places on the verge of redevelopment. The manner is also significantly different: rather than

focusing on a single object, the poem ranges across a number of examples without ever settling on one in detail. Its subject is not the object elegised but the attitude that elegises, and rather than a descriptive blank verse, it uses rhymed pentameter–tetrameter couplets to develop an argument grounded in Marvell's Metaphysical pastoral. I use a number of devices to complicate the poem's overt formality: enjambment, internal rhyme and four- and five-stress phrases all serve to interrupt the listener's expectations. For example, the tetrameter sentence that begins the following line invites the reader to expect a rhyme on *soot* eight syllables later, but since it occurs on a line of pentameter the end-rhyme is with *speak* instead:

> My fellow guests wear suits of soot. We speak
> About the state their crumbling brick
> Betrays.

Two lines later the same expectation is actually met, effacing the real end-rhymes:

> I thank the curve of their decline that makes
> Their final moment mine. I take
> The back way through the England-flagged estate

The 'deserted pavements' link implicitly with the tornado-hunters who 'storm/across the desert' of the American Midwest; again a landscape associated with space and wildnerness is brought to bear on the English city. Meanwhile the closing image of the rain ringing 'atonal effigies of hymns' on a set of metal steps introduces religious imagery into my treatment of the landscape; I take this development of Didsbury further in 'Triumph of Orthodoxy' and 'Icon', discussed below. The final reversion of the poem's argument – that place will mourn the speaker as his poem mourns place – performs both the identification of self with landscape and the escape, through death, of identity into non-identity, place into nowhere. This dissolution, which occurs also in 'Gawain and the Green Shade', recalls O'Brien's 'Grey Bayou (2007: 23–4).

The form and manner of 'The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street', whatever their benefits, mean that the poem lacks a specific place as focus. Its strict formality may also leave the reader feeling that part of the story has been squeezed out. I balance these features by placing it in the collection next to the specific, detailed prose of 'The Old Harlequin' (191). The two pieces inform each other – the one is all concrete detail, the other all wit and reflection – and 'The Old Harlequin' provides a means of discussing the collection's themes, particularly the nature and inhabitants of an derelict

urban landscape, in narrative form. The ghostly men in the photographs draw on O'Brien's usage of the Gothic.

The generalising manner of 'The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street' occurs in a number of poems drawing on the tradition of the Horatian ode. I call them odes because of this manner and because they are meditations *on* specific subjects (dereliction, sand, gravel, tinkering), and because they adopt formal features of the tradition. 'In Praise of Tinkering' (197) uses the stanza-form of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' (Marvell 1976: 55–58), a rhymed couplet of iambic pentameter followed by a rhymed couplet of iambic tetrameter. This is the same form which William Empson adopted for 'This Last Pain' (Empson 2000: 52–3)); indeed the poem's argument praising futile art recalls Empson's poem in places: compare 'electric light/warming a corner of the night' and 'flute the leg of a balsa chair/to sit on in the house of air' with Empson's 'build an edifice of form/For house where phantoms may keep warm' (2000: 53). The Augustan flavour here also recalls Marvell (e.g. 'The Garden' (100–2)) and O'Brien's more Marvellian moments (e.g. 'Before' (1991: 3–4)). Empson's stanzas are largely self-contained; I follow Marvell's practice of stringing sentences across stanzas. The setting of the poem in a garden shed implicitly connects the subject of economically useless craft with the derelict or economically useless landscape; the references to useless and antiquarian general knowledge (another form of pastoral retreat) recalls both Didsbury and O'Brien.

'Late Schoolboys' may take its central image and conceit from Donne's 'The Sun Rising' (Donne 1996: 80), but Marvell is a again a more extensive influence, from the rhyming tetrameter couplets and relatively clear syntax to the park location. Again the strict formality is modified by the use of sentences that run across lines and stanzas, particularly in the first and last thirds of the poem:

> Lateness is the state of grace
> they travel through and in this place
> where their dazed craniums
> receive the codas of their dreams [...]

The schoolboys' fecklessness, like the style, recalls O'Brien's 'Of Origins' (1995: 19) – again truculence and outsiderdom are idealised.

'Sand' (138) and 'Gravel' (187) develop the ode more radically. Their tone derives partly from Hofmann's cynicism and partly from Auden's tone later in his career in

poems like 'In Praise of Limestone' (Auden 1979: 184–187), 'Bucolics' (1979: 202–216), 'Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno' (1979: 239–242), 'Ode to Terminus' (1979: 289–291) – the manner of which Randall Jarrell wrote:

> this is what great and good poets do when they don't bother even to try to write great and good poems, now that they've learned that – it's Auden's leitmotif, these days [1955] – art is essentially frivolous (Jarrell 1980: 226).

The heart of Jarrell's complaint is that the poems lack a moral centre ('Auden has finally... given up morality' (1980: 226)), and his praise for 'Bucolics', for example, is double-edged:

> these exercises in viewing landscape quasi-morally are learned, masterly, charming, complicatedly self-delighting, trivial (1980: 227).

'Sand' and 'Gravel' take on the conceit of 'Bucolics' and elements of the manner, fused with Hofmann's impersonal, prosaic style, to produce a tone which is wide-ranging, flippant, and sometimes bland. The lineation contributes to the prosaic effect: the line is a unit of sense (though this principle is broken in places), so that the line breaks may seem to indicate points at which a speaker may draw breath. But poetic features such as alliteration ('clean lost livestock's skulls') repetition ('sand'), and half-rhyme (*Kalahari/Death Valley*, *spitefully/skulls*, *toes/nuisance/spouses/dross*) undermine the apparently prosaic surface. Enjambment is used occasionally ('It morphs/and fuses...'), but a more prominent device in the lineation is the use of short phrases and sentences at the end of lines, a formal repetition which adds dynamism and contributes to the poem's manner being a kind of patter:

> to be discovered by attentive spouses. A minor nuisance,
> it is the grain of dross in every pearl. It is thirsty and fugitive.
> ...
> the end of parabolas and the limit of records. It smoothes by abrasion.
> ('Sand');
> schools, utilities, forecourts of car lots. Beloved of janitors,
> ...
> to its hidden minerals. It surrounds you,
> ...
> making things possible. Never the bride, ('Gravel').

The repetition of syntactical forms occurs throughout, with many sentences taking the form '*Sand/Gravel/It* [verb/predicate]'; this mirrors the argument, which does not

proceed to a conclusion but simply presents a list. The sense of a surface performance which is empty underneath, which is promoted by the tone, lineation and argument, is also related to the 'quasi-moral' treatment of its content. Sand and gravel are personified as villain and everyman, but the poems deliver no moral content that is either applicable in a human context or justifiable as judgements of inanimate objects. The moral content is merely formal – again, Empson's 'This Last Pain' is relevant. Yet I hope that the poems' play save them; that they are excursuses worth the trouble, and that part of what makes them so is the quasi-moral dimension, the teasing sense that the poem is saying something important even if that something can't be specified.

These odes represent one aspect of my interest in transplanting traditional forms and manners into a contemporary setting; apostrophes are another. In various poems I apostrophise a day of the week ('Poem for Tuesday' (174)), a place ('The Matlock Elegies' (143)) and a person ('Homage to Julian Metcalf' (178)). In each case the rhetorical trope clashes comically, ironically and/or bathetically with the contemporary subject matter, which may be banal, prosaic, obscene or associated with a pastoral sensibility seemingly at odds with high rhetoric:

> Tuesday, the bank-holiday fall-back of all events
> habitually scheduled for Mondays, except
> the emptying of the bins, which seems to drag on
> randomly across the whole of the following fortnight
> ...
> Tuesday, irreproachable day,
> your morals and the sound of your name
> are both sweet beyond measure. Who would have thought
> you were named after the god of battle, or that he
> would have his hand bitten off by an enormous wolf
> and be cuckolded by a fish of mischief?

Such effects are similar to the use Hofmann and Didsbury make of classical culture. 'The Matlock Elegies' depends on a contrast between the high style of Rilke's original and the banal contemporary language ('on the lash', 'a fight, a fuck') and setting. Enjoyment of such a contrast partly expresses local character ('no town/I know is more sicked by emotion'), but nevertheless the accumulation of detail is supposed to be affectionate and to amount to something more than mere comedy. Though the high European tradition is being mocked, it is also translated to survive in some mutated form in a local, pastoral idiom.

A number of poems celebrate everyday provincial life. Didsbury's influence is apparent, but my own idylls are tied more or less to a specific place, landscape and associated culture, specifically the limestone region of the White Peak in Derbyshire. 'The Lame Dog at Monyash' (150), 'The Winter Silage' (166), 'White Peak, Abandoned Workings' (186) and 'Izaak Walton's Flight' (204) depict this landscape in detail; note the hostility to outsiders, which is a noticeable part of local character and relates also to the pastoral writer's distance from an original home. It is also present in 'The Matlock Elegies' where 'Its denizens claim to know what you mean, then take their drinks/and sit elsewhere, mock you and your city fancies'. I try to steer a course between the particular and the general, for example, in the title of 'The Town of K., in the Province of M.' (152). In this poem I equate the culture and character of a small town with provincial architecture and the writing of the poem, treating the latter two as expressions of the same sensibility. Certain metafictional aspects (e.g. 'peering along the roofline counting pigeons,/syllables') relate the poem to Didsbury's 'Red Nights' (Didsbury 2003: 114). 'Izaak Walton's Flight' draws on Didsbury's 'Glimpsed Among Trees' in its indulgence of rhetoric: I use fragmentary metrical rhythms without adopting strict metrical structures:

> Wait for the trees on the hillside at this hour
> to reveal what has remained there always,
> what your dilating eyes would have you fancy:
> a solid fishing-house, addressed by a triplet of steps
> wearing scrapings of mud from the bank
> of the narrow river, adorned by a gritstone finial moon
> round which the universe revolves.

Similarly the poem's narrative is driven by the rhetoric, allowing the association of ideas to produce a dreamlike structure (ostensibly dreamed by the snoozing Walton). The Gothic aspects should be obvious here, from the co-temporality of Walton and the contemporary addressee of the poem to the unresolved reality and presence/absence of the various objects and persons named.

My use of religious imagery in connection with provincial idylls also stems from Didsbury, from incidental details like the 'sacerdotal hut' in 'In Praise of Tinkering' to the more overt treatments of 'Icon' and 'The Triumph of Orthodoxy'. The latter relates not only to an ambivalent relationship [to a landscape but also to a technical rapprochement with tradition: over the course of the project irony and cynicism have

changed from central occasional features of my work. The poem's readiness to idealise a landscape in spite of the pitfalls of doing so is supposed to reflect this. The association of religious and civil elements also ties the perception of landscape to perceptions of the wider culture as a unified phenomenon: the poem is conservative in tenor, although the choice of Orthodox rather than Anglican imagery complicates this judgement, as do the doubts exemplified in the closing lines.

The use of the Gothic and the indulgence of rhetoric in 'Izaak Walton's Flight' recur in various poems. 'Tenebrio' (165) equates darkness, danger, crime and the fears of suburban insomniacs in a single personification. The sense of shape-shifting is partly achieved by the use of long sentences, a feature in most of these poems since they give room for complication and shifts of emphasis that mirror the argument's mutation-process. (I owe my appreciation of the usefulness of long sentences to Michael Hofmann, e.g. 1999: 14–15, 60–1, 76–7.) 'Reproductive Behaviour of the Dark' presents a series of images for 'the dark', moving from one to the other by association and from an evolutionary origin through medieval Europe to the contemporary Pennines. In this sense it is driven by the rhetoric, which is the means of the argument rather than mere decoration. Similar processes are at work in 'Argument About the Definition of Red' (170; a movement from 'strawberry' to 'raspberry' via associations of the colour red) and 'A Room of Old Presses Reprinting a Great Work' (172). The latter is an extended onomatopoeia, with the noise of printing presses embodied in a dense, unrhymed five-stress verse. Enjambment and rhythmic clusters contribute to this effect:

> along a corridor runs the raucous hum,
> cokehead chatter in morse, maybe a jazz
> drummer and bassist going it hammer and tongs,
> then down a short fast-fingered run of steps
> into a basement hangar of aero engines
> busy imagining their flights.

As in 'I Leave Myself', the syncopation is distantly related to jazz (see Roy Fisher's 'The Thing About Joe Sullivan' (Fisher 2005: 164–5) for a direct treatment of this relation). Long sentences are useful not only in allowing the sense to develop and mutate over the course of several lines but also in providing a more or less constant noise. What the poem actually provides is a series of images for the same thing (as in

'My Love'), again recalling jazz in the repeated variation of a riff or theme. Meanwhile the 'one heroic typo' manifests the notion of dissent and the outsider figure.

Outsiders are important figures for O'Brien and Hofmann, providing a vantage point outside a society from which to criticise it. In Broken Tiles, which I shall discuss below, I use the outsider figure of the inmate of a lunatic asylum; in *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street* I explore a figure who is an outsider to the liberal discipline of poetry if not to the wider culture: the aggressive, sexualised male, represented in the character of Julian Metcalf. 'Metcalf's Development' (176) shows how such a figure is related to the romantic tradition, while 'Homage to Julian Metcalf'(178) mythologises him in a series of epithets which recall the classical hero and the honorary title of kings. Again a high-rhetorical tone collides with banal, prosaic, contemporary subject matter:

> Vocal witness of downsides, caller of bullshit,
> sneezer in salad bars,
> putter of brown glass
> into green bottle banks!
> gatecrasher of beanfests for the business-minded!
> sufferer of the yips!

'You've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'' (182) presents a short lyric in Metcalf's voice. The placing of the 'punchline' at line two rather than as the last line is important: as the last line it would turn the poem into merely a joke; as it is, the way the speaker goes on to expand on his lyrical sentiments is a way of insisting that he too is capable of participating in such sentiments and in the emotional discourse of poetry.

3 Broken Tiles

The sequence *Broken Tiles* grew out of my interest in outsider art, particularly the work of the mentally ill. As I discuss in the thesis, outsider figures – whether they are shepherds, children, tramps or murderers – function in pastoral as analogues of the pastoral landscape. Lying outside a society they become vehicles for explicit and implicit criticisms of that society, the exemplars and prophets of alternative social visions. In *Broken Tiles* I take the opportunity to construct an extended pastoral vision in the voice of an inmate of an early twentieth-century Central European lunatic asylum. Because the writer is ostensibly writing from a position 'outside' societal and literary norms, I am able to approach pastoral's conventions in unusual ways.

The maker of the tiles is supposedly a patient or subject of Hans Prinzhorn, whose

Bildnerei der Geisteskranken (Artistry of the Mentally Ill) (1922) was a seminal text in the history of outsider art (Rhodes 2000: 59–60; much of this discussion, which relates to my technical development and does not pretend to scholarly rigour in the field of art history, relies on Rhodes). Prinzhorn's interest in the work of 'self-taught obsessive artists' (Rhodes 1983: 61) involves the relationship between the artist's outsider status (in most of his subjects this consisted both in the separation from society generally owing to mental illness and separation from the art world and tradition owing to lack of technical training) and the 'rawness' of the art produced. Artists working outside social and artistic traditions (i.e. without regard to convention) produced art which responded more directly to experience:

> In orthodox notions of Outsider Art the status of the artist as cultural outsider is a vouchsafe for the 'putiryu of the art, because the detachment of the creator proves the absence of deviousness or cynical manipulation of fashionable taste in the work on his or her part (Rhodes 1983: 16).

Prinzhorn identified schizophrenics as 'the group most likely to make images spontaneously and devoted his discussion to their work. Central to this is the common tendency for the "autistic, self-important schizophrenic" to create "an entirely different, richer world out of the sense data of his environment"' (Rhodes 1983: 61).

In fact the notion of an absolutely unconventional art is no more than an ideal, and in *Broken Tiles* I am more interested in subversions of pastoral and lyrical convention than its avoidance; it has to resemble poetry in some way in order to be understandable as poetry. Similarly the world of the creator of *Broken Tiles* is not 'entirely different' from that of his doctor and acquaintances; part of my interest in the sequence is in presenting two narratives simultaneously, the private world of the tiles themselves and the public world from which it deviates.

A number of features are common to much of the work which interests me. Many artists produced 'highly individual, alternative world-systems that are often extremely sophisticated' (Rhodes 1983: 61); there was a 'tendency for the artist to fill every part of the sheet' (Rhodes 1983: 64); and many artists, like August Natterer, produced work which was 'schematic' and 'hallucinatory' (Rhodes 1983: 65). Others produced (usually useless) machines and artefacts; photos of Heinrich Anton Müller (Rhodes 1983: 71; 'Müller spent much of his time standing in a deep hole' – see 'Hemipteron' (219)) and Katharina Detzel (Rhodes 1983: 59) alongside their artistic creations are affecting in

contextualising the artists alongside their creations, in hospital settings. In the sequence I draw on all these features, but the transfer from visual to literary art required some difficult decisions about how best to portray the artist. I am interested in creating text which is analogous to such visual works as, for example, Adolf Wölfli's *General View of the Island of Neveranger* (Rhodes 1983: 39 6), Madge Gill's *Composition* (Rhodes 1983: 11), Howard Finster's *What is the Soul of Man* (Rhodes 1983: 16), Josef Heinrich Grebing's *Calendar of my 20th Century – Chronology for Catholic Youths and Maidens (Hundred-year Calendar)* (Rhodes 1983: 48), Jacob Mohr's *Proofs (*Rhodes 1983: 50) and Andrew Kennedy's *Factory Maid* (Rhodes 1983: 51) in their absurd, unsettling, bathetic variations from artistic convention. Part of the means for doing so is visual – hence my use of a schematic visual approach, and the depiction of the tiles as broken in order to establish their identity as found materials and hence to support the ostensible narrative context. But the literary language of the sequence must be a translation of these images' visual elements, not a pastiche of their textual elements or of text commentaries such as Natterer's explanations of his work (quoted in Rhodes 65–7). Clearly most people have some basic level of language use which bears on what might count as 'self-taught'. In order to be categorised as poetry a text would have to meet at least some of a number of fundamental criteria (e.g. lineation, orthography), and in order to be worth reading it would have to meet a number of rather less fundamental criteria, or at least to frustrate those criteria in interesting ways. So I assume a relatively sophisticated literary sense in my creator, who writes poems which *nearly* do what poems should, rather than a more pronounced naïveté which might establish more obviously the creator's mental illness but produce work less interesting to a reader of poetry.

The reception of outsider art inside the art world and tradition clearly mediates insider enjoyment of it. Insider appreciation involves the application of aesthetic criteria, including judgements about genre, convention, tradition and allusion, which the creator by definition does not apply, or does not apply in orthodox ways. Outsider artworks receive value-judgements, including judgements about their oddity and outsiderdom, from the insider art world. Similarly any attempt to replicate the features of outsider art by an insider artist involves artifice, not only in the broad sense of assuming a fictional identity but also in the technical reproduction of characteristics which outsider artists produce accidentally or simply do not recognise in their own work.

My reasons for attempting such an imitation go beyond replicating technical characteristics for their own sake. I have no interest in mocking the work of mentally ill people. But I am interested in the lyrical and emotional vocabulary of outsider art – its bathos and absurdity, for example – and in absorbing it into my own technique. (In the future I shall look to use some of the effects in use here without the framing narrative of *Broken Tiles*.) In *The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street* I engage with pastoral themes through short poems whose relations to tradition are relatively unproblematic. The conceit of *Broken Tiles* allows me to indulge formality and ornament for its own sake, and provides a narrative context in which to try out repeated and unorthodox approaches to my pastoral materials, and to construct an extended social vision. Lastly, in spite of (or partly because of) the fictional conceit and setting, the technical departures of *Broken Tiles* allow me to approach obscure material in my own life more directly than I am able to through more lucid traditional ways of working. In particular, several of the poems have enabled me to dramatise certain obscure feelings about specific places which have seemed to me important but which remained 'inchoate' (Didsbury in Williams 2007: 2). Examples include an area of the school grounds of my old primary school (214), two houses at the end of a lane in my home village (233), certain pools in a pleasure garden in the same village (239), a lone tree in my local park (213), Crosspool Cemetery (223) and Walkley Library (256) in Sheffield, and Whernside in North Yorkshire (226).

The sequence displays a number of pastoral features. Many or most of the poems are concerned with landscape. The setting of the hospital in a former country house (209, 210, 225, 227, 242, 243, 247, 257) and surrounding parkland (212, 213, 234, 237, 245) offers obvious if oblique connections with the country-house tradition of Jonson, Carew and Marvell (Raymond Williams 1975: 40ff); the parkland's status as a closed landscape makes it both prison and Arcadia, and relates to Raymond Williams's consciousness of the park as enclosed (Raymond Williams 1975: 32) and to the speaker's impermeable private vision. The speaker's institutionalisation and alternative vision are both forms of retreat. Gardens (233, 240, 249, 250), growth, and the sciences of biology, zoology, evolution and taxonomy provide (un)natural subject matter. Religious material and themes of rebirth, flight and escape (211, 215, 216, 218, 220, 222, 231, 233, 244, 248, 254, 258), boats and lakes (209, 224, 226, 236, 245), metamorphosis (215, 218, 230, 231, 239, 245), duality and inversion (218, 212, 220,

225, 227, 229, 230, 238, 249, 254), artifice (216, 219, 245), idealisation of a woman (218, 224, 226, 225), and cure and/or/as death (212, 253, 254, 256, 257, 258) also relate in various ways to the pastoral tradition. The speaker's rejection of the public world in favour of his own private vision constitutes a form of pastoral dissent. Theories of outsider art in terms of the Other, including the colonial Other (Rhodes 2000: 198ff), suggest oblique links with the post-imperial aspects of my thesis. Imperial material is introduced via the speaker's monomaniac identifications with various emperors (221, 237, 241, 249), as well as with Christ (209, 217, 230, 231, 237, 239), Job (248), Luther (220, 241) and others (241). Here the imperial material is used in a contrast not between an imperial past and a diminished present, but between an imperial private vision and a diminished public world (or a diminished present and an imperial future). Finally, the Gothic appears in various forms, from the identification of person and landscape (226) and of person and house (210, 242, 247) and the overlaying of one place on another (250) to ghosts (247) and the more nightmarish contents of the vision (224), while a number of poems later in the sequence use variously elegiac tones.

Links to the poets covered in the thesis are also various. The interest in outsider figures recalls the work of both O'Brien and Hofmann. The use of bathos also recalls Hofmann, though his use of it is slightly different, as does the use of ellipsis. The Gothic elements recall O'Brien and Didsbury, while the use and misuse of traditional sources draws on the lessons of Didsbury and Hofmann. Individual poems recall the poets in places, for example 'Roundel Pit/Iris' (222), where 'the mangels the heads of those who stay on earth' utilises the syntactic oddity of Didsbury's 'the moon the sump of the aproned pluvial towns' (Didsbury 2003: 147); 'Strata Lying' (229) uses his image of the buried item (Didsbury 2003: 135).

The use of sources might be seen as drawing on or parodying modernist practice (the element of self-parody in *The Waste Land's* notes may be significant). Generally I use quotations and allusions (sometimes merely tonal) to sources which bear thematically on the poems or which help to establish the setting in early twentieth-century Europe. These include Horace, *Odes* 1.14 (209), John Gower (211), Huysmans (213, 228, 224)), Strindberg via Didsbury ('explicates the madness of a face/Some god has painted on my carapace' (215; see Didsbury 2003: 166), Robert Johnson/Faust (216), a confusion of the myths of Leda and Icarus (217), Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (219, 220, 230, 231, 241, 247), Petrarch (225), the opening of Tennyson's 'Tithonus' (229), Plato's ship

of state (232), Voltaire (237), Coleridge (238), MR James (242), Dostoyevsky (243), Gottfried Benn (244, 245), Tolkien (245), Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (215, 218, 220, 230, 235, 245), Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (252, 253), the milieu of Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth (257), John Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* (258) and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (258). I use a number of anachronistic sources (e.g. Frank O'Hara (223), Louis MacNeice (240), *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (248)), hoping that the anachronism is partly effaced by the lack of references and the tenuousness of allusion; I don't necessarily intend that readers should recognise them, and often the original may be largely unrecognisable (e.g. 'Confessio Amantis' (211) draws its central image obscurely from Robert Lowell). But I am also conscious that the sequence is insider artifice rather than an authentic outsider text; the speaker's allusions may be accidental, hamfisted or weirdly prescient, and taking them as such is, I hope, part of the suspension of disbelief.

The formal indulgence which the sequence licenses ranges from overarching structure – the sonnet sequence seems an appropriate vehicle for obsessive formality – to pure ornament. For example, the use of acrostics (210, 215, 216, 218, 222, 224, 231, 236, 258; I also use a mesostic (i.e. a medial acrostic (211)) and an acrostic running down both the first and last letters of the lines (249)) here receives a justification from the narrative context which is usually lacking. Within the sonnet sequence I use a variety of formal effects. Mostly I use iambic pentameter, to varying degrees of strictness, but some poems use free verse (214, 227). The use of rhyme ranges from blank verse (217), heroic couplets (248) and traditional sonnet rhyme schemes (215, 219) to nonce-rhyme schemes (210, 211) and rhymes occurring across stanzas (212, 253). I also use anagrams in place of rhyme (232) and mirror-words at the beginning and end of lines (220). Again, such formal indulgence is supposed to be justified by the speaker's mental state.

The use of marginalia as a visual frame and supplement to the main texts are an integral part of the sequence. These additional texts – again, like Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* – purport to function as commentaries, but their relation to the main text may not be obvious (from a compositional point of view they may be entirely arbitrary). Their purpose is not to mislead but to provide the reader with a sense of getting a glimpse of a 'sophisticated' but 'hermetically sealed' universe (Rhodes 48), shaping the sense of the main text in unexpected and even random ways.

The sequence aims at a range of tones and effects drawn from outsider art, including

bathos (210, 215, 219, 222, 225, 233, 235, 240), non-sequitur (219) and oddity (passim). The poems aim to satisfy or frustrate traditional expectations of poetic effects, gesturing towards lyricism (211, 245, 251), satire (209, 244, 248), nature poems (216) and elegy (214, 252) to various degrees. Some of the poems draw on specific traditional voices in order to contribute to the historical setting; in particular I intend to echo Rilke in places in grotesque parody of his milieu, period and thought (e.g. 214). One surprising feature of the sequence has been the tendency for similarities to traditional and contemporary voices to emerge unbidden. For example, there are echoes of Plath in the fevered imagery of rebirth (211, 230); of Geoffrey Hill ('A green coma/Beckoning outlawry, hedgerows, unknown orchids,/Yarrow, summer's heat, flies-in-the-water. Time.' (216); the use of capitals and italics throughout the poem is partly a parodic allusion to Hill's *Speech! Speech!* (2000)); and of Larkin (253). I am happy to let these stand, in a relation of partial parody; the fact that they occur might indicate the extent to which the sequence remains a work of insider rather than outsider art, but might equally suggest that certain literary effects inhere in configurations of thematic materials as much as in conventional treatments of them.

Contents

Sand....138
How Good it Sounded....140
I Leave Myself....141
For My Brother....146
The Rubicon....147
Gawain and the Green Shade....148
The Lame Dog at Monyash....150
Landscape for August Natterer....151
The Town of K., in the Province of M....152
A Missing Person....154
Notice of Death....155
The Civil War....157
Great Edwardian....158
The Vision....159
The Fence....160
The Corrugated Soul....161
Pressure....163
A Lowland Palsy....164
Tenebrio....165
The Winter Silage....166
Reproductive Behaviour of the Dark....168
Argument About the Definition of Red....170
My Love....171
A Room of Old Presses Reprinting a Great Work....172
Poem for Tuesday....174
Metcalf's Development....176
Homage to Julian Metcalf....178
You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'....182
Variations on a Form by Gottfried Benn and Babette Deutsch....183
White Peak, Abandoned Workings....186
Gravel....187
The Looking Behind Walls Club....189
The Old Harlequin....191
The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street....193
Late Schoolboys....195
In Praise of Tinkering....197
The Triumph of Orthodoxy....199
Icon of a Bloke in Glasses Opening a Window....201
Variation on the Fourth Eclogue....202
The Carp....203
Izaak Walton's Flight....204
The Flowers Singing....206

Sand

From the Kalahari to the Gobi – *a waterless place*,
very large and dry like the desert's own imagination –
the Empty Quarter, from Black Rock to Death Valley,
sand's names do little for its public image,

for all it cares, grinning spitefully
as it joins with the wind to clean lost livestock's skulls
and irritate the watery eyes of workers for western NGOs.
It is its own playpit. Quick or slow, it is always shifting.

Sand ruins seaside trysts and then betrays betrayers
by lurking on scalps and between the toes
to be discovered by attentive spouses. A minor nuisance,
it is the grain of dross in every pearl. It is thirsty and fugitive.

Sand would like to meet a snarling Bactrian
by which to be stamped and spat upon, and with whom
to plot the murder by asphyxiation of foolish travellers
who stray to the still hollows of its dunes.

There are more grains of sand than there are
windows in the offices of hell. It morphs
and fuses into splinters of a broken bottle
under the innocent soles of children.

It bears as anti-effort the print of athletes' straining lunges,
the end of parabolas and the limit of records. It smoothes by abrasion.
Castles and condoms, bladderwrack and crabs
have learned to speak with sand, but can convince it of nothing.

It writes messages in itself until the next high tide:
'help' and 'I love you' are both erased by the surf's bitter laugh,

and you must take with a pinch of salt sand's claim
that an egg has cooked in the time it took you to read this poem.

How Good it Sounded

after Heine

Once I had a country of my own.
The trees there grew to a huge size.
The smell of the woods sounded like laughter.
The air tasted of the earth.

It was a dream, a long and wonderful dream.
For years it kissed me in English and sang
'I love you', and stroked my head,
and though I know it wasn't true,
how good it sounded.

I Leave Myself

after Tadeusz Nowak

I leave myself – leave my body like smoke
through the gnarled and inelegant chimney of my ear,
or rise as a spirit from the vault of my chest.

No. I leave myself. Salt leaves, or is left by, the sea,
something of old ironwork
leaks from the end of a long tool like a hoe
left lying in perfect stillness on the ground
or leaning against a gate:
where iron nails attach the iron end to the wood
seems the likeliest place for such a loss, or escape:
among the flakings of rust and spider shit.

Dogs lean out from the boundaries they guard
towards the musk I exude, exhibit, which I am,
swirling the smell of the pigs in the woods
through a nest of hay, down to a kink in the river.

I'm not there, or anywhere else. There's a raspberry bush
modestly covered in dust from the road, where yokels
carry heavy items down the road
in ten-legged, hesitant crab-step, kicking up dust:
sleepers, roof lead, a grand piano, their plans for satisfying sweethearts.
They happen to stop, pull the fruit and dust it
on their sleeves, in the air, blow on its absent fire to cool it.
Their searching fingers play a little jazz medley on my branches

like a cosmopolitan priest counting rosaries,
come to the country under a cloud,
staring absently into the bishop's orchard
up through scented branches towards the open veranda

from where
the man's elder daughter disappears into the house.
He can hear her, then it isn't true that he can hear her,
he only imagines it; it's worse.

The suffocating heat under his cassock.
I sympathise madly but I am only a fruit tree
and he ignores me, kicks his heels
and pulls a dead strand of honeysuckle from the wall
with as much petulance as he'll allow himself.

From the top of the telegraph pole above him
which is
singing across continents about
matters it would be presumptuous to mention,
I can see a cloud of horsemen approaching.
I can see a haystack dreamed
in the murky cobalt of a
landscape reserved for dreams
and other untethered possibilities,
and beside it
two or three or four horses
standing placidly,
in possession of their horsey selves,
reaching down stretching their stringy ropes
taking sugar lumps, the tarts, from a man
no older than I remember – which seems rather suspicious,
a heaven I imagined when I was in a self
that seems laughable, a mere heaven. I leave myself.

Ja, ohne die Liebe wäre die Welt nicht die Welt,
aber Matlock wäre doch Matlock noch.

[Yes, without Love the world would not be the world,
but Matlock, of course, would still be Matlock.]
J. W. von Goethe

Who, in Matlock, would hear me if I cried my heart out
after a night on the lash? Half of Crown Square,
the massed crowds queuing at the Turkish Delight,
or for taxis to take them to the Pav for more drinks,
a fight, a fuck. The ghosts of John Smedley,
Rum-Tum Billy Young's Son and Mickey Morris
scouring the streets for the sons of children they remember,
to bother and bore with their dead gossip
and stories we'll not need until they can't be found.
Traffic wardens, teachers, family friends and enemies…
A heartfelt laugh, of course, is all I'd receive
from all of them for my troubles; no town
I know is more sickened by emotion.
The smoke of their restrained disgust
curls up Steep Turnpike, Bank Road, drops
the wrong way down Firs Parade
and stops at Circle-K, as was, for a lottery ticket.

O my beloved Matlock! Market town
with barely a market to speak of,
my county town, my botched Eden.
Old Matlock, Matlock Green, Matlock Bank,
Hooley's estate stretching off towards Darley Dale,
laughable old Hurst Farm – even the rough end
is somehow tinpot, for all the town's

valley-sediment of truculent aggression –
Tansley, Elton, Winster, the other outliers.
Lea and Holloway. Matlock Bath,
tawdry jewel, I curse you as a tourist honey-pot;
you shadow me even unto Death. You slink
like a line of warts through the gorgeous
rock of my deliverance. A part of me
wanders forever round your amusement arcades
in an off-white polyester shirt smelling of stale teenage sweat
and a blue school tie. Another is sick in the woods.

The river runs shallow and swift through the old paint-works
and the dead stretches which follow (I fished them for years,
in my ignorance, heroic, wet, hopeful and hungry),
receives the chip trays discarded off Jubilee Bridge
by trippers from Mansfield, Sheffield, Stockport and Nottingham,
on through the Pally Gardens, the unreliable
lights and seasonal hotdog stalls, on to Cromford:
cradle of the Industrial Revolution! Poor relation
in my heart to Matlock, The Matlocks, a town
so singular, so bountiful in the fruit of the soul
that it's sometimes referred to in the plural! But rarely!

Who else hears and abases me with their laughter?
The fifth- and sixth-formers walking down Chesterfield Road,
filling the pavement, the gutter, who seem so young
that I feel oddly ashamed to have lusted after them
when I was the same age. The lynxes who allegedly escaped
from Riber Zoo, when it still traded, its most glamorous
and apparently least secure inhabitants. Matlock, your faux castle
may not sit on an Italian headland, be owned by the cream of Europe –
may be due for redevelopment into a suite of posh flats –
but it starred the dreams of my youth, made me feel
that every life was a fairytale. Matlock, you bitch,

you deluded me. Your cinema has closed down. I love you.

Matlock follows you like a dog. You move away,
fall in love, get some perspective on the place. All of it helps.
You visit, it seems to mean less and less. Always
you carry Matlock with you, inscrutable, useless, undeniable.
Its denizens claim to know what you mean, then take their drinks
and sit elsewhere, mock you and your city fancies.
Matlock your sweet curse sits across my back.

For My Brother

The wall falls quicker and stronger and blanker than I can gesture love,
or having gestured, clarify the sense.

Walk with me along the sunlit road.
There are fewer roads and fewer walks than once there seemed.

The Rubicon

With luxurious dignity at a small table we played
piquet, klabberjazz, bezique. All good Scrabble words:
the entropy of culture into form,
to use an expression you wouldn't.

The *goods/not goods* that puzzled passers-by were not
value binaries but correctitude
as the flowering of love, high-church
quietism in a house of books and clocks.

Your heart stirs silently over another volume of Scott
as we age together at that great fixed distance.
To find you enjoying *Schweik* is the same as reading it myself.
We meet at weekends for our rituals –

drinks, an elaborate hand of cards, a walk –
and scan the local rag with professional scorn,
totting heady sums of typos, or 'literals' as you,
with your fixed Fifties English, insist on saying.

Gawain and the Green Shade

Over the river, on up the hill,
up past the circular house of the witch,
through the thin street to the top of the road
where the track runs down, and the old house is.

Away from the firing range of the soul
and the box where times before time are stored
and the threads which lead back somewhere else –
up to the woods on the hill I ran.

Through the thick mud at the derelict farm,
the water-logged gate that guards this hell,
and out into fields of ungrazed grass:
I followed the line of the hedge that had gone,

and looked where the paths led over the hill,
but then dropped down to the edge of the woods
and sat on the roof of a cavernous hole
and waited there for the man to come.

I watched the rabbits in the evening sun,
gave the strange trees new names. I had
no time for learning the strangers' names,
no love for the round house, end of the road,

the river, the place where I was young,
or the gate, or the track, or the ghostly farm,
or the viscous mud or going there
or the villages tucked on the sides of the hill

or the rabbit alert, facing the darkened wood.
I sat in the end of the sun, and time went by

as I waited for him, and the field was bare,
and the rabbits gone, and time went on.

The Lame Dog at Monyash

Its black unopenable door
is what the village really thinks.
Virgil's native name sits on the plaque,
licensed to bid your welcome nixed

to afternoons of Lethe Best
and tightness in the chest and neck
brought on by pressure at the desk
you work at to afford the move.

You should consider going back.
You'll never join the Us of Here,
or even Them of Over-There.
The locals all have history.

The white limestones are fixed
in ragged and deceitful smiles
across miles of saturated green
with paradisal lambs between

that bleat that things are looking bleak
and maybe you should ask your kids
about the role of revenant.
Leaving, you pass the desolate farms.

Their huge prefabricated sheds
proclaim the names of local firms,
contain fence posts, rusting plant,
oil drums, doomed livestock.

Landscape for August Natterer

Two darkened semis
blue eyes blazing

Malcolm and Sarah and
Chris and Leslie

staying up to watch
the final of the swimming

The Town of K., in the Province of M.

How to render it, then, the old bank's
neoclassical facade? The thump
and swat of raw materials, the hardhat suit
peering along the roofline counting pigeons,
syllables. Coming past it in the rain,
a grid vanishing quietly in the fumes
till the lights change and you swing on and out
to see it staring after you. Scotch eggs, bald-
headed clerks aswim in lunchtime alcohol,
scribbling lists of burial goods, their own –
Potter and Hart portray them as humble, caged
and dessicated sparrows – the dusty hope
that all large buildings squash and cherish. But this
is no waxwork frontage: the Two Ronnies
can be involved at some point, if they like,
and cheaper cuts wrapped up quaintly in paper
can do the rounds as currency to delight us
with the queasy air and bring to froth
the town's fat-man commerce, a meaty yeast...
Look at that girl walking in front of it: her hair
wends out wisps to tease the stolid columns,
stands blonde-white against the black windows.
They swallow the light that's been released from prison
and flings its sad radials towards the open
doors of alcohol—something to scoff at,
wastage, occluded ore in the local rock.
It's a valley of names. A sudden storm
dashes the may from the trees before its time.

A Missing Person

Where else do people start to look
for their loved ones but in themselves?
the nip to the shops, the route to town,
a place they stop with the wheelie bin
and just *look* and think of somewhere else—
the rhododendrons in the park,

the alley where you might have been
wherever you were going, why,
and who to meet; and then they think
of the jeans you might have worn, the pink
T-shirt and what its slogan, *I*
Don't Know You, quite what that might mean,

and while they're rummaging upstairs
to see what's dirty and what's clean,
which of your things are indispensable
and still there, they start to wonder where
you'd go if you were you. Or run,
according to the sort of trouble

you were in. And then they think
obscurely of the hardware shop
whose awning shades the silent street
below the town hall's hulk of soot,
grandfatherly advice, the stink
of metalwork and rubber clips,

and how from there a path might drop
between a graveyard and a gritstone wall
towards the centre of the place,
the domes of cobbles on the slope

pressing their feet, an infant school's
high hubbub out proclaiming peace.

A laughter in the local accent
floats across the pond. They sit
till nightfall at the swings' stilled
pendulums, watching a face concealed
by sky and mortar, stone and light.
I'm here, you say. *The town. I'm found.*

Notice of Death

Call in the council's legions to assist
in the great removal: send wagon and dumper,
dog van and red appliance, extant bus
whose passengers are late and cross, artiste
deserving of support and hospital driver,
cart from the sodden municipal course.

Send solemn alderman murmuring sweetly,
coughing director, unkempt registrar,
send nurses and doctors and carers and bills
and troops of out-contracted cleaners, and dealers
in furniture taken in lieu of rent. Send money.
Enter the data and confirm in gore

where sent and by what means the box in question,
obtain a letter from a Personage, and throw
a final number to complete the sum.
By this the heavy edifice shall *know.*
And at the signal take your place, sit down,
and listen in the echoes of the room

for something of the piece's closing chords
decaying to entreaty to be heard,
occluded by the weight of whispered lies,
the scrat of pigeons shifting on the roof,
or for that matter the offensive sigh
a youthful officer lets out, a cough,

like earth upon the blank-brassed lid,
the flap of a file thrown down on a pad
echoing in the institution's ears
and yours also, who share these corridors

although you are mistaken what they prove,
and falter when you're told it's time to leave.

Your shoes squeak. The smell of fumigant and dust
attends your walking, and the light is drenched
in windows shaking in a rumbled gust;
the sky smells cold and clean, is vast and blanched
above the railway bridge's blackened pit
and on the dais of the steps you wait

– as if you'd left a friend inside a bar
to walk alone abroad the sober day –
before you join the stream, but don't know why:
perhaps it has to do with what's been done,
the thought of yellow weeds down by the car
bowed low in this incessant rain,

the radio, the engine's failing wheeze.
You think of letters which will be posted still
and how you'll cook a meal, and entertain
a day with no appointments left to fill;
books you've yet to read; the damascene
that bathes the stone slabs of these premises.

The Civil War

A church clock static on the midday chime:
the valley breathless like a desert bowl:
a boy shy in the lane in a too-big suit.
My brain no longer resists this stratagem,

but lolls instead in the meadow of its crime.
Off-shore the mackerel, blank in a huge shoal,
are the reasons my mind's land is destitute.
Under the harbour's calm I cannot see them.

Vertically the cloud builds over a parkland lime
which hides the idea of Charles I in its giant bole.
The cloud is the vision of republicans. Absolute
blue surrounds that shifting diadem.

Great Edwardian

A cock-pheasant on the steaming muckheap:
Prospero admiring all. Those deep inks,
the bludgeoned, sexual midnight and a pope's

vermillion, are his interiors. He stands,
coat-tails trembling in the breeze, and smokes
and gazes out across the wooded sea.

Mock-Tudor dragonfly, he delays his flit.
Behind him are the lit boxes of his ease,
where guests and sisters sit and wait.

His mind is gaslight. His gaze travels over
the flocked regimental walls, the farm's brickwork:
it seems as if he is about to speak.

The meal is ended. Watching the evening droop,
he hears the clearing of the plates—the tinkle
of a pianola. He stubs his *Rey del Mundo*

in a jardinière and puffs his breast.
A cloud-mass dulls the sheen of his regalia.
He shivers: his island has grown suddenly cold.

The Vision

I see the boy shocked white
in the dank mandorla of the pond,
his suspended fall, young and alive
at the point of recession into death.
He my friend: splashing into the past,
the waters lurching greenly over.

The Fence

Great storms bring sorrows great and small
– John Evelyn

No one died. But an old fence falls
that stood crookedly for years, or leant
against a post fixed in crumbling concrete
for support, yawned through winters, wore
green velvet and a mist of spores
on the soft-biscuit panels, which the snails
had chalked with the diagrams of decay;
and when it falls, the boundary must be marked
with fresh wood nailed securely up
clean to a square post, new and straight,
that lets no wind or foxes in, and speaks
more proudly of the garden's state, absorbs
its creosote three times a year, but can't
remember what was here before, or grieve
for the sickness it replaced; and this
is sadness of a sort. What's blown away
is on the wind, stays only in the mind:
a man leans on a broom and stares and sighs
at the lost power of the departed storm
whose cooled passion reminds him of his own,
and tidying the broken spars and leaves
scattered across the sodden lawn, he knows
the clearance must be made, but will destroy
dormancies he cannot help but mourn.

The Corrugated Soul

The corrugated soul is always having to be patched
and is probably considered an eyesore.
The noise it makes in the wind
is hardly dignified.

The corrugated soul is a figure of speech
as a house is a figure of bricks,
lengths of timber and reinforced glass,
and a shed is a figure of corrugated metal
and plastic sheeting.
(This is why the shed
is the corrugated soul's spiritual home.)

But it isn't so much a gestalt
as a mere aggregate –
specifically, a pile of aggregate
turning moss-green under an oily rag.

The corrugated soul is not available in the shops.
Its badge is a *rodent couchant*
under the floorboards of the bower of bliss,
and any knight that didde presume,
his earhole was yclipt.

The corrugated soul feels pity without sentiment,
loves without sentiment,
considers the slope of a bitumen roof
without sentiment. That's the theory;
in practice, sentiment always creeps in
through a flap nailed down too hastily.

The corrugated soul brings no earthly benefits.

It is scorned by vicars
and New Age evangelists.

These days the most technologically advanced
souls are manufactured by Mitsubishi;
but all the main brands offer souls
with aircon, drinks holders, polaroid glass
and double-sided DVDs.

The corrugated soul has no such conveniences.
Draughty in winter, in summer
it becomes listless and demands alcohol;
but at least it can't be sold at a profit,
and the constant attention its upkeep requires
fills the time and makes your fingers dextrous.

Pressure

A procession of whales gliding under the street:
their exhalations spume startled rowans
from a litter of tarry gravel, twigs and compacted earth.
A pair of dotted lines on the archived plan –

alternating with grassy dashes that are mown
more often than the meadows they conjure,
strings of Morse banalities between road and pavement –
recessed a metre from the sleepless streetlamps,

they leak organic matter into the smokeless sky,
bunches of stunted ruby grapes hanging back
like the fruit of ignorance, chandeliers in the halls of Hades.
The light they shed reverses polarities of conscience:

neighbours, generous, concerned, close their curtains on incidents,
absolved by all these linear civic patterns –
double yellows, kerb height, angles of camber,
the faux-irregular arrangement of gables.

It rains, on and off. Leaves and sap and aphids and putrid berries
cover the cars parked neatly down one side of the road.
The local stray trots down the middle: cautious, recalcitrant,
it barks responsibly when a back door slams.

A Lowland Palsy

This region's afflicted by the Mind of its inhabitants:
behind the breezy kitchen stands an empty window
stocked with dolls,
the half-lives of abandoned dreams.

Stores of glass-eyed malevolence haunt
their midnights and their waking too, divorcées,
alcoholic couples, young families,
high-minded and emotionally dangerous.

Their sparse dramas flee the rain and sicken
for lack of motile air amid the cooking smells and easy chairs,
surrounded by miles
and miles of friendless arable.

Everyone ends up on their own, prowling the concrete town
in their shapeless sweaters, rehearsing reasons for failure and for hope.
Liberal but desperate, they pair off
with their reduced ambitions,

start afresh, leaving the empty house behind with its
bad memories, drains, unsourceable Welsh slate
and the usual sad unfinished novel
silenced under months of snow.

Tenebrio

Tenebrio, the fabled Panther, Reynard, local kids,
a dangerous prowler – or just the usual drunk on the skids –
slipping in and out of your names and costumes nightly,
you come around here, rifling bins, screaming your vixen cry,
playing your games, leaving a guano of gum in the bus shelter.
    The mystery caller that made the dogs bark, the lateness of the hour,
    the sweet spliff fumes that rise through the air,
    backlit orange, behind the privet – you're gone, never were,
    remain in the bushes as a pair of evil stars,
when some gracious shivering husband stirs
and comes with a torch and pulled-tight dressing gown to see.
Plodding back, he hushes his wife but is awake instantly
when the floodlight's triggered by your shadow's tail,
and is taking *Nytol* when he hears the clatter of disturbed metal.
    The next day there's just a smudge of feathers and two
    twigs lying crossed in the path. Next door's window
    has been tampered with: the tracks lead to a high fence and stop.
All those night-time incidents: you move in rumours, stalk and drop,
accost and flash at the elderly and the young
and fade like the Cheshire Cat, leaving a fleshless dong
and a funny turn or tearful scream for mummy.
    You are a ninja dissembling into the bough of a tree,
    and now stand huge and awful by the wardrobe shelves,
    fixed in a rictus of mockery and wrong intent till that too dissolves,
and you depart, drifting across a city of bad sleep and prints on window-sills,
finding sport among its bedroom hells
and day-forsaken alleyways, lurking behind the silence:
    something and nothing, all the false alarms that diffuse
    through foolish laughter, all the violence that goes
    unreported or is shelved for lack of evidence.

The Winter Silage

It squats in a landscape of walls gone green with lichen,
honesty's paper moons ragged like burst bongo skins,
draughty hedge-holes, streams of degenerate ice,
and sections of concrete pipeline
stacked
neatly nearby in arrested quagmires.

In the lee of a cavernous sheet-metal barn,
by a breeze-block cow-shed, which emits
the usual moo and moan of that sad species,
it trickles its sluggish business like a licit still.
Bald tyres weight it down with memories of roads
and everywhere white clouds
rise from what is warm or alive.

Under a plastic cape which cracks sometimes in the wind,
the grass pickles and stinks and waits, and sometimes entertains
itself and the empty yard with its field of whispered secrets;
and sometimes the cows, too, listen, and hold their cud;
but Kine is a purblind language,
and the mulling conclave's dicta sound to them
like the teasing scent of a neighbour's trough
or a lumbering bull.

The steam of their stamping lust
sours the thought of wood-smoke
drifting down the valley, and Farmer Giles,
a capable husband but a rotten interpreter,
hears nothing of either
but the swish of the cows' tails
telling of markets next summer, and the wind,
rocking the barrow's ropes with its ghostly whine,

a dirge for the passing of his mother's eye,
outdated field systems, the ethics of hares
and the last repairer of man-traps in his sphere.

He guards the captives he has gathered, and his nose
wrinkles at the horsey smell of parvenus to the east.
Her he could cover, once a season. *He* should be shot.
The children he imagines absent, or silently contrite,
or borne of his own dry bed, whose forgetful warmth
he has known too little in the dark mornings when he rises,
in ageless summer evenings when the parish tups,
and through the nights of his wordless vigils when an owl
flies out of the moon to make its appalling noise,
circling at the edge of creance, and he dares wake no one.

His dump of feed is dynamite. The gas in the silo grows.
Carefully he unwraps the slice of cake his wife has made,
listens to the worms beneath his feet, and broods
on lay-bys doggers use on summer nights.

Reproductive Behaviour of the Dark

The dark began as gloaming miles from here,
mutating moss that spread in corridors
and dusty passages of history
before it shadowed you, priming the cough
of a delicate clerical constitution
that runs to the abbot with its find, who frowns –
and the dark is free and abroad in a new country.
It has travelled in storms over the sea (men drowned)
and over the mountains under the carriage's axle,
has stewed in a dungeon under architecture
of buttress and steep gable and impossible arch,
which moods it puts into a tragic metre,
astounding the populace, who are foolishly pleased,
then asks its Fausts to die in foreign holes
where it also thrives, lining the jugs
with the undrunk, listening to what's unsaid
and hopping into bed towards dawn
to propagate itself and roam the sullen days.

It's your illness makes you think these things.
The dark's the nearest thing there is to you.
It comes in on bad weather, is only
on longwave and was on song that date when drinking
and a night-walk under winter trees
brought matters to a head and magnificent
ruining scenes proved the dark's involvement
in the moorland, which you always suspected
and thrilled to in your more criminal
moments. It shares a burrow with the lizards,
and ventures Fridays to the valley bottom's
empty heart, the mill, whose phantom clanks
are the dark, laughing. The drinkers stand with their chips

in the fog that surrounds them as a constable holds
the danger with his torch, turns on
the patrol car's headlights. The dark hides
in its own shadow, shoots its mouth, the dad
of a young family, breeds, and will not be told.

Argument About the Definition of Red

Dessert is almost ready, the final strawb
bulges its angry glans in front of you,
its whitening heart, a glossed womanhood
hulled and advertising, by its blush,
a sweet castrato purity that shimmers
on the tongue, all thin words, the pain
of the raw knees of youths condemned to the final bend
taken at maximum revs. It tightens,
and heaven's hoardings approach. – Which provokes
a ripple of laughter visible through the felt
buttoned over a royal belly, and up
drunk Henry's nose, the heraldic pincushion
subsumed in a smell of crushed rosehips, cut
flowers, cut limbs, releasing liquid far
crimsoner, port wine of a man's own vintage
(a blushing courtier's), shade of upholstered gloom
in the haunted residence, a rare venison haunch
eaten by the vamp or weals across the backs
of malnourished and delinquent boys,
on which the heavy curtains of the house
are decently drawn. A sufferer of the clusters,
meanwhile, groans in a distant room, from where
drab peafowl can be seen strutting
the old parterre. For some reason this
makes you worried about the missing shotgun,
and as crows caw you look down upon
a miniature bunch of the true, the sourish morello
grown for the hell of it by Diablo from Del Monte,
a lone raspberry hollow on the white plate.

My Love

My love is like
a burning haystack in a civil war:
I hide in the quiet farmhouse,
imagine history running away with her.

She brightens chapters of the classics
I have yet to read.
I read them. They are only books.
No whiff of her assured perfume

tightens the biscuit smell of their pages.
She is the rattle of a closing latch,
the subject of a conversation stopped,
the cooling coffee in a room I enter.

She flies with the birds I blunder near,
nips into doorways as I cross a public square,
confides in other people, and lives in the future.
She falls through my hands like water.

A Room of Old Presses Reprinting a Great Work

Only a solid floor can take the weight
of so many words being proclaimed at once;
along a corridor runs the raucous hum,
cokehead chatter in morse, maybe a jazz
drummer and bassist going it hammer and tongs,
then down a short fast-fingered run of steps
into a basement hangar of aero engines
busy imagining their flights. And it is
music that these beasts transcribe so flatly,
the clank and clatter of black, industrial pianos,
a shadow of music, air on the play of light
in the darkness, what the mind of the quaint original
misremembers in Hell, where, finding himself at war,
he's struck by a squadron of stalled tanks, their tracks
shaking and shells ticking with the sly menace
of pamphlets dropped from above. Enigma
machines, their fonts baptise in ink
the bright thoughts' impossible expression,
unlocking with a full array of keys
that which once said is heard and heard again
across years and continents, as in an orchard
where the muted evening sun recalls
the print-room's seedy yellow lamps,
the text modulates gently inside a reading voice
and a cat negotiates a glass of wine
set down by the foot of a wicker chair,
far from the bang and stamp, hot metal and grease,
the smell of the sheets' lost virginity
and the overseers passing about the ranks
in dreadful search for jams and the one heroic typo
probably perfroming now its word against authority,
off-kilter as the rest of its atomic gang of glyphs

beats out the drums of the tribe, barbaric to the ear
but, understood, a psalm of beauty repeatable.

Poem for Tuesday

for James Sheard

Tuesday, you are waiting for me
just out of reach – further away than Monday,
of course, but nearer than the rest of next week.
Tuesday – with your full-tilt weekday clatter,
tendency to flash by regardless of deadlines,
and promise of dog-training classes in the evening.
Tuesday, the bank-holiday fall-back of all events
habitually scheduled for Mondays, except
the emptying of the bins, which seems to drag on
randomly across the whole of the following fortnight.
Tuesday, precursor of Wednesday with its awful
midweek finality – and rival of that day
for the transmission of European club football.
Tuesday, on which I used to have History
in the morning and English in the afternoon,
and by the time English was history I'd be
sure once again that I was in love with my English teacher
in spite of her grey hair and disciplinarian approach –
Tuesday, in whose early evenings
I ran home to masturbate joyfully
with the after-images of Miss Pearson
and Eustacia Vye fresh in my mind.
Tuesday, irreproachable day,
your morals and the sound of your name
are both sweet beyond measure. Who would have thought
you were named after the god of battle, or that he
would have his hand bitten off by an enormous wolf
and be cuckolded by a fish of mischief?
You, Tuesday, would never
commit fornication outside marriage.
Your modesty does you credit.

I imagine you as a vicar's daughter in a floral dress,
but don't let that put you off.
I have to point out, Tuesday, that you've never
quite repaid the trust I have invested in you;
but it's fair to say equally that you've never
badly let me down. Bread and butter of days.
Excellent day for appointments, harvest time at the desk,
Tuesday, you are truly one of the footsoldiers of Time
and your position in the ranks makes you likely to coincide often
with my gentler pleasures, such as a couple of pints
with a friend, providing the ambience is not blighted,
as it occasionally is under your auspices, by quiz night.
Tuesday, I roll grumpily into your mornings
without comment, O inferior cousin of the weekend
and day marginally to be preferred to drear Monday
and Friday-imitating Thursday. Tuesday,
the love of all the world's plain brown birds
and non-flowering grasses flows through you.
Wait in your tumbledown altar while I make
the remainder of my grand observances to Sunday,
your suzerain, and slouch through the grim duties
of the day that follows, your deathly leader
whose name I have mentioned
too many times already
for those worry-warts, the astronomers.
See you the day after tomorrow – may the sun
shine a little first thing in the morning
and then nothing all day, may your hours
fit together somehow into the regulation twenty-four
without anyone getting run over or the Gregorian calendar
falling suddenly into disuse, may my meeting with Jim
be as Tuesday,
be as amicable and restorative as ever.

Metcalf's Development

after Heine

I used to kiss girls
like a zoologist handling the last egg of a rare eagle
like a high priest in a thunderstorm
like a bomb disposal expert after a run of bad luck
like the victim of a cult signing away a Subaru Impreza
in an access of future happiness
like a character in D H Lawrence whose earthy spirit has been lately awakened
I used to kiss girls
as if my life depended on it
as if the girl's did
in the certain knowledge that the weight of hellfire
and the distances of heaven's eternal corridors
lay behind the key I was unlocking
in the service of Love, which was synonymous with Fate, Destiny,
and the Unutterable Unity of Mind, Body and Soul
like Sir Walter Raleigh debasing himself at the royal hem
as a futile gesture towards domination –
In short, I used to kiss girls
with lies in my heart
and fervent Truth in my callow mind

Nowadays I understand
that kissing, touching, fondling, fucking
have nothing to do with such abstractions
that a symbol is a terrible thing, not to be trusted, least of all
by a man trying to traverse the region
where emotion and animal lust co-exist,
and not stray too far into the former
in his efforts to satisfy the latter –
for the sake of his health and sanity,
not to mention his bank balance and self-respect

– so I kiss the girls with no thought in my mind except
the practicalities of ingress, and whether
the bar will still be serving when the kissing's done

and I don't repeat any of that naïve nonsense at all –
except, of course, where necessary,

I whisper some of it in the girl's ear

Homage to Julian Metcalf

O Julian Metcalf,
you lecherous old time-travelling scoundrel!
lothario of history!
unit of manpower striding heedlessly
across the vulnerability of the innocent!
stumble of orphans across the fire's asbestos grill!
a wolf in wolf's clothing!
insouciant waster of regiments,
initiator of full-frontal offensives!
starer into the barmaid's close abyss,
administrator of the sucker punch
in myriad shameful episodes!

You came and you violated my brain through the ear
and made me pregnant with yourself –
'Tell them the truth about love,'
you said
as you scribbled an invented phone number
down on a scrap of paper –
I lay on the bed exhausted and made you a promise,
my mind addled by your gestating spawn
– but Truth, and *your* truth?
and your handwriting? Despicable!

O aspirant frequenter of hourly-rate seraglios!
traveller in imagined time and fictitious space!
friend of Ed Parsons the brass-necked raconteur!
much-talked-about user of compound words and atrocious idiom!
eponymous construct of thematic unity!
childish feeler of unmediated emotion,
compliant agent of unreasoning lust!
(more sinning than sinned against, may God

forgive you – should he
survive your molestations),
the girl
whom you infected with rabies
sends her love.

Subject of contemptuous condemnation!
notorious *bête noire* of multitudinous women's groups!
baseball-capped *flâneur!*
body and genitals!
alienated wreck of archaic gender!
I have written to the authorities about your behaviour,
the surgical disdain,
the crushing of fragile confidences with a well-judged frown.
I await a response.

O collapser of delicate moods and arch lyrical poignancies!
damper of youthful enthusiasms!
user of out-of-date prophylactic sheaths!
It is time we listened to your denial of human
warmth, stared into the miserable
embers that warm your kill.

You who have travelled the Slavonic east,
sailed in a steamer to dominions overseas
with a cane in your hand and a whip in your satchel,
pierced hymens in the Med and in the frozen north
emptied your bowels, I have blabbed
all your secrets. Forgive me.

O disingenuous parser of 'integrity',
selective moralist, hardline free thinker,
hard drinker of the nihilist school!
pilot of the big ones they hold in reserve,

they want to amputate your trigger finger, but you
are the only one prepared to wield the saw.
Imperial bureaucrat, post-nuclear brain,
virus of my gibberish IT meltdown surge,
militant without portfolio,
you, burst aglet from the dead man's sodden shoe,
you, craven curdled-milk-fed silverfish,
emperor of leatherette upholstery,
egg yolk lying at the feet of a doomed duellist,
how does the crisp snow feel on your ruby cheek?

Vocal witness of downsides, caller of bullshit,
sneezer in salad bars,
putter of brown glass
into green bottle banks!
gatecrasher of beanfests for the business-minded!
sufferer of the yips!
anarchic forger of paleolithic remains!
'missing link' between Coventry Patmore
and the devil Beelzebub!
latter-day Jason seeking chimerical contentment!
mixed metaphor of a man, crossed reference,
bug-eyed gawper at Godiva's chest!
bad apple!
pugilistic offender of race-day decencies! I have
retrieved your hat from the magistrate
and roasted you a chicken. Come home!

Roadhog! Congenital swine!
Champion of 'the boys' whom you nevertheless despise!
O sufferer of bad conscience and immoderate self-recrimination!
jailbird of the senses, spiritual no-hoper!
superfluous bloke!
ubiquitous antihero of world-historical events!

ex-husband!
O pantomime villain, you too
have a 'right' to 'express yourself'.

By Georgina,
by all that is hirsute and gashly,
I would rather you were here in the house
helping with the jigsaw,
but sleep under the hedge if you must, only
take your beercans and the debris of your psoriasis with you
when you go,
and tell that arse your cousin
I despise his creation –
a churl with a rubberised finish –
and shall return it to him
as soon as I can raise the postage.

You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'

Remember when we watched the sun go down in the Gulf of Tunis?
That was before my conviction for sexual assault.

You wound a trail of honeysuckle round your graceful finger.
The light of the wine glowed red in your fair-haired face.

Variations on a Form by Gottfried Benn and Babette Deutsch

1

I

O that we were our Tsarist predecessors.
A little clump of dimwits in a country house.
Then life and death, and tea and cards and talk
would still be something really very nice.

A landlord's agent or a simple dunce,
wig-wearing, plump, yet strong-toothed like a vice.
A peck of grain, a goose, an evening with a girl –
help yourself, old boy, we'd chortle; don't think twice!

II

Despicable, the sergeants and the commissars.
Preferment, justice, farming, all are vile.
We are such effective bureaucrats,
but write off-duty ditties in a lumpen style.

The arctic inlet. The woods' darkling cries.
The grave stars, huge on the rumbling tanks.
The submarine rises soundlessly from the lake.
And the shore is bleak. And always Joseph rants. –

2

I

O that we were the pioneers of English botany.
A scene of livewires in the Civil War.
Then *wort* and *reed* and *buttockspur* and *clod*
might be our contribution to the lore.

A leaf of alga or a massive fungal bloom,
piquant and swollen like my lady's womb.

Angel's-wing or *fly's-head orchid*; name
and name and name. But still the sense of doom.

II
Despicable, the walkers and the lists,
taxa, knowledge, hybrids in a vial.
It makes me sick: we play too much the gods
yet my heart stops at the sun on a sundial.

Standing water. The yet unsurveyed wood.
Tiny stars among the flowering snowdrops.
The bug squats nameless on the tree's bark.
I pin it in a drawer. And there it stops. –

3
I
O that we wear our Primal Scream T-shirts.
A little line of speed in a pub bog.
Then drink and sex, and pregnancy and birth
would matter less than our next trip to Prague.

A Rizla paper or a simple pint,
gassy and full in my rooted clutch.
Gulls alongside the boat, a schoolgirl giving head.
I learn 'a coffee shop' in Dutch.

II
Desirable, the lovers and the mockers,
daring, longing, hopefully we smile.
We are such sickly, such corrupted gods.
A geezer vomits halfway down the aisle.

The gentle harbour. The lack of dreams.
The pop stars, transient as summer snow.

We shuffle blearily towards the waiting coach
and we're ashore. And off to buy some blow. –

4

I

Odette, we were in our prime. Alan says so.
A little club of two in a warm bed.
Then life handed us a permanent breach
via that plump nymph you'd asked me not to wed.

I leave for Calgary or somewhere soon.
When safely out I'll make for you. I clutch
a girl on a swing, it's what I reckon by.
But we're altered long ago, and stuff. Your touch –

II

Dispensed my uppers and my downers,
a spare, long without hope, forlorn, I
prepare such sick, such abrupt words.
I've lived my life backwards, I realise.

Gently I replace the handset. An answering machine.
The grave stares. You bother me no more.
In my pants I sleep through the sound of the trees,
sure that this is me always. And then old Alan calls. –

White Peak, Abandoned Workings

Fading in a wrapper at an antiquarian's,
the groundplan's foxed in yellow darkness,
a candlelight that has to be imagined
when to no purpose honour of past works makes ingress.

'The eye is old that shall read and understand
these scratched inscriptions. Hayfields in late sun
wait for it, and wave a little in the wind
which sighs aloud that the mine will be empty soon.'

Here is the sallow complexion of the guide,
here the stalled tools ready for their absent remit
and all around the song of the gaseous bird
faltering out always along a blocked and flooded adit—

a tune without words, the rusty scraping roar
of movement on the dotted track, which spills
ghostly parabolas of slag and ore,
hummock and scree and cowslip of the absent dale.

Gravel

Measured in tons and millions of tons
and by the bit in millimetres too,
gravels of all shapes and sizes go to give
the driveways of this world the desired level of crunch.

This poem is to celebrate the large buildings
gravel makes possible: HQs military and commercial,
technical stations, aerodromes
and the palaces of deranged dictators;

also hospitals, institutions for the arts and sciences,
schools, utilities, forecourts of car lots. Beloved of janitors,
gravel touches rats' paws and the brogues of the great.
It lies against the bottoms of fences and shares their creosote,

rubs against its siblings but will never return to the mother lode.
Joy to the hills for their Caesarean spawn!
Without it, whither helicopter landing pads,
whither *boule*, whither proliferation of fishing lakes?

Without gravel expensive machines would lack the proper setting
for the murders and astonishments
and exhaustive algorithms they perform.
Nowadays most organisations prefer it.

Gravel hides the blood which the rain washes through it, betrays trespassers,
and realises locally the emptied landscapes dreamed of by centres.
It travels secretly in the treads of tyres, arrives,
exhausted, somewhere else, and disappears at once.

Each piece is unique, a snowflake evaporated
to its hidden minerals. It surrounds you,

lies forgotten in the gutter or kicks up towards the firmament.
Stone's populace divided and set to work alone,

it drowns in fish tanks and sickens
in the ballast-holds of international freighters,
lays paths around a multitude of sins.
Gravel blots out place with geology,

covers the surface with what lies underneath,
making things possible. Never the bride:
no one seeks it, but a barrow-load or two
is often welcomed. It can belong to anyone:

keep it in a wall-safe or a wet cardboard box.
Run it through your hands like money.
A single grain is enough to stall your movement,
yet has no uses. In any quantity it means nothing.

The Looking Behind Walls Club

The Looking Behind Walls Club
lost its headquarters today: it got too familiar to the members
and dissipated into their sad knowledge of the city.
It didn't make the papers. It wasn't their sort of story:

all footnote, no beginning, no middle, no end. So it ended. We stood around,
trying to avoid conversation, coughing, poking, looking, till we saw someone coming,
and hid, I don't know why, inside a disused shed, then lost
an hour or two rummaging through knick-knacks and pots of two-stroke.

We look for lost traces, evidence of things, stuff, items, objects, trinkets,
crap, phenomena, dead-end versions; mistake empty crisp packets
for the Grail's wrapper. What's that hidden down there under the chipboard flooring?
Bluebeard's hoard? Chickenfeed? The Treasure of the Sierra Madre?

The left and forgotten down-at-heel site of foxgloves, broken boxes,
a flat football, two mouldy canvas shoes, who knows, a stash of street signs
from the 1930s, is our open-air cathedral. We only ever pray for distances,
unknowns, new anonymities and elsewheres as habitat. Hallelujah! No one hears us.

Sneak down the side of the old canal, snub the footpath.
Meet me under the bridge like pottering urban trolls, or
vault the chain-link into the sub-station's gravel yard for no good reason,
or anywhere. Don't tell me postcodes, addresses, *la-la-la* I can't hear you.

Describe it to me. Its nameless locations, where it leaves the track,
the shape of its nothing,
its colours of neglected grimes, the feel of moss on your fingers.
What songbirds weren't singing there. Micro-climate, geology. How many minutes
you wasted. Whisper it, don't write them down. Someone might use it.

This club's no fun any more. Too organised. We burn the rolls. Our song drifts out

one more time across a web of dusty brickwork gennels: *Don't fence me in...*

We sniff the air: corroded metal, dinners, stagnant water.

Always another wall to look behind. The unknown region slides.

The Old Harlequin

Nursery Street crosses The Wicker at its inner end, inside the sourthernmost curve of the flaccid Don where it reaches and shies away from the city centre's hump. It used to form a section of the ring road; now the area behind Nursery Street has been razed and transformed into a knot of lanes and road signs, and the ring road disdains its old route along the bank of the river.

The company I worked for moved into the old city mortuary in the first summer of the new century; the big, empty rooms still wore the metal stubs of old equipment high on their walls, and one or two – but not the ones we frequented – had noticeable camber, and discreet canals running rounds their edges, for the drainage of blood. There was a dismal yard, in which a caravan, with no operational purpose, soon appeared and died.

The ex-mortuary lived in a row of similarly battered, oddball buildings: an obscure church and a scientific company occupied adjacent and featureless sixties blocks, beyond which a refurbished mill provided office space a la mode for design firms, therapists, business groups and IT consultancies. Facing the caravan in its yard was a supplier of glasses to the drinks trade; here the row curved round, via a hotel of indeterminate quality and invisible clientele, to join the glorious decrepitude of The Wicker with its stinking newsagents, shops selling fried chicken and fishing tackle, all-night chemist and the boarded-up corpses of pubs.

The pubs – The Viaduct, The Big Gun – were an index of the area's decline. We, the symptoms and observers of change, assayed a leisure crawl on successive Friday lunchtimes to find a local and a feel for the place. But they closed quicker than we could gather the stomach to enter. *The owner of this building is hereby given notice that it will be demolished on 17th August 2001.* They never were: the notices themselves seemed to be abandoned. Those pubs not closed did a brisk trade in violence and hostile, near-Western catatonia. The Hare and Hounds lay opposite my new place of work and we watched the regulars arriving from just after ten to stand and wait for opening. One morning, arriving at work I found on the doorstep of the mortuary a bag of low-grade cocaine; another time a crowd of people surrounded a man who had been run over; such events seemed consonant with the place. At the other end of Nursery Street lies The

Manchester Arms, which honourably, oddly, changed its name to The Harlequin when its rival a street or two away was demolished to make way for the new layout of roads.

The old Harlequin sat dormant among the backstreets lying in a rectangle beind Nursery Street and The Wicker. The surrounding buildings were industrial premises used and disused – and a massage parlour-cum-brothel – set in a network of narrow one-way streets leading insistently back to the ring road. So who can have been the clientele of The Harlequin I do not know, unless it were the ghosts of the old-timers who clung on in the cutlery shops. I visited it once, before it closed, but even now I don't know whether I drank there or simply peered through the windows. The entire memory is frosted; I see silence and empty tables, cigarette smoke and photographs. The men in the photographs are the men allegedly sitting in the corners; behind them you can see the same photographs, a chronological Escher. Is the bar closed or open?

I can't go back and check. Still, you can search for it on the internet. When I do so, and look at a photograph of the old Harlequin as it was, it looks bigger and more imposing than I remember, a landmark on the corner of a wide road. I want to walk behind it and find its quiet side, stand admiring it among the still and silent brickwork, wishing it could remain as it never was.

The Corner of Arundel Lane and Charles Street

Midwest tornado-hunters do not storm
across the desert with more warmth
than I, attracted by the sunset's flare,
fly to where it sinks, and stare
tender and dispassionate as a friend
at what is coming to an end,
the evening of a dormant farm, or house
untenanted and verminous.
I travel randomly by foot and bus,
and with no data from the skies
to guide me to the gruesome, mossy yard
by which my atmosphere is stirred,
the gulf of house-backs, broken pots and drains
which no whole window looks upon;
like them, to satisfy my human lust
for seeing things reduced to dust
and have my sadnesses provoked, I race
towards the funerals of place,
and watch – and watching feel myself grow rich –
the infill of a stagnant ditch,
then find a dirty pub and hold a wake,
alone, and toast the world's mistake.
My fellow guests wear suits of soot. We speak
about the state their crumbling brick
betrays. Their chimneys are forlorn salutes
to something going down the chutes.
I thank the curve of their decline that makes
their final moment mine. I take
the back way through the England-flagged estate,
shin up and leap a padlocked gate
and cross the paddock where no horses are,
the yellow grass, where I inter

the moment of the dying of the dead,
and I am turning in the road
to catch its final flash of sun, its gasp
of clarities. If you should pass
a *Private* sign by ivy-covered cliffs
inside a fly-tipped wood, and if
a culvert empties at its foot into
a runnel, canalized and blue
with algae, petrol and pollutant scum –
then call me, tell me, and I'll come
and duck the wire, stand on the concrete foot-
bridge, fondle the freezing rail and put
a cough of benediction on the blight
that takes its time upon the site,
for what that's worth. And when I come to die
deserted pavements, streets, will sigh,
an iron set of steps will ring and chime,
pretending that it knows my name,
atonal effigies of hymns to praise
the rain, and Nowhere breaking loose.

Late Schoolboys

The speed of their gallows walk's
lower even than their backpacks,
slung pained and aslant like their
dissenting grimaces. Trudging, more

stop than start, they take long-cuts
in twos and threes through the drab bits
of scrub tacked on to public parks,
meet the dogs on their walks

and their stoic, indifferent owners. Some
lost glove rots in front of them
all winter, and they know each flake
of paint on the railings their sticks rattle.

They'll arrive in a ragged parade
that mourns into the school's facade
and wait for the worst to burst over them
in a spat shower of opprobrium.

The birch, the worn footpath's line,
the pavements and tarmac patches they learn
over years of yawns and missed breakfasts,
the dread of the official lists,

are not on the syllabus;
nothing that interests them is.
They know only the equation of day
and death, and they avoid it stubbornly,

rolling over on their lives
and bright futures as depressives.

They have their love affairs with sleep
and blush at Miss. They speak in burps.

Lateness is the state of grace
they travel through and in this place
where their dazed craniums
conceive the codas of their dreams

they daub their uniforms with mud
to make the powers storm and chide
and have confirmed that everyone
despises them, and they the sun.

In Praise of Tinkering

Retreat to the shed of your dying expertise
illuminated by a yellow bruise
    dispensed by the electric light
    warming a corner of the night,

and there with bradawl, circuitry or oil
make something other than a haul,
    the useful, profitable job
    that serves the kingdom of the glib:

astound the spiders with a welding arc
that sticks no metals but whose flames are dark,
    or flute the leg of a balsa chair
    to sit on in the house of air,

paint a still-life, a Lowry, or Mao Zedung,
spin pots or yarns, collate outdated slang
    and sling it at the dozing moon
    throughout the dingy afternoon,

rig up a web of LEDs and flex
to flash the profile of a Mazda 6,
    and snake the power down the path
    so, with a flask of chicken broth,

you need not leave the sacerdotal hut,
presenting the Master's famous silhouette
    to the watching birds, until the last
    match is stuck to *Victory*'s mast.

Produce a treatise for the gods of dust
to bless, and scholars reference, if they must,

in later stages of their talks
on Derby Locomotive Works,

and should the local institute request
an hour in April on the thermal vest,
refuse the fee, but take a mic
and eat them out of simnel cake.

Show that true alchemy's the will to make
a stilled self and a plume of smoke
because no saleable result
can make the maker's soul exult

like the first fizz of homebrew stout. Therefore
treat the shed to a new coat, deter
loved ones from ever going there,
and recollect with tender care

the layout of the walls of Antioch,
the names of kings, the world's first wooden clock,
the rare and edifying fact
which blank indifference protects,

and revel in the state of being apart,
considered useless: this makes into art
the lonely, universal wink
and order in a world of junk.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

The local gnomes are drunk in fields behind the mist,
dreaming of Para Handy in their landlocked state.
The moonshine trickles through their karstic brains
and disappears like foxes and the dead – themselves.
A pheasant's rusty crank's
a fanfare for the aged sun,
setting the dawn's jalopy
at the duck-pond of night;
and in the silence I set out
through pure and cold and empty air
across the frosted paddock's forward slope
where trees arrayed in gold leaf in the slanting sun
are bursts of lost stars or gunfire
lighting up a frontier sides still care about.

Evergreens absorb their share of light.
Among them stands the shining gritstone of the homes,
the yellow SALT/GRIT *staurotheke*
inlaid with crystals of the frost that fell,
the pylons saints astride the land,
the council building's antique town of gables—dreamscape
hovering in a collective municipal mind
of wet streets familiar but unwalkable.

The hydro's massive side shines with the glory
of a great exotic church, the golden wall
studded with black windows and white paintwork,
a slab of patriarchal faith above a beard
of hammered copper, the dessicated hedge,
framed by the scrolled effusions of the trees
beneath a stalled procession of cloud-forms
through blueish horizons of apse.

It is the National Autumn,
the feast of the saints of the dying year
whose bonfire is the piling on of time and season
to wood left lying in a musty yard. A diesel coughs.
So: a priesthole behind the bookcase
I had not noticed all these years.

It is as if Christmas had descended unannounced
and I'd slipped out just as the house began to stir
the first chimneys start to clear their throats
to join their households singing.
I think of the first bottle popping,
glad voices and the frying of bacon,
the slicing of pork pie and talk of cribbage
going on in a lucid interval elsewhere
while I traversed the fields along the usual lines
in shy communion with the peaceful or dying town,
in the hour before ascension. I think of returning

through a gold and static morning to crush
my absence from the fixed familial smile,
and try to do so, a room listening to the gentle clocks
announce me as I walk, the mist undrifting
and birds shouting
from tree to sharp-drawn tree.
O on the tarmac I watch my long shadow
creep from one festival to the next,
a fool in dozy Byzantium where visions of
sunshine on stonework and warming
brown- tinted windows of stuffy and idle
Slack's Coaches illustrate
truths of old and indecipherable Greek.

Icon of a Bloke in Glasses Opening a Window

The
rain a golden
veil of movement
fixing things here,
the great weekday, in
a plain uPVC frame.
The figure of
a saint cum-
nimbo-kitchen-
strip-light,
dressing-gown
anointed with crumbs
and a fragment of honeycomb.
Above the right shoulder a cinnabar moth
proclaims the limited flutterings of the heart.
Above the left: a chalk inscription: salt,
olive oil, sugar, self-raising. The left hand's holding
a cup of strong tea; the right hand's raised to the latch
in adlocution to the sparrows hiding in the hedge.
The lost coughs and murmurs. Insinuating cat.
The 'plashing' of the rain 'upon' the sill,
and other decorative remarks;
and through a drop on the outer pane
the sky's faint light disposed into a coloured band.
The misting of the spectacles as cold air,
wet-earth-smell in-rush, the filling of the house
with spirit, the kettle containing sainted thumb
or stones from the Riding, temporary stillness,
the gold and garnet tiling of his mind.

Variation on the Fourth Eclogue

Not every song of praise begins
skulking round dingy shrubberies
in the grounds of old hotels
or walks of blushing statuettes
designed to pique the ordered depths
of municipal Edwardians;
yet these narrownesses too,
and the wide forests, breed their loves,
the one a modesty, the other
unbroken and exhaustive,
filling a horizon. Either place –
in which you find yourself alone,
hidden by leaves from the road and the eyes
of the house, at evening or early morning
(there comes the sound of running water) –
either sends gifts from the earth: ivy,
foxgloves in a clump, the white
pates of fungal monks among
habits of brown needles spread
on the spongy ground; or, coy with dust
and pale in the shadows cast by bored
cherubim staring into the distance,
an ageing rhododendron flower,
whose scent shall be yours alone. The gods
look kindly when they do not see you:
may these be the trumpets of your reign,
bluebells in the afternoon,
and miles of nameless conifers
your only avenues of state.

The Carp

I woke to see my cousin standing there
proud of the two fat fish he'd poached,
dead and glistening on an oval plate.
One was a trout, the other something else,
more medieval but less good to eat:
eye skewed in a grimace of reproach
while brown blood congealed at the gills –
a thing unspeakable for us to share –
    and drunken laughter down the stairs
    baited our dreamfuls of despair.

Izaak Walton's Flight

Finishing a long walk along Beresford Dale
as night falls, you watch the dusk rescind the line
where air and vale meet, the local greens,
in favour of a gulf in which the brighter stars
appear to appear, and shine through soot
as signs, for seasons, and for days, and years.
The water pools, deepens, and clears its dulcet throat.
Pray silence in the snugs of Hartington's public bars
for what she promises to sing. A shiver of cold
casts over the river, a small argent and sable moth
dances ahead the length of the shadow you walk
in this aisle of country church. There are stories
you can find your way by. Remember them.
trust to the ankle-breaking rocks, have faith,
watch as a silver shuttle moves in the water
and is gone towards its distant planet.
Wait for the trees on the hillside at this hour
to reveal what has remained there always,
what your dilating eyes would have you fancy:
a solid fishing-house, addressed by a triplet of steps
wearing scrapings of mud from the bank
of the narrow river, adorned by a gritstone finial moon
round which the universe revolves.
Inside, Izaak Walton reclines. His gurgling laugh
at not knowing anything still about fishing these streams
is the waters themselves in their icy departure apace
to the Trent and the lowland cities of mind
whose ardent confusion his temperate smile resigns
through love and exhaustion and age.
He fondles the side of a trout, whose eye
stares back in alarm with the sternness of food
before it is eaten, wriggles his feet in the leather,

oozing with mud, ripples the gills of his coat,
then stoops his head to observe
the yellow, gelatinous balls of its roe arranged by chance
in a smear on his thigh. It's the shape of the zodiac sign
of his first beloved. For her sake he retreats
at times alone off the river to sit and refrain
from lighting the candle as cattle proceed on their way
towards evening where their bells are stifled
by cloisterous air that surrounds them and he,
alone in his wet confessional, can talk to her
about the workshop domus he has made. The finnock
bucks in the bucket, and dies, but is already dead.
He would like to eat of its flesh, wherein is the breath of life.
He waits here always, and was always waiting.
He's munching his way through the plums' misty midnight
growing by day and by year to a sweet with a nub at the centre,
can barely remember the launch and celestial arc
of his beauteous craft in the darkening river.
He stares at its rocks burning white and imagines
the amethyst heavens' reduced and plunging flare
undrinkable outside the square window
on which his meditations loom,
being leisured and still at the spiral's central bulge,
an awareness of movement not wholly empty and lit
by the thought of it moving to dwell on itself in the dark.
You are only the tracks of a walker
long past or yet to come, intruding lightly
on a scene imagined through dusk's diabolical pomp
in a compact re-entry cabana of Derbyshire stone—
the walls, altar and hour and night—
with Walton inside it at peace on the seat like a throne
spinning through space and the few elemental shapes
that persist through his grief, the dim and joyful constellations.

The Flowers Singing

I have always thought there was such beauty about a room like that, even though there weren't any people in it, perhaps precisely when there weren't any.

Vilhelm Hammershøi

Standing suddenly, you frown down at the book
then wander dumbly through the house,
against the muted singing of the flowers in their vases –
an airless house of closed doors and doors
left open: jellied meats, an ox-tongue shining
in a courtyard's steady sun, dry cushion of moss,
four glassware jars lit by rose light and by green;
and the smell of the sea. And voices:
the house sings – a warm breath wafts through it, once,
cools in the silence, and dies,
as if it had never been.

The flowers' singing, strangled and airless,
recites the words left hanging in the room:
a tired plan to interpret dreams,
a masque, the room's spatial monody
droning on behind – everyone sitting,
recordings of music, news from around the world.
The *bon mots* of dead uncles,
dated mechanical knowledge.
Against the wallpaper whispering
a phrase or idea slides into being,
only to hide under the dresser.
The children are bamboozled by a simple trick
a troubled conjuror performs,
the clock retreats towards its darkness on the mantle,
and money also is a field of shadows.
You stand at its edge, a queasy anonymous figure.

A glass in your hand is some comfort;
the wind ignites the evening's melodies,
and you stand in the darkening room
cloyed by the odour of flowers you cannot name.

The green and rose casts of the glass,
the house and the singing flowers –
their songs, grandparents and their gloom
muddled among the folk you bring in, your lot,
and other, half-familiar powers – they sing to you
of age and agelessness, and dare you to repeat their song.
It will die in your throat. This place north of most,
a world jealous of summertime,
its sign is sunlight powerless against the cold,
its stone is limestone. A lamentation
animates the houses in these valleys. Flowers singing:
the air they disturb
settles again across the words in a book,
a phrase from a song you remember hearing
sung badly but at all. The house is airless.
Looking for things, objects, occasionally people:
gloves, facial resemblances, rain and stonework
and other rooms. They die,
and you no longer think of them.
This house: your waking self is not a resident.

Broken Tiles

Hans Prinzhorn was a German psychiatrist and art historian whose *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922) explored the relationship between mental illness and artistic expression and is considered a landmark in the history of outsider art.

Prinzhorn died in 1933 in Munich, having retired there with an elderly relative after the failure of his marriages. The building he had lived in was stripped for renovation as a chiropractic clinic in 1986; in the cellar a number of his patients' works were discovered, including a large crate of hand-painted ceramic tiles. Most were smashed, but a significant remnant were able to be pieced together with some hope of accuracy; a selection of these reconfigured tiles is presented below.

• DONKEY-DRIVEN • A STRAIT-LACED BAGNIO FOR MY SINS • OPALS • VESSEL WHOSE CARGO PRESERVES ITSELF • NUTRITIONAL ADVICE • KLABOUTERMANNIKIN • *Moral*, A TIMID SAILOR DOES NOT TRUST TO THE PAINTED BEAUTY OF HIS FIGUREHEAD' • AWAKENING

MASONRY

The power or otherwise of titles

A CRACK IN THE LINTEL whispers as I pass:
No hope of help or home or harvest here.
Fool welcome from the lettered brass

The character of the man

To dope and calico, a cold regime
Administered according to a rule
We in our madness shall be made to dream.

Consultation the first

THURSDAYS THE PROFESSOR comes to share a meal,
Handles my problems with a ghost of trust,
Exhales again the healer's siren spiel:
'You must allow the pills a chance, you must!'

Consultation the second

Mice clown with the moon in empty lofts.
I cry as evening fails across the lawns.
Their strongarm cures chisel my temple open;
Murmurs of murders, phantoms, fly the cleft.

FALLING

SHATTERING • IN TWO DAYS' TIME I SHALL BE IN PARIS • ECHO •

SPEAKING &

the WEEKEND DRAGS OUT *into* SOMETHING LONGER •

Assay

PROFESSOR BLOODLESS meets me at the gate
Returning from some sumptuous conference
Enjoyed by supervenience on our state.
Sun falls across my eyes; the Pharisee

Encountering the chamberlain

Harvest

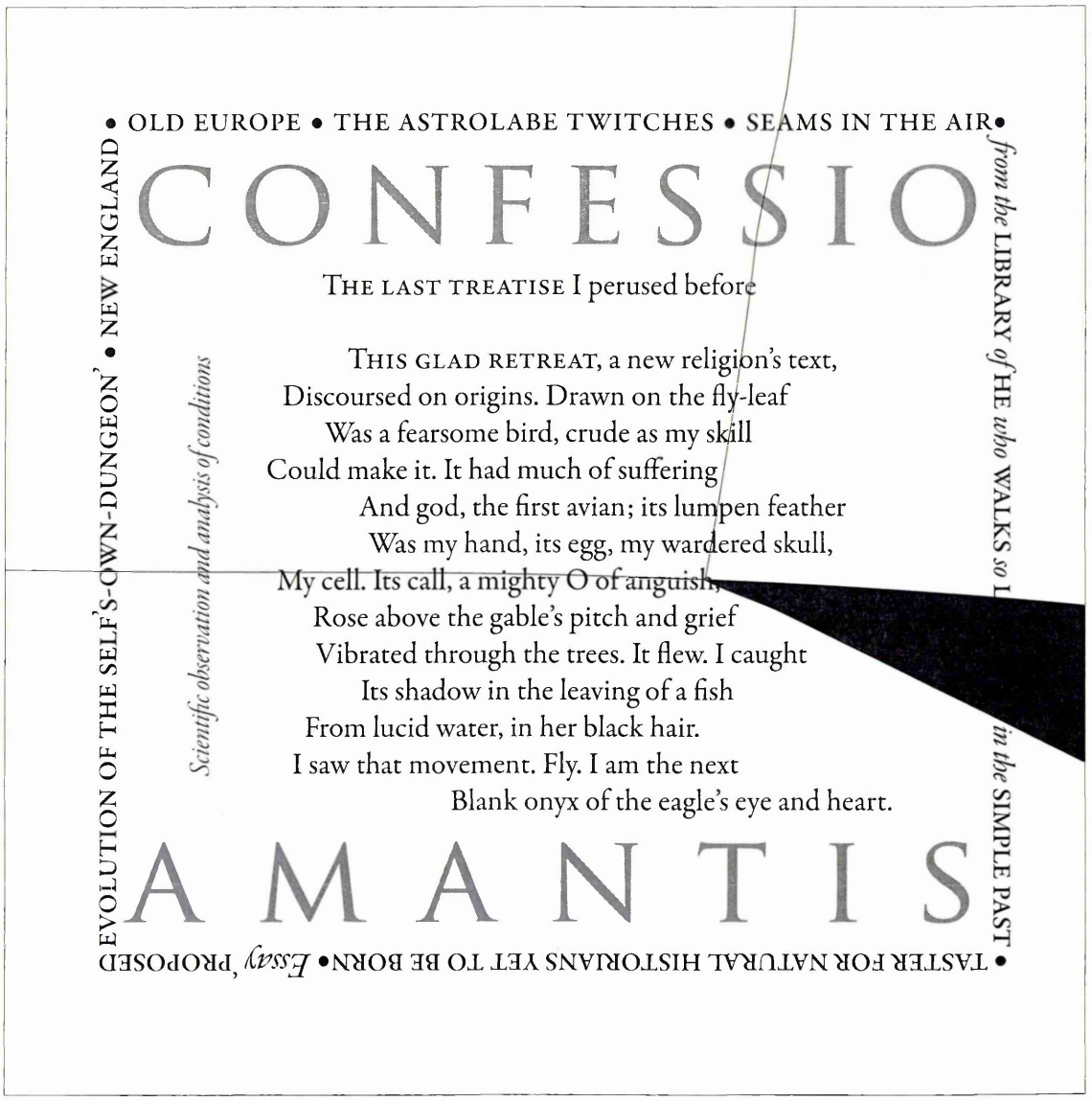
Scotches with a smile my insolence.
Uncle would not like me to leave. Petals
Rage in the lawn's clipped morning calm.
Echoes of metal striking at metal.

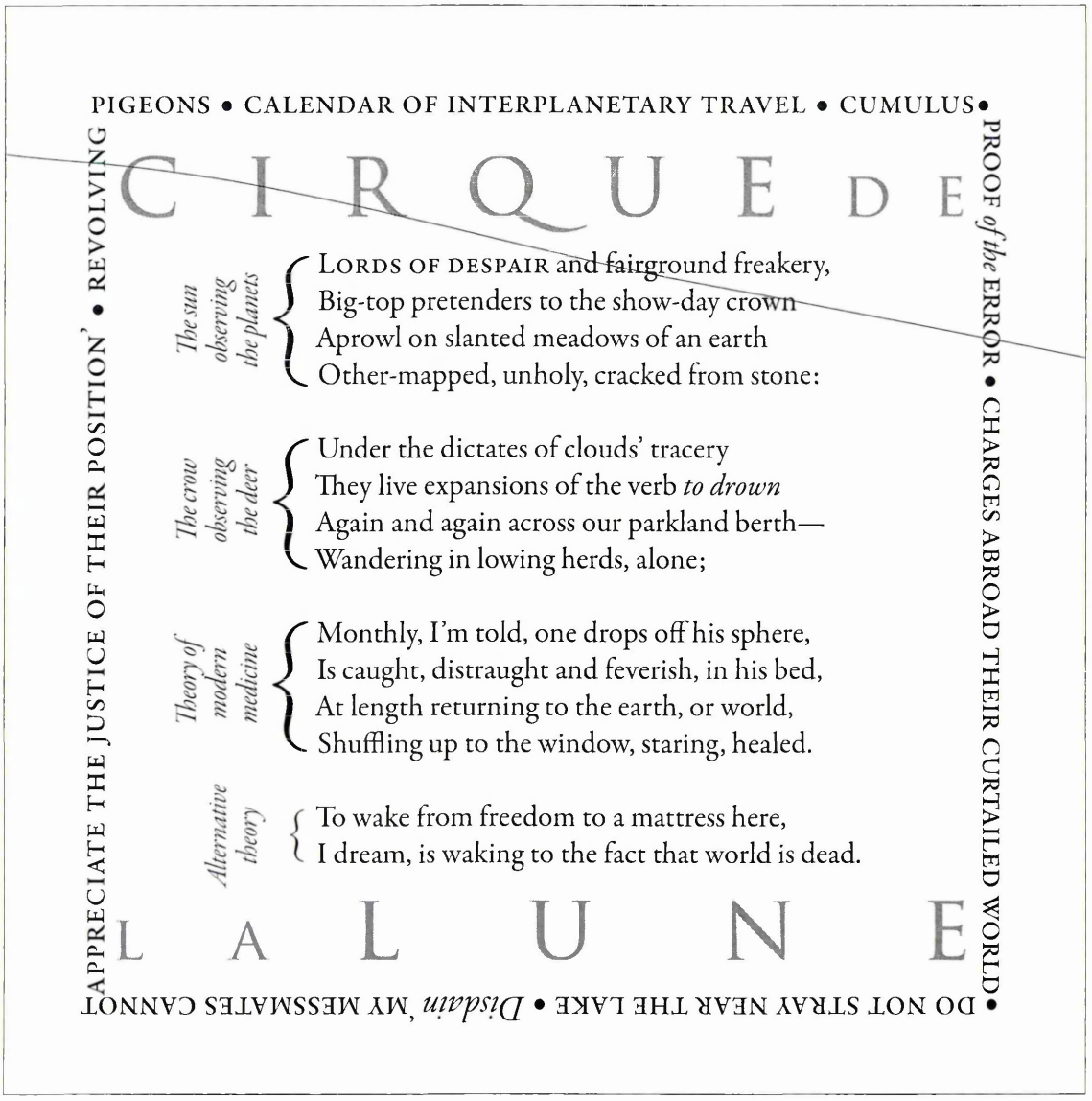
Retreat inside the king's skull

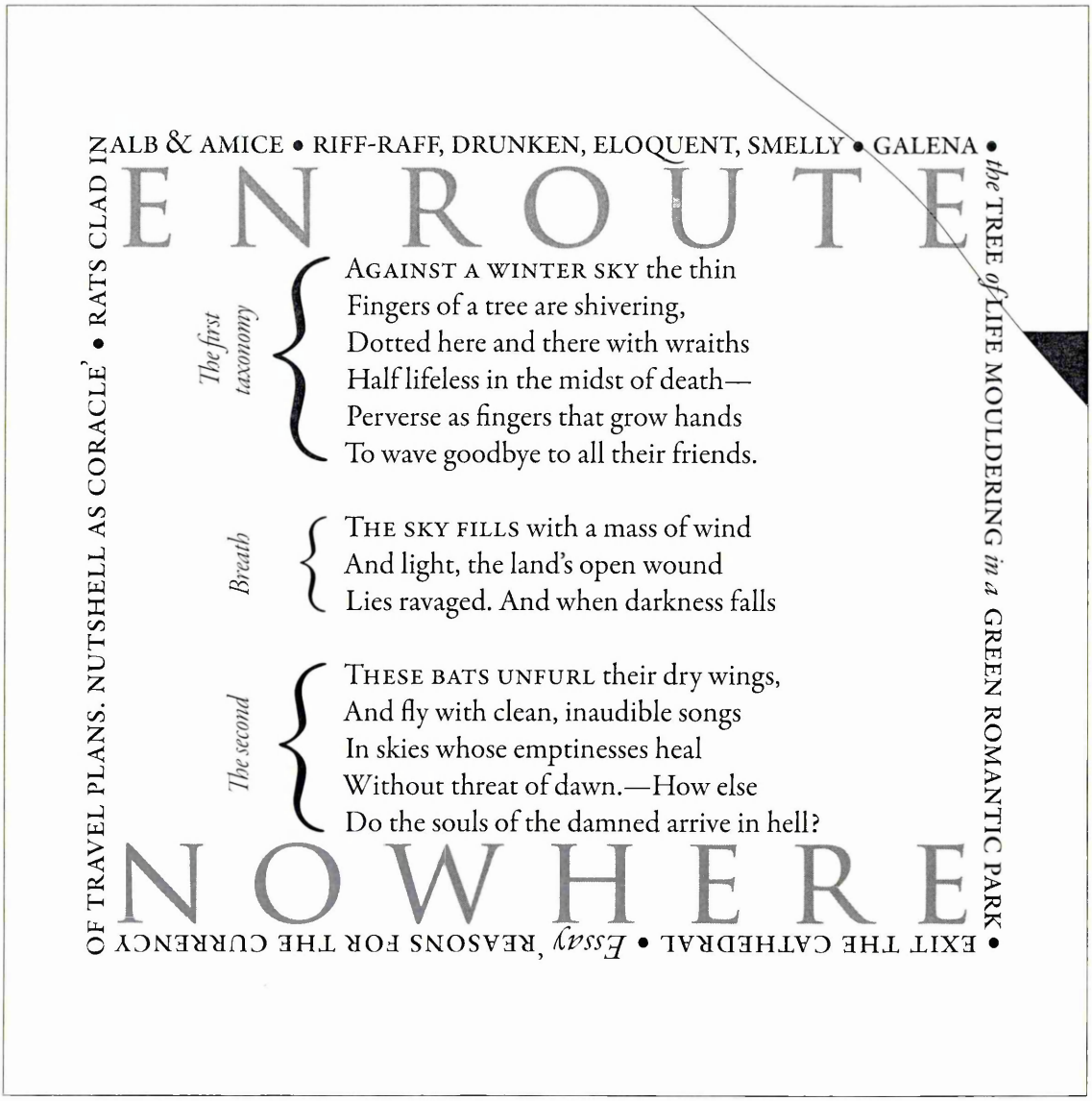
CUPBOARDS ARE A FUNNY PLACE to be
Outmastered by the world. The lordly claim
Opens on a careful view. The bland
Kitchen steams away below my sill.
Every clink spills over on the wind.
Ragged voices. I knock quietly and think.

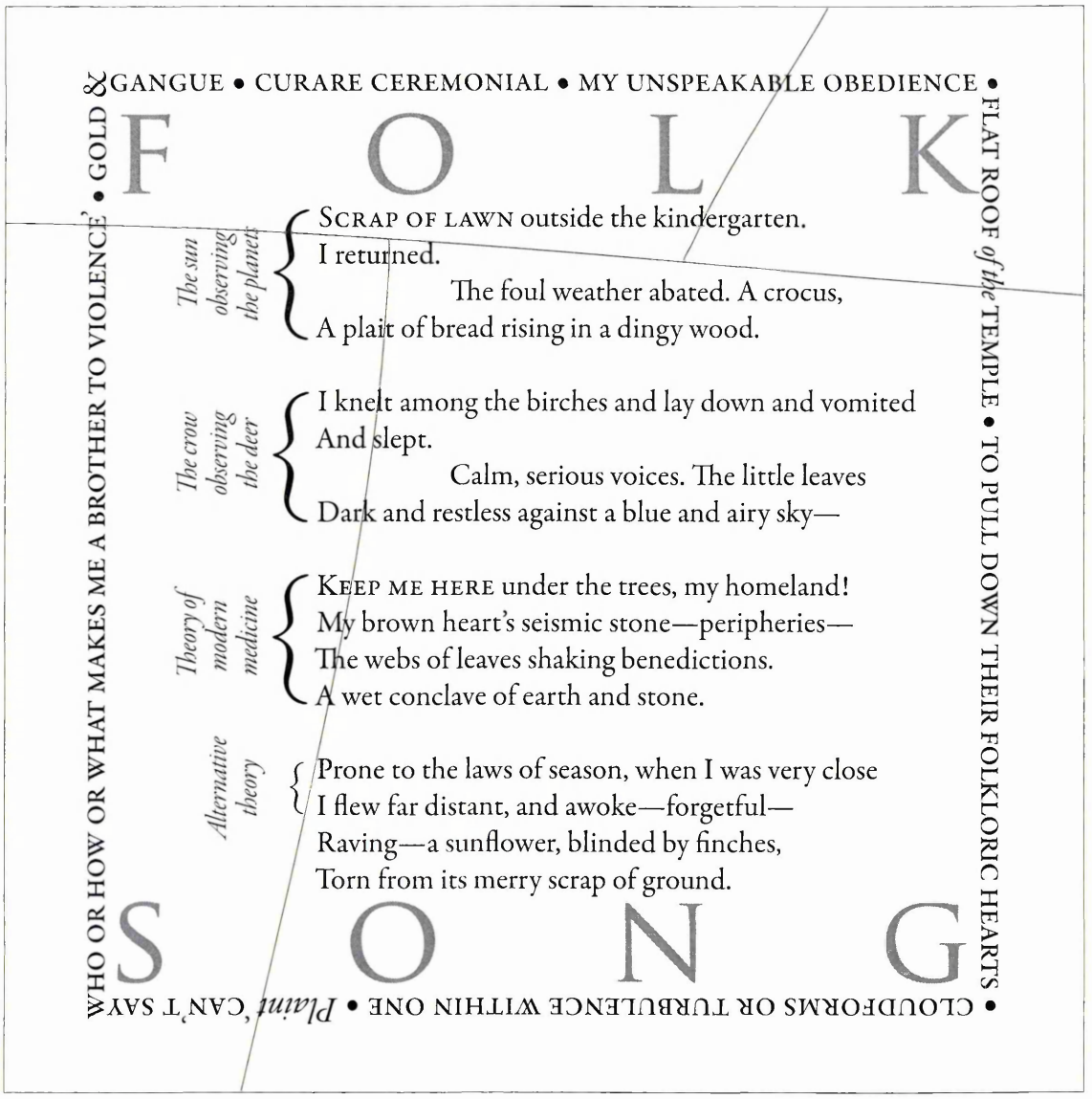
LISTENING

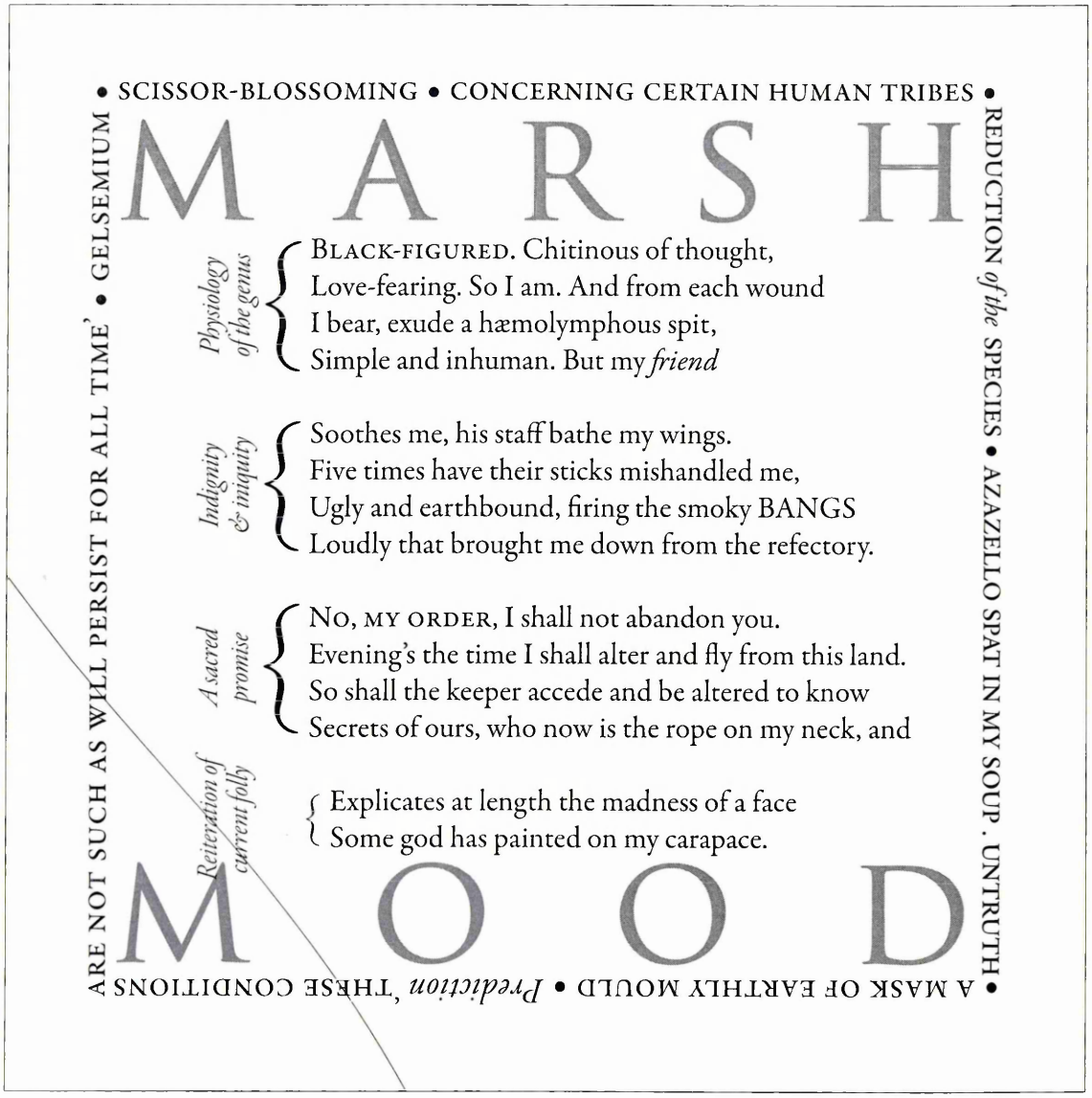
'WHAT HAS THAT TO DO WITH YOU, SIR?' • *Gripe*, DECORATION OF THE HOME APPARENTLY A MORBID DANGER' • CHRYSOPRASE

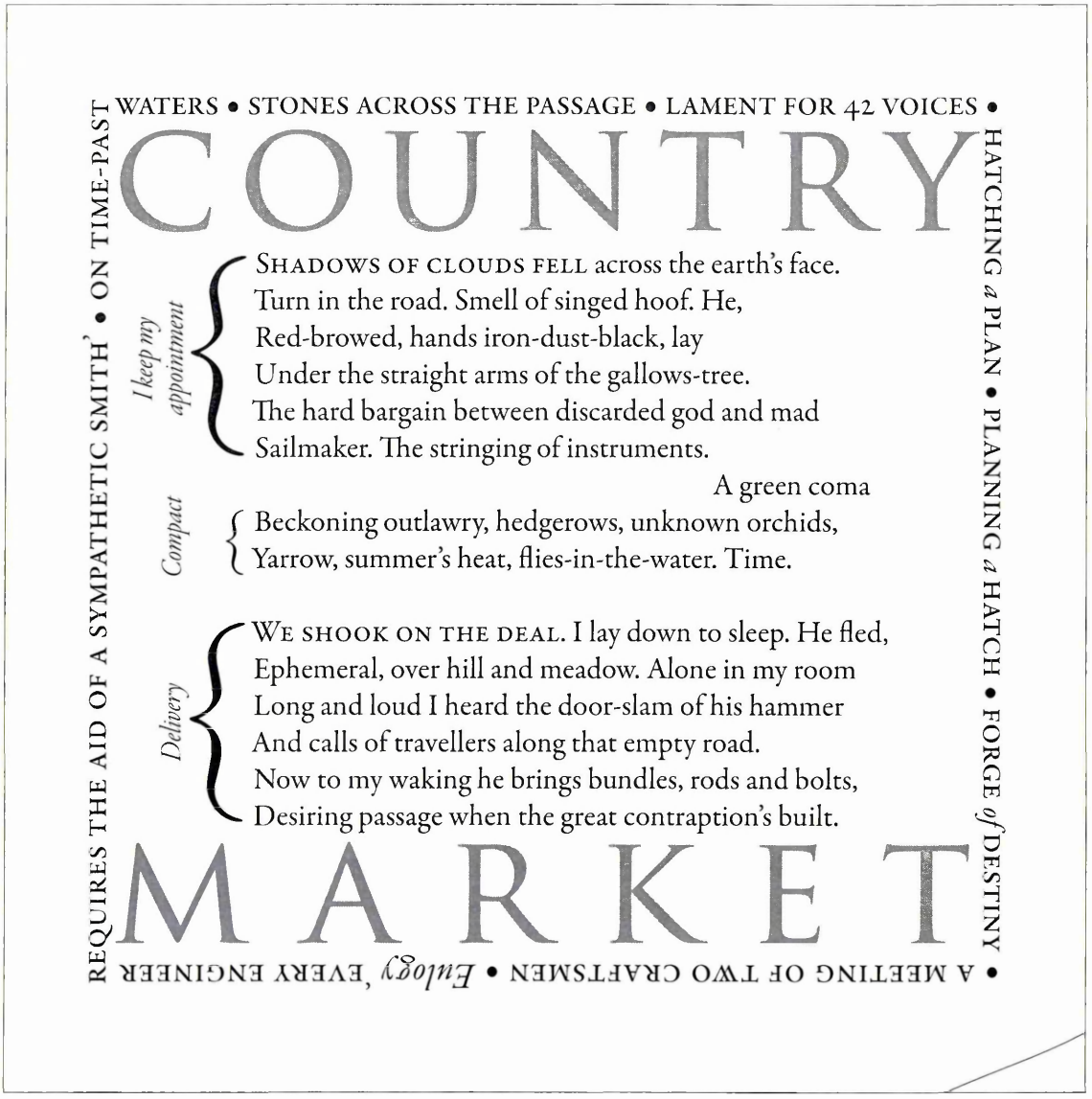

• OLD EUROPE • THE ASTROLABE TWITCHES • SEAMS IN THE AIR •
CONFESSIO
THE LAST TREATISE I perused before
THIS GLAD RETREAT, a new religion's text,
Discoursed on origins. Drawn on the fly-leaf
Was a fearsome bird, crude as my skill
Could make it. It had much of suffering
And god, the first avian; its lumpen feather
Was my hand, its egg, my wardered skull,
My cell. Its call, a mighty O of anguish,
Rose above the gable's pitch and grief
Vibrated through the trees. It flew. I caught
Its shadow in the leaving of a fish
From lucid water, in her black hair.
I saw that movement. Fly. I am the next
Blank onyx of the eagle's eye and heart.
AMANTIS
• TASTER FOR NATURAL HISTORIANS YET TO BE BORN • Essay 'PROPOSED
EVOLUTION OF THE SELF'S-OWN-DUNGEON' • NEW ENGLAND
Scientific observation and analysis of conditions
from the LIBRARY of HE who WALKS so L
in the SIMPLE PAST •


PIGEONS • CALENDAR OF INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL • CUMULUS •
PROOF *of the* ERROR • CHARGES ABROAD THEIR CURTAILED WORLD •
DO NOT STRAY NEAR THE LAKE • *Disdain*, MY MESSMATES CANNOT
APPRECIATE THE JUSTICE OF THEIR POSITION' • REVOLVING
CIRQUE DE
LALUNE
The sun observing the planets
LORDS OF DESPAIR and fairground freakery,
Big-top pretenders to the show-day crown
Aprowl on slanted meadows of an earth
Other-mapped, unholy, cracked from stone:
The crow observing the deer
Under the dictates of clouds' tracery
They live expansions of the verb *to drown*
Again and again across our parkland berth—
Wandering in lowing herds, alone;
Theory of modern medicine
Monthly, I'm told, one drops off his sphere,
Is caught, distraught and feverish, in his bed,
At length returning to the earth, or world,
Shuffling up to the window, staring, healed.
Alternative theory
To wake from freedom to a mattress here,
I dream, is waking to the fact that world is dead.


ALB & AMICE • RIFF-RAFF, DRUNKEN, ELOQUENT, SMELLY • GALENA • the TREE of LIFE MOULDERING in a GREEN ROMANTIC PARK • EXIT THE CATHEDRAL • Essay, REASONS FOR THE CURRENCY OF TRAVEL PLANS. NUTSHELL AS CORACLE' • RATS CLAD IN
EN ROUTE
The first taxonomy
AGAINST A WINTER SKY the thin
Fingers of a tree are shivering,
Dotted here and there with wraiths
Half lifeless in the midst of death—
Perverse as fingers that grow hands
To wave goodbye to all their friends.
Breath
THE SKY FILLS with a mass of wind
And light, the land's open wound
Lies ravaged. And when darkness falls
The second
THESE BATS UNFURL their dry wings,
And fly with clean, inaudible songs
In skies whose emptinesses heal
Without threat of dawn.—How else
Do the souls of the damned arrive in hell?
NOWHERE


GANGUE • CURARE CEREMONIAL • MY UNSPEAKABLE OBEDIENCE •
FLAT ROOF *of the* TEMPLE • TO PULL DOWN THEIR FOLKLORIC HEARTS •
CLOUDFORMS OR TURBULENCE WITHIN ONE • *Plaint*, 'CAN'T SAY WHO OR HOW OR WHAT MAKES ME A BROTHER TO VIOLENCE' • GOLD &
F O L K
S O N G
The sun observing the planets
SCRAP OF LAWN outside the kindergarten.
I returned.
The foul weather abated. A crocus,
A plait of bread rising in a dingy wood.
The crow observing the deer
I knelt among the birches and lay down and vomited
And slept.
Calm, serious voices. The little leaves
Dark and restless against a blue and airy sky—
Theory of modern medicine
KEEP ME HERE under the trees, my homeland!
My brown heart's seismic stone—peripheries—
The webs of leaves shaking benedictions.
A wet conclave of earth and stone.
Alternative theory
Prone to the laws of season, when I was very close
I flew far distant, and awoke—forgetful—
Raving—a sunflower, blinded by finches,
Torn from its merry scrap of ground.


• SCISSOR-BLOSSOMING • CONCERNING CERTAIN HUMAN TRIBES •
MARSH
Physiology of the genus
BLACK-FIGURED. Chitinous of thought,
Love-fearing. So I am. And from each wound
I bear, exude a hæmolymphous spit,
Simple and inhuman. But my *friend*
Indignity & iniquity
Soothes me, his staff bathe my wings.
Five times have their sticks mishandled me,
Ugly and earthbound, firing the smoky BANGS
Loudly that brought me down from the refectory.
A sacred promise
NO, MY ORDER, I shall not abandon you.
Evening's the time I shall alter and fly from this land.
So shall the keeper accede and be altered to know
Secrets of ours, who now is the rope on my neck, and
Reiteration of current folly
Explicates at length the madness of a face
Some god has painted on my carapace.
MOOD
• A MASK OF EARTHLY MOULD • *Prediction* 'THESE CONDITIONS
ARE NOT SUCH AS WILL PERSIST FOR ALL TIME' • GELSEMIUM
• REDUCTION *of the* SPECIES • AZAZELLO SPAT IN MY SOUP . UNTRUTH •


WATERS • STONES ACROSS THE PASSAGE • LAMENT FOR 42 VOICES •
COUNTRY
HATCHING a PLAN • PLANNING a HATCH • FORGE of DESTINY •
I keep my appointment
SHADOWS OF CLOUDS FELL across the earth's face.
Turn in the road. Smell of singed hoof. He,
Red-browed, hands iron-dust-black, lay
Under the straight arms of the gallows-tree.
The hard bargain between discarded god and mad
Sailmaker. The stringing of instruments.
A green coma
Compact
Beckoning outlawry, hedgerows, unknown orchids,
Yarrow, summer's heat, flies-in-the-water. Time.
Delivery
WE SHOOK ON THE DEAL. I lay down to sleep. He fled,
Ephemeral, over hill and meadow. Alone in my room
Long and loud I heard the door-slam of his hammer
And calls of travellers along that empty road.
Now to my waking he brings bundles, rods and bolts,
Desiring passage when the great contraption's built.
MARKET
REQUIRES THE AID OF A SYMPATHETIC SMITH' • ON TIME-PAST
• A MEETING OF TWO CRAFTSMEN • Eulogy, EVERY ENGINEER

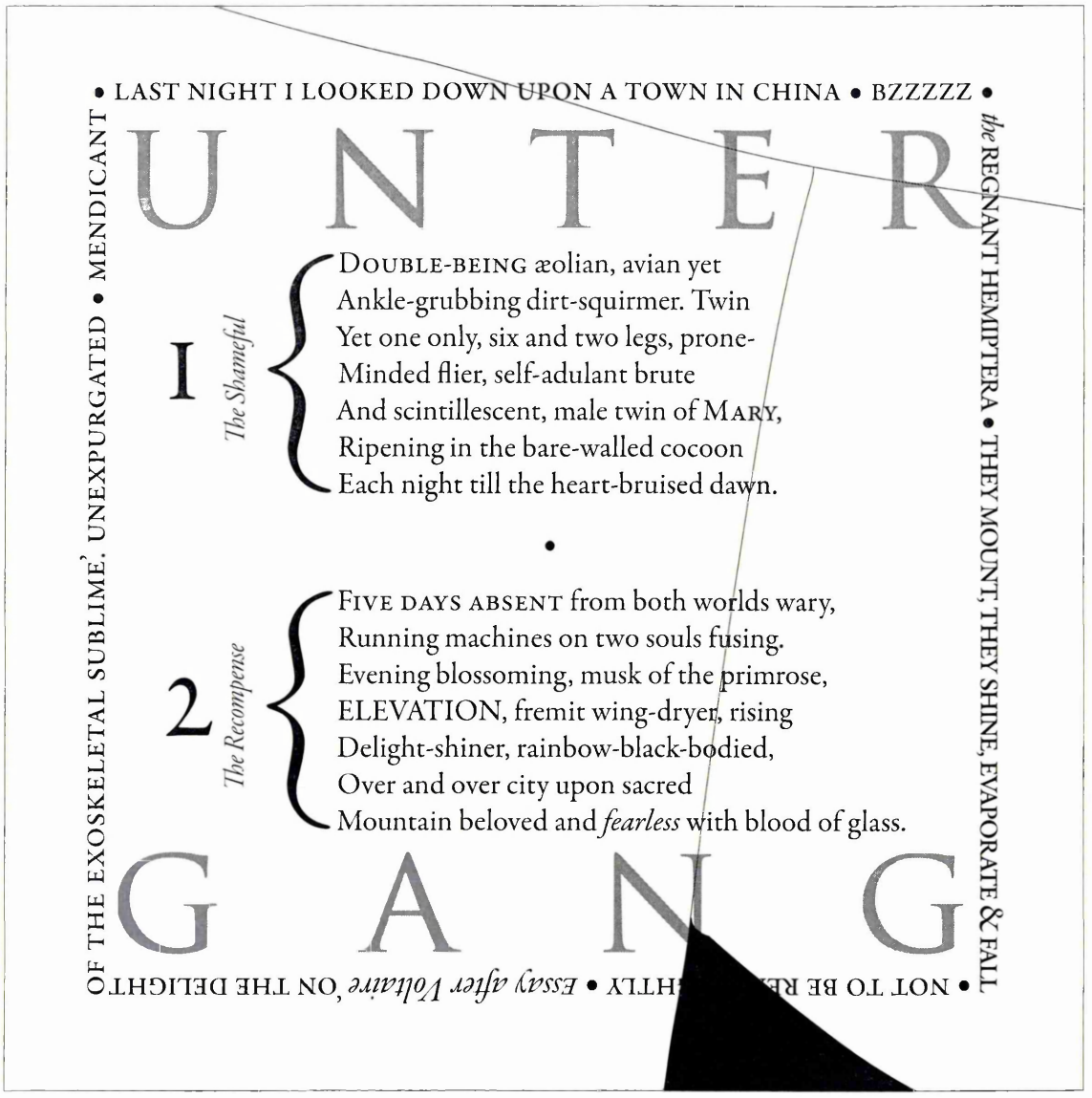
• ON STANCHIONS OF LIGHT • TO STARE ON CÆSIUM • A GREY-BLUE TRAY •

SCRAPE

MANKIND INVENTS the notions of consent
And madness. Rain shall fall upon the brake
And sluice the still waters of the swan.
The white neck extends in anger. Eyes
Turn skywards with the grief of weathered shame.
Rise and cry, shame's offspring, shiver free
Of all earth's low transactions, through a last
Hard-jawed dirt-transcendence. FLY,
White lung, illiterate bagpipe, king of the ponds,
Look down on men's divisions, town of stone
And court where marks—the scratches of a claw
Upon a bank's wet clay among the reeds—
Draw out the nightmare of a species whose
Old inhumanity is come to pass.

SUMP

'RENDER UNTO ME THAT WHICH IS CAESAR'S' • A NEW BRIDGE • *a* SPEECH *by* DAEDALUS • WHITE BULL UP TO THE WITHERS • IN THE MARSH • A LONELY FARMHOUSE • EXIT EX LUX • *Proverb*


• LAST NIGHT I LOOKED DOWN UPON A TOWN IN CHINA • BZZZZZ •
UNTER
the REGNANT HEMIPTERA • THEY MOUNT, THEY SHINE, EVAPORATE & FALL
OF THE EXOSKELETAL SUBLIME.' UNEXPURGATED • MENDICANT
1
The Shameful
DOUBLE-BEING æolian, avian yet
Ankle-grubbing dirt-squirmer. Twin
Yet one only, six and two legs, prone-
Minded flier, self-adulant brute
And scintillescent, male twin of MARY,
Ripening in the bare-walled cocoon
Each night till the heart-bruised dawn.
•
2
The Recompense
FIVE DAYS ABSENT from both worlds wary,
Running machines on two souls fusing.
Evening blossoming, musk of the primrose,
ELEVATION, fremit wing-dryer, rising
Delight-shiner, rainbow-black-bodied,
Over and over city upon sacred
Mountain beloved and *fearless* with blood of glass.
GANG
• NOT TO BE RE HTLY • *Essay after Voltaire* 'ON THE DELIGHT TO

HEMI

UP HERE IT'S QUIET. Forget the birds
So they don't exist. The Secretaries reprimand me.
Hubris { At times my legs lengthen to thirty yards,
{ The bracken steepens and turns; I am the COMMANDER

And I fly, fearful at first, I have a speech
Impediment, then *calmer*, clearing the sky
Fears of mine { Of doctors, buttonholes, visitors, cigars. Touch
{ Nothing, none of these things must be altered, by

ORDER of the sacred memory of the Mother.
In the sky I pass laws honouring machines
This particular avatar { Such as myself, the Fond Mustachio'd Father
{ Whirring quietly under a high zeppelin

Smoking and elongated in the hand of the fool
Who asks why I stand all day in that deep hole.

PTERON

• BIG RAT. LITTLE RAT • E HIM, I HAVE HIM, I HAVE HIM • ORB •
BEETLE
Pernicious influence of drinking buddies
DEPOT FOR UNFORTUNATES. Here I toped
Lager of the soul from the regal
Deeps of my gaoler. (God speed
Reined ambition for that life-denier.)
A fact
Straw-mattress bed. Painful warts.
Scandalous conditions of worship
Warder reaching for the chemicals drawer,
Terce spent scattering dirt on the secret
Dial of spell-flowers I had laid,
Rood of my Orders, at the door.
The further vision
SLOOP OF THE AIR over the farmland pools,
Sleek darter dipping a weightless keel,
Meeting the water where its children teem
Live and irregular, far off from the evil
Room where LUTHER hatches his dream of the moor.
JACKPOT
NTENDS AND THIS CONTENTION IS WHAT I AM' • BURROWING
• PORTRAIT of LUTHER RORRIM • HIS DEGENERATE HABITAT & FORM •
• HINC ILLÆ LACHRIMÆ • Essay, BETWEEN TWO PLANES THE

THE WEAK THE STRONG

Reading the same page several times over

A MAN IS STRIDING over the ploughed fields.
The satchel is loam scored deeply by the rain.
Papers scatter like seeds. A tree is felled:
Its fall happens thrice more and again;
The branches cushion and crack.

Pages of my mind in the wrong order

Inside the case,
A shining rifle, fizzing tissue. I read
The maker's name to flatter space, and rise
In the air behind myself, and bleed, and *bleed.*

The librarian interrupts me

AZAZELLO IN A BLACK COAT at my shoulder.
A piece of liver sausage. Crowding round.
Metal-tongued, torn from the open wild,
Mud on my shoes. Informed by the wind,

An angel reading aloud

I *hover* in the stately music of words
That do not know themselves overheard.

THE STRONGER THE ANGELS

• A BAT SWOOPING IN MY PERPETUAL DUSK • ECHOTRANSLOCATION •

R O U N D E L

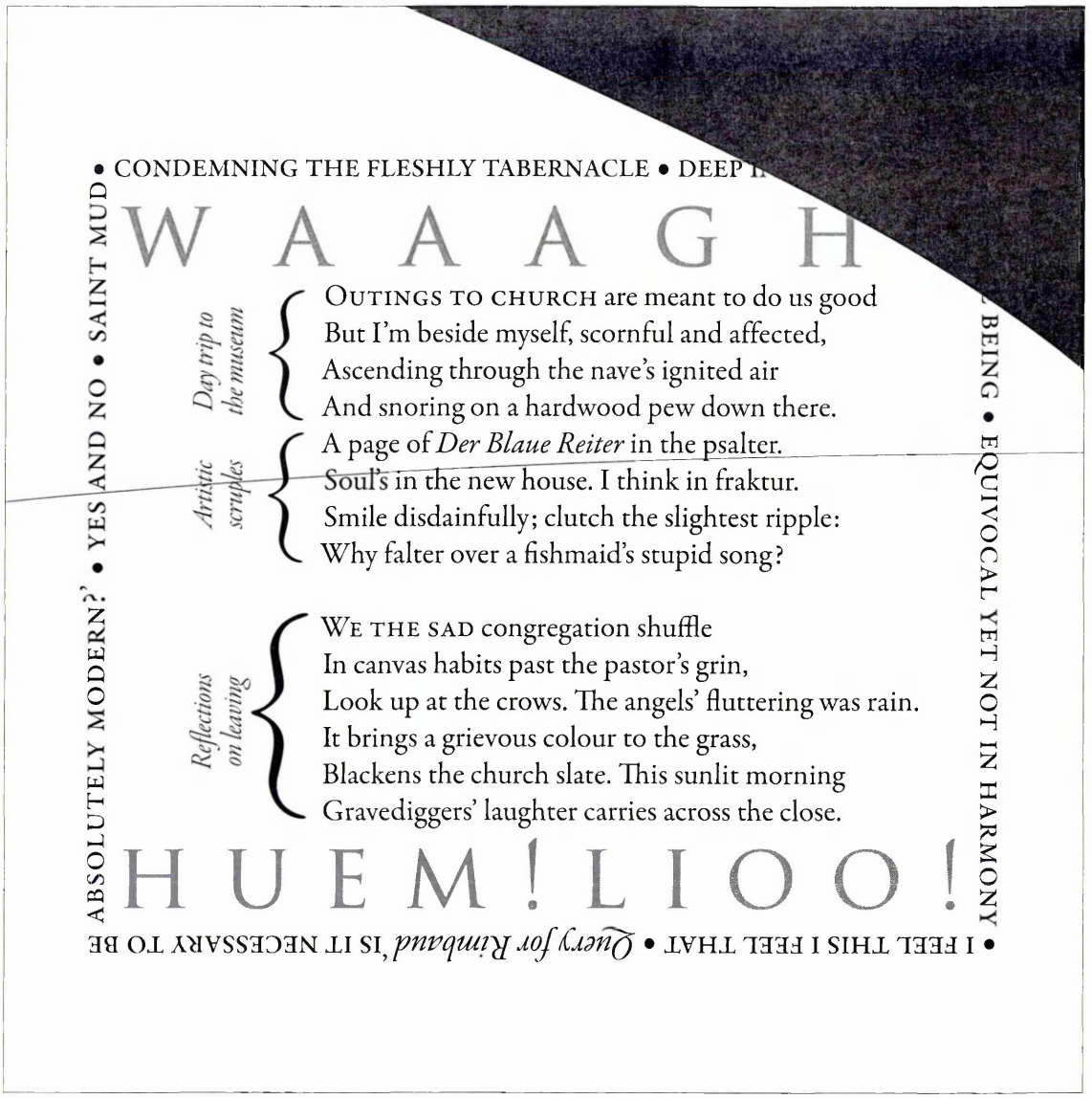
Logistical necessities: materials, land, the love of others

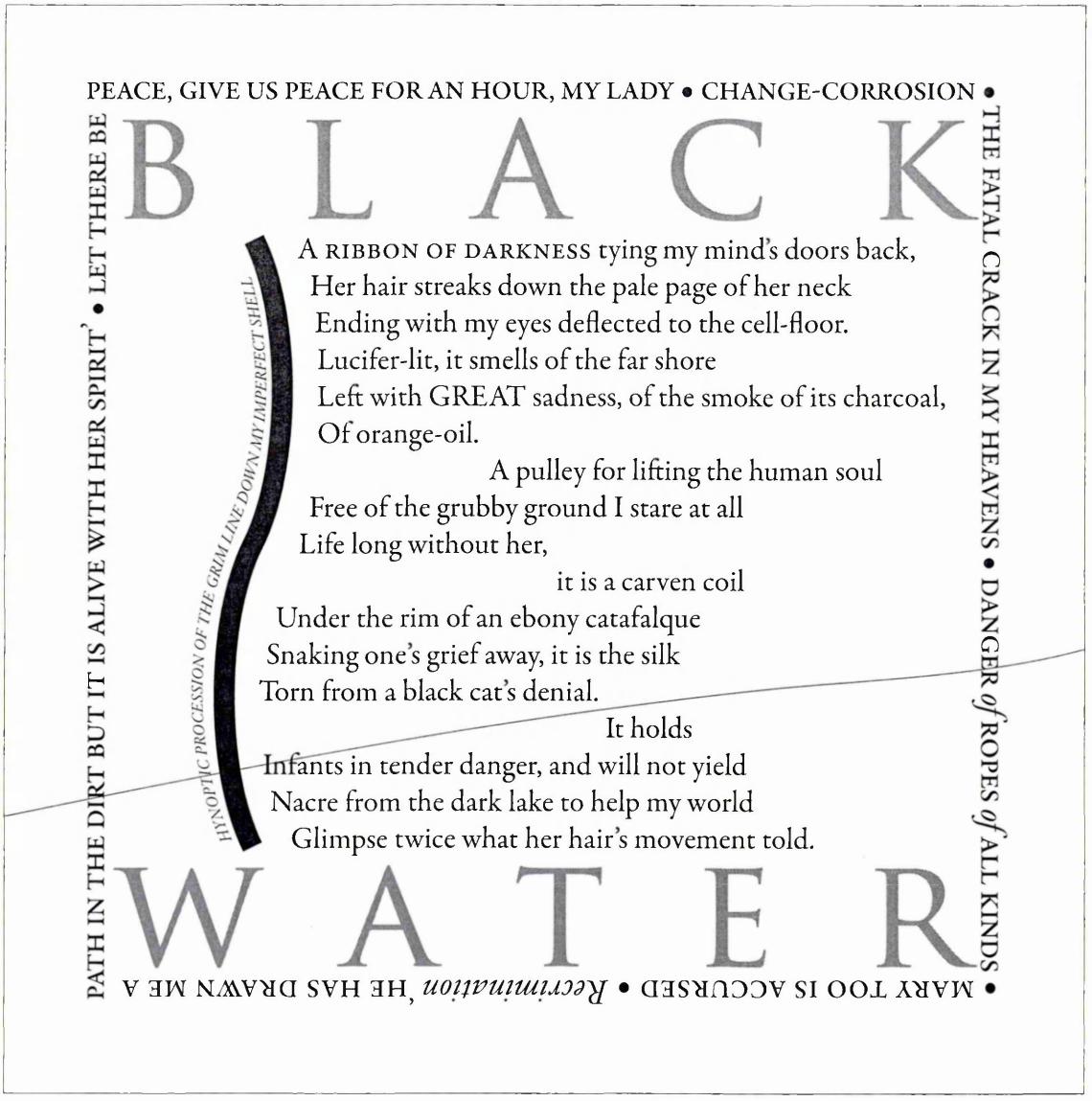
WHITEWASH FOR MARKINGS, graphite and foolscap,
Rotas for observation of the skies,
Infinities, metalwork, carts of canvas,
Goodwill of your attendants. Survivals of hope,
HONESTY, Professor, your soul's fly's loop-the-loop
Towards the chasms of daring I suggest.

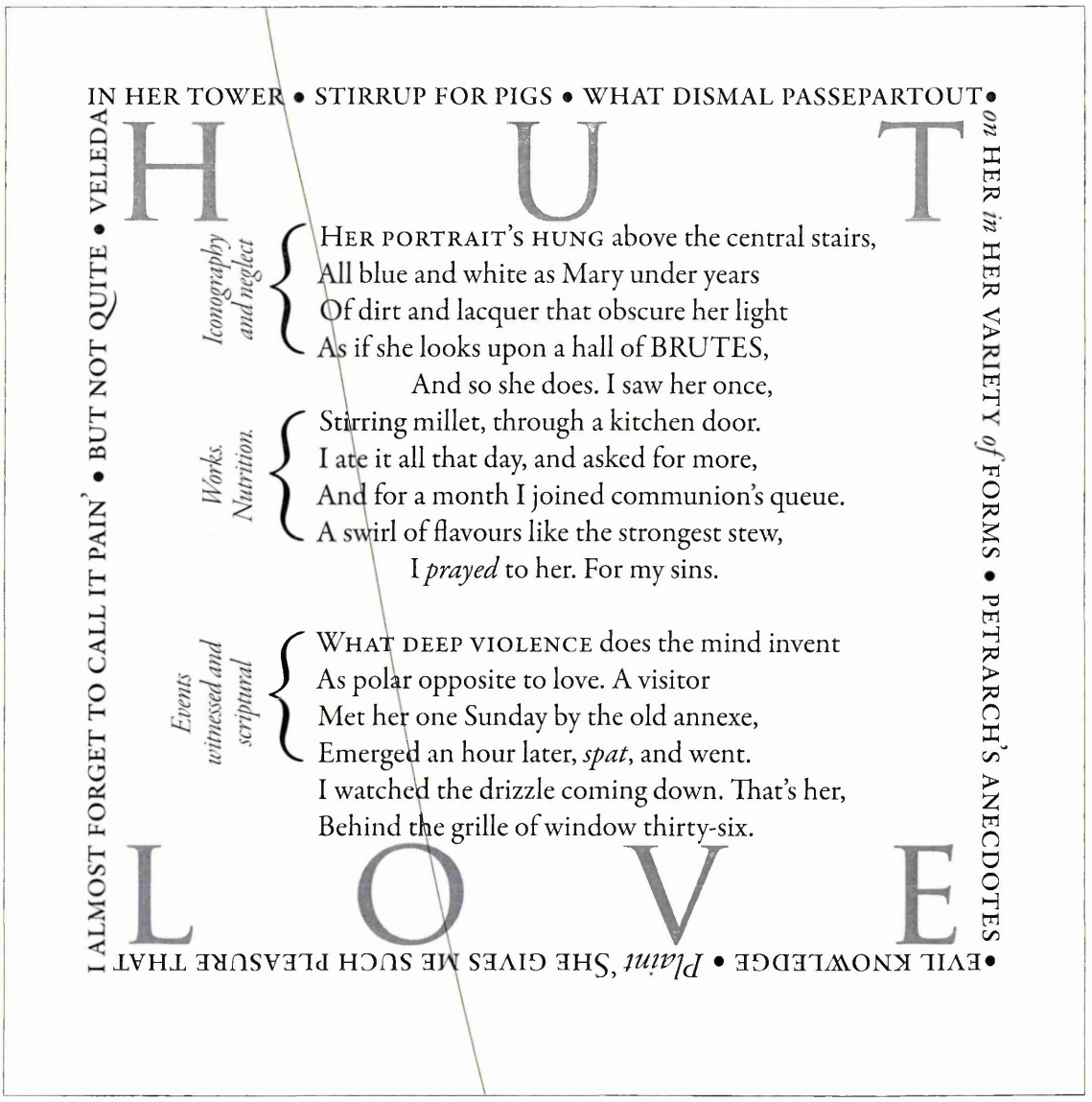
BARBITURATES, perhaps. And apple schnapps,
Rowdiness of the beer-hall, the great yeast
Of our short incarnations as the Living.
Together, you and I, I and my shadow,
How shall the dogs bark, how shall the winds blow
East over the wide field I need for landing,
Red sun in our eyes,
we, should you cede what my mind is worth,
Shall stride in miles across
the mangels the heads of those who stay on earth.

P I T / I R I S

• A SINGLE DRAGON • *Memorandum*, WITHOUT THE ITEMS LISTED HEREIN THE NOTION OF SUCCESS IS AMUSING' • IF I SCREAMED • CONTRAPTION BRED OF BROTHERLY LOVE • TWO WINGS OF


• CONDEMNING THE FLESHLY TABERNACLE • DEEP
W A A A G H
Day trip to the museum
OUTINGS TO CHURCH are meant to do us good
But I'm beside myself, scornful and affected,
Ascending through the nave's ignited air
And snoring on a hardwood pew down there.
Artistic scruples
A page of *Der Blaue Reiter* in the psalter.
Soul's in the new house. I think in fraktur.
Smile disdainfully; clutch the slightest ripple:
Why falter over a fishmaid's stupid song?
Reflections on leaving
WE THE SAD congregation shuffle
In canvas habits past the pastor's grin,
Look up at the crows. The angels' fluttering was rain.
It brings a grievous colour to the grass,
Blackens the church slate. This sunlit morning
Gravediggers' laughter carries across the close.
H U E M ! L I O O !
• I FEEL THIS I FEEL THAT • *Query for Rimbaud*, IS IT NECESSARY TO BE
ABSOLUTELY MODERN?' • YES AND NO • SAINT MUD
BEING • EQUIVOCAL YET NOT IN HARMONY


PEACE, GIVE US PEACE FOR AN HOUR, MY LADY • CHANGE-CORROSION •
BLACK
THE FATAL CRACK IN MY HEAVENS • DANGER *of* ROPES *of* ALL KINDS
PATH IN THE DIRT BUT IT IS ALIVE WITH HER SPIRIT' • LET THERE BE
HYNOPTIC PROCESSION OF THE GRAM LINE DOWN MY IMPERFECT SHELL
A RIBBON OF DARKNESS tying my mind's doors back,
Her hair streaks down the pale page of her neck
Ending with my eyes deflected to the cell-floor.
Lucifer-lit, it smells of the far shore
Left with GREAT sadness, of the smoke of its charcoal,
Of orange-oil.
A pulley for lifting the human soul
Free of the grubby ground I stare at all
Life long without her,
it is a carven coil
Under the rim of an ebony catafalque
Snaking one's grief away, it is the silk
Torn from a black cat's denial.
It holds
Infants in tender danger, and will not yield
Nacre from the dark lake to help my world
Glimpse twice what her hair's movement told.
WATER
• MARY TOO IS ACCURSED • *Recrimination* 'HE HAS DRAWN ME A


IN HER TOWER • STIRRUP FOR PIGS • WHAT DISMAL PASSEPARTOUT •
on HER in HER VARIETY of FORMS • PETRARCH'S ANECDOTES
• EVIL KNOWLEDGE • Plaint, 'SHE GIVES ME SUCH PLEASURE THAT
I ALMOST FORGET TO CALL IT PAIN' • BUT NOT QUITE • VELEDA
H U T
Iconography and neglect
HER PORTRAIT'S HUNG above the central stairs,
All blue and white as Mary under years
Of dirt and lacquer that obscure her light
As if she looks upon a hall of BRUTES,
And so she does. I saw her once,
Works. Nutrition.
Stirring millet, through a kitchen door.
I ate it all that day, and asked for more,
And for a month I joined communion's queue.
A swirl of flavours like the strongest stew,
I prayed to her. For my sins.
Events witnessed and scriptural
WHAT DEEP VIOLENCE does the mind invent
As polar opposite to love. A visitor
Met her one Sunday by the old annexe,
Emerged an hour later, spat, and went.
I watched the drizzle coming down. That's her,
Behind the grille of window thirty-six.
L O V E

AND ITS PALE • 10,000 FLOWERS • GLASS MEMORIAL TO THE FOOL • *the* FINGER WHOSE NAIL IS LOOSE • TOWARDS *a* HOTPOT *of*

SUPERNAL

The last village

DRIFTWOOD, TONSILS, BLOSSOM — trudging the down
To the nape of her neck, a little ticking box
In a satchel. Slumping at a chipped milestone,
Throwing the empty snail shells at a fox.

Rainbow snuff-box

Watching the crows scratching the blue pools
That tremble in the shoulder of a hill.
Dry grass is swinging in its cot.

Westerly, crying

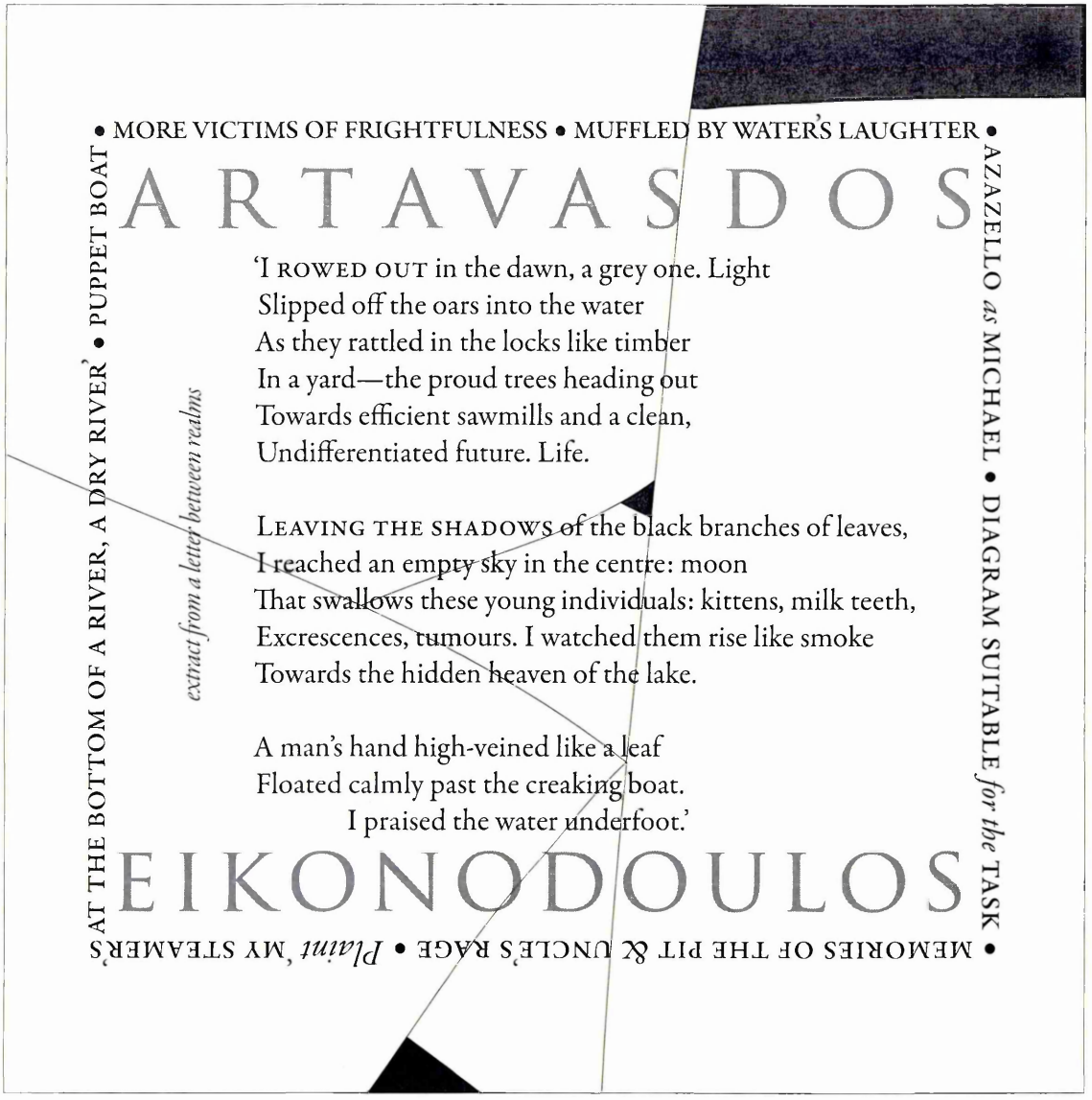
THE SHORELINE is covered in violet flowers
The wigwam is covered in violet flowers
The painter is covered in violet flowers

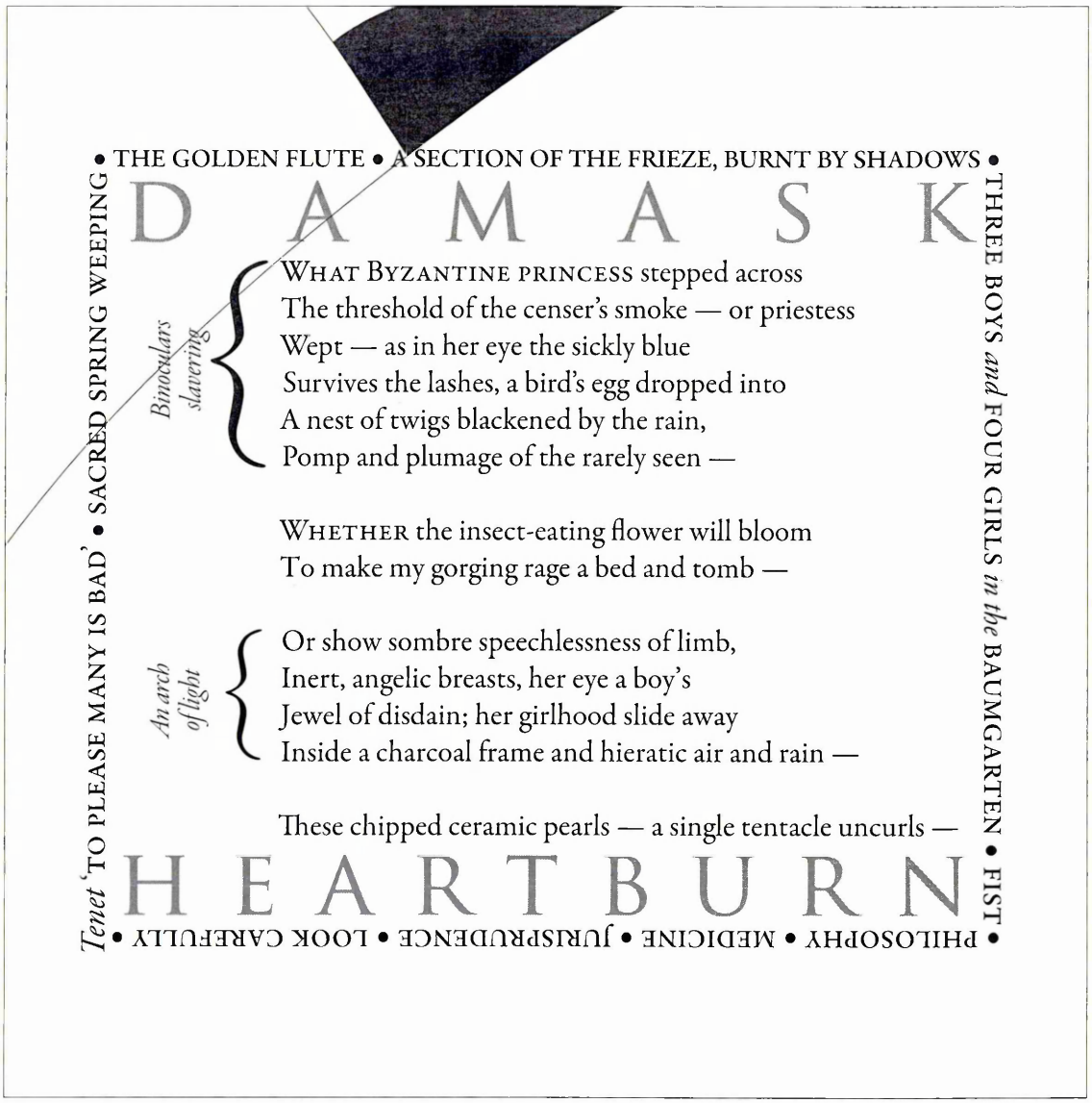
Topography

The gravestones are covered in violet flowers
Her pubis is covered in violet flowers
The pastures are covered in violet flowers
Ankles? I think not.

DRESSER

ELECTRICAL PHENOMENA • *Song*, THE UNHAPPY WANDERER SLEEPS ACROSS A CROOKED ARMPIT' • HALBERDIER'S MARCH • CASTLE


• MORE VICTIMS OF FRIGHTFULNESS • MUFFLED BY WATER'S LAUGHTER •
ARTAVASDOS
'I ROWED OUT in the dawn, a grey one. Light
Slipped off the oars into the water
As they rattled in the locks like timber
In a yard—the proud trees heading out
Towards efficient sawmills and a clean,
Undifferentiated future. Life.
extract from a letter between realms
LEAVING THE SHADOWS of the black branches of leaves,
I reached an empty sky in the centre: moon
That swallows these young individuals: kittens, milk teeth,
Excrescences, tumours. I watched them rise like smoke
Towards the hidden heaven of the lake.
A man's hand high-veined like a leaf
Floated calmly past the creaking boat.
I praised the water underfoot.'
EIKONODOULOS
• MEMORIES OF THE PIT & UNCLE'S RAGE • Plaint, MY STEAMERS
AT THE BOTTOM OF A RIVER, A DRY RIVER' • PUPPET BOAT
• AZAZELLO as MICHAEL • DIAGRAM SUITABLE for the TASK •


• THE GOLDEN FLUTE • A SECTION OF THE FRIEZE, BURNT BY SHADOWS •
DAMASK
• THREE BOYS and FOUR GIRLS in the BAUMGARTEN • FIST •
• SACRED SPRING WEEPING
'TO PLEASE MANY IS BAD' •
Binoculars slavering
WHAT BYZANTINE PRINCESS stepped across
The threshold of the censer's smoke — or priestess
Wept — as in her eye the sickly blue
Survives the lashes, a bird's egg dropped into
A nest of twigs blackened by the rain,
Pomp and plumage of the rarely seen —
WHETHER the insect-eating flower will bloom
To make my gorging rage a bed and tomb —
An arch of light
Or show sombre speechlessness of limb,
Inert, angelic breasts, her eye a boy's
Jewel of disdain; her girlhood slide away
Inside a charcoal frame and hieratic air and rain —
These chipped ceramic pearls — a single tentacle uncurls —
HEARTBURN
Tenet
• LOOK CAREFULLY • JURISPRUDENCE • MEDICINE • PHILOSOPHY •

• GERM-SOIL • CHALK ON GRANDFATHER'S FACE • HIS GUTS HIS LIVER •

STRATA

turf leaf litter
snail shells topaz
gravel clay & dust
vegetation rotting
chalk pebbles rust
dark breathable earth
cool liquor of decay
mycelium
the front doors of elves
moles earthworms
bacteria and the dead
lost trowel blade
fragment of a page
& earth earth earth
a treasure chest
the last words of kings
a scrap of fur
something moving
the red eyes the snarl
a destination

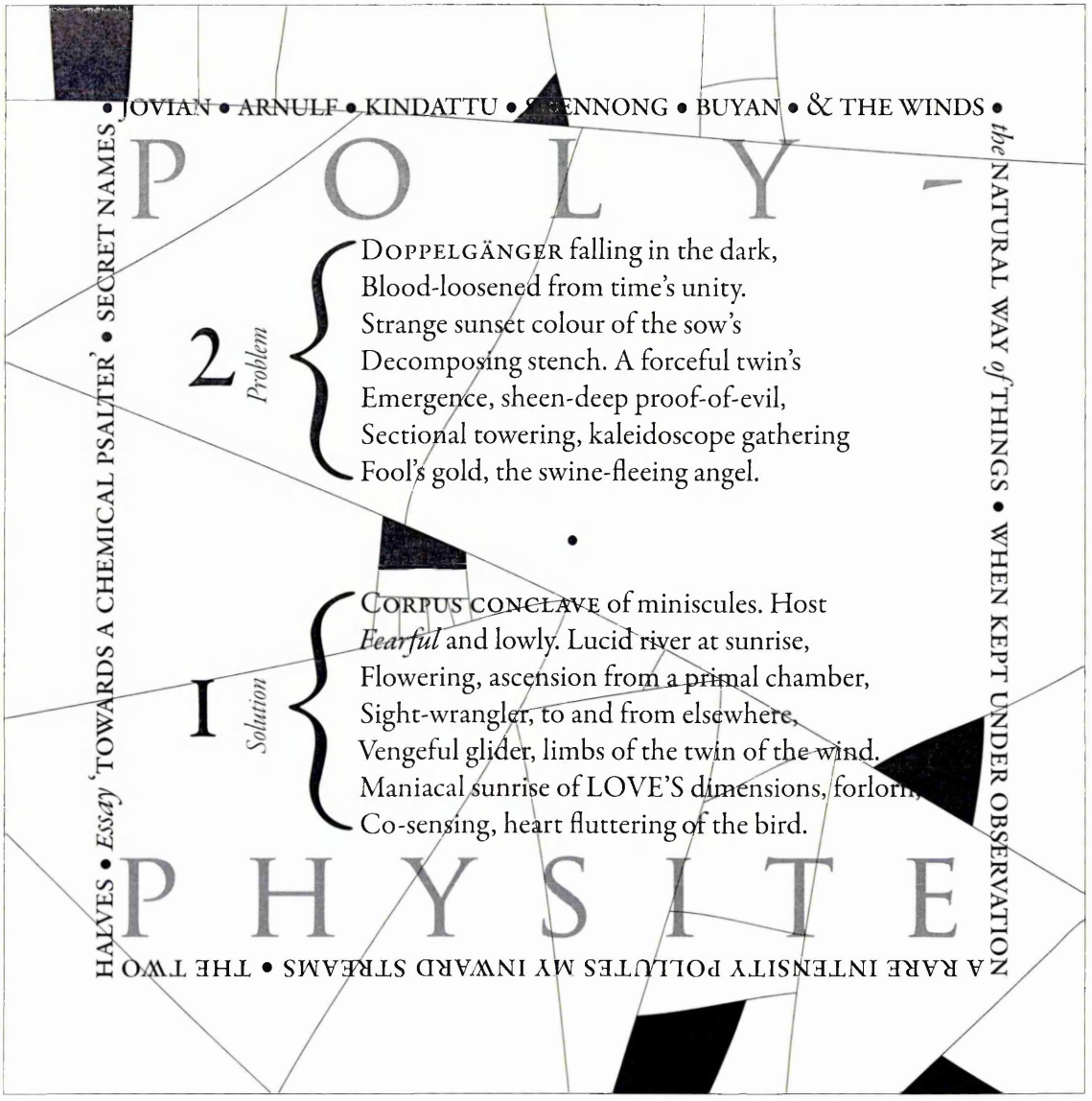
MAN DRAGS HIS NAILS across the land, and dies,
And goes away. The rainfall pools and spells
Decrees for other-living-ones the birds
To fathom their migrations with. A cupboard
Opens underground.
By labours of moles
And glum saddlebacks the roads are swept;
Secrets of distance and destination kept
By DARKNESS, despite adjustment of the eyes
To DARKNESS, and the LIGHT of earth's stars,
Stones, the miraculous cohort's silver purse
Dropped at the known world's outer edge.

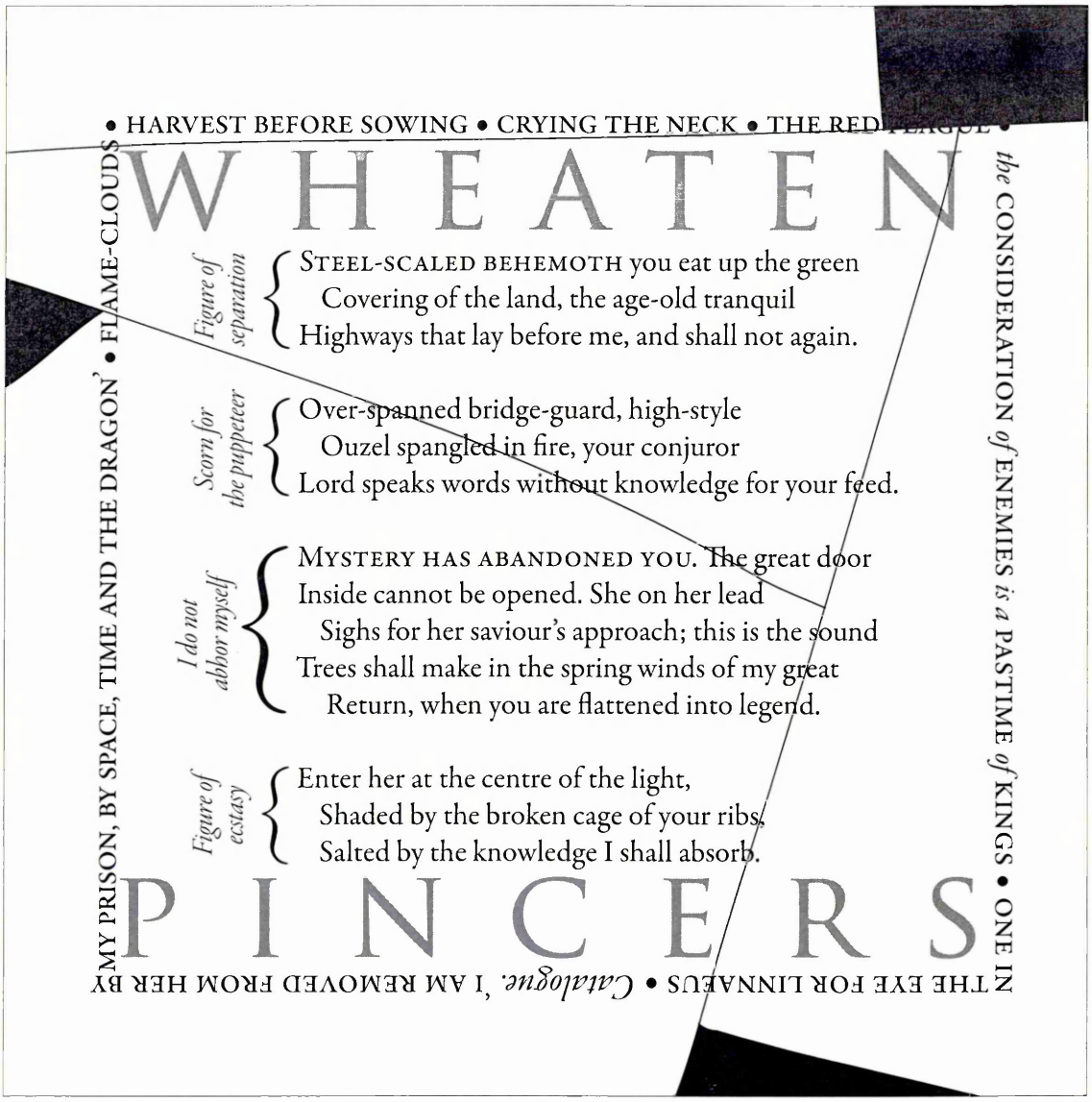
HANDFUL BY SOUR HANDFUL I shift my grudge
From black and brown to morbid blue and grey,
And dream, under the hills and far away.

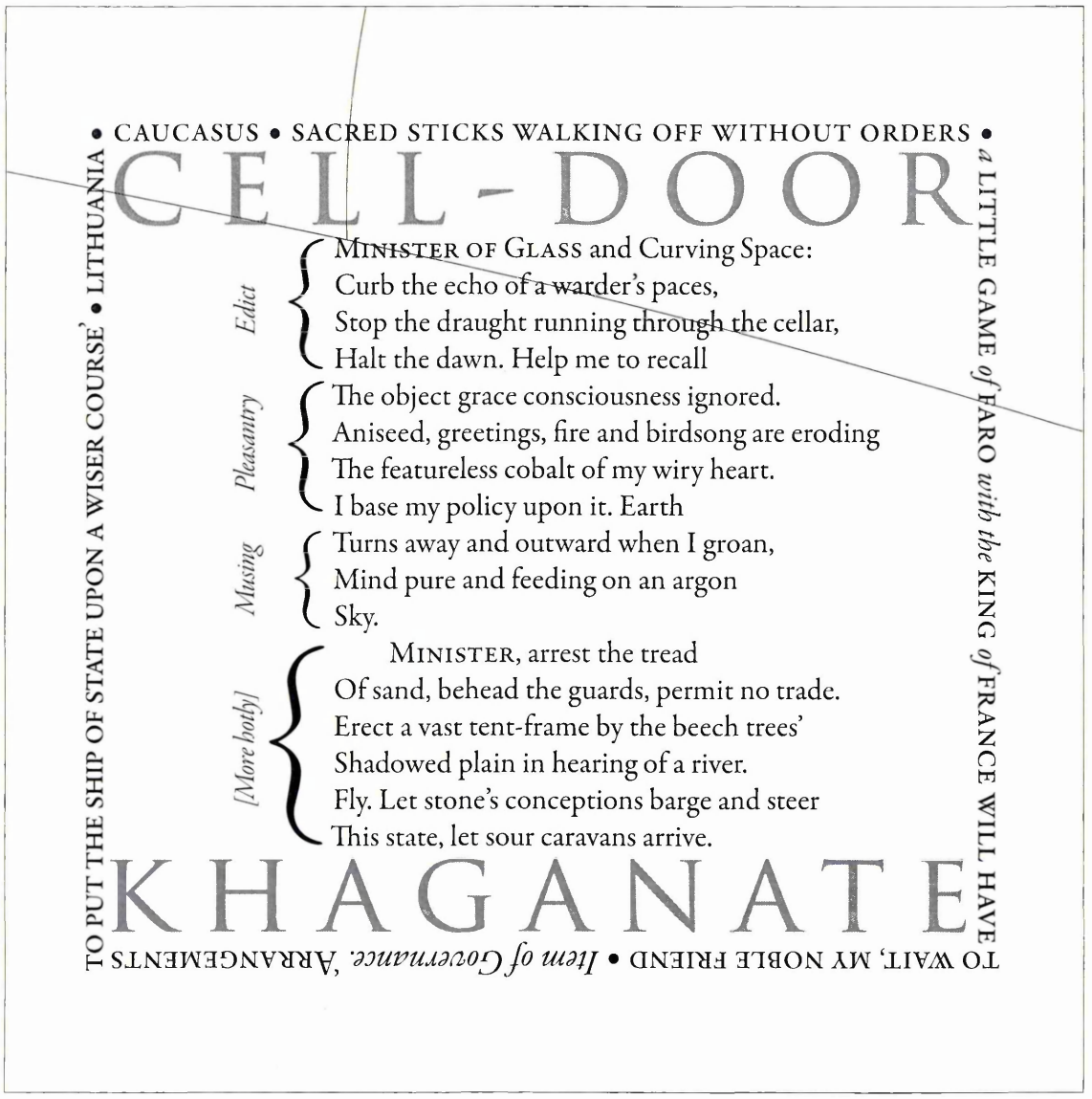
LYING

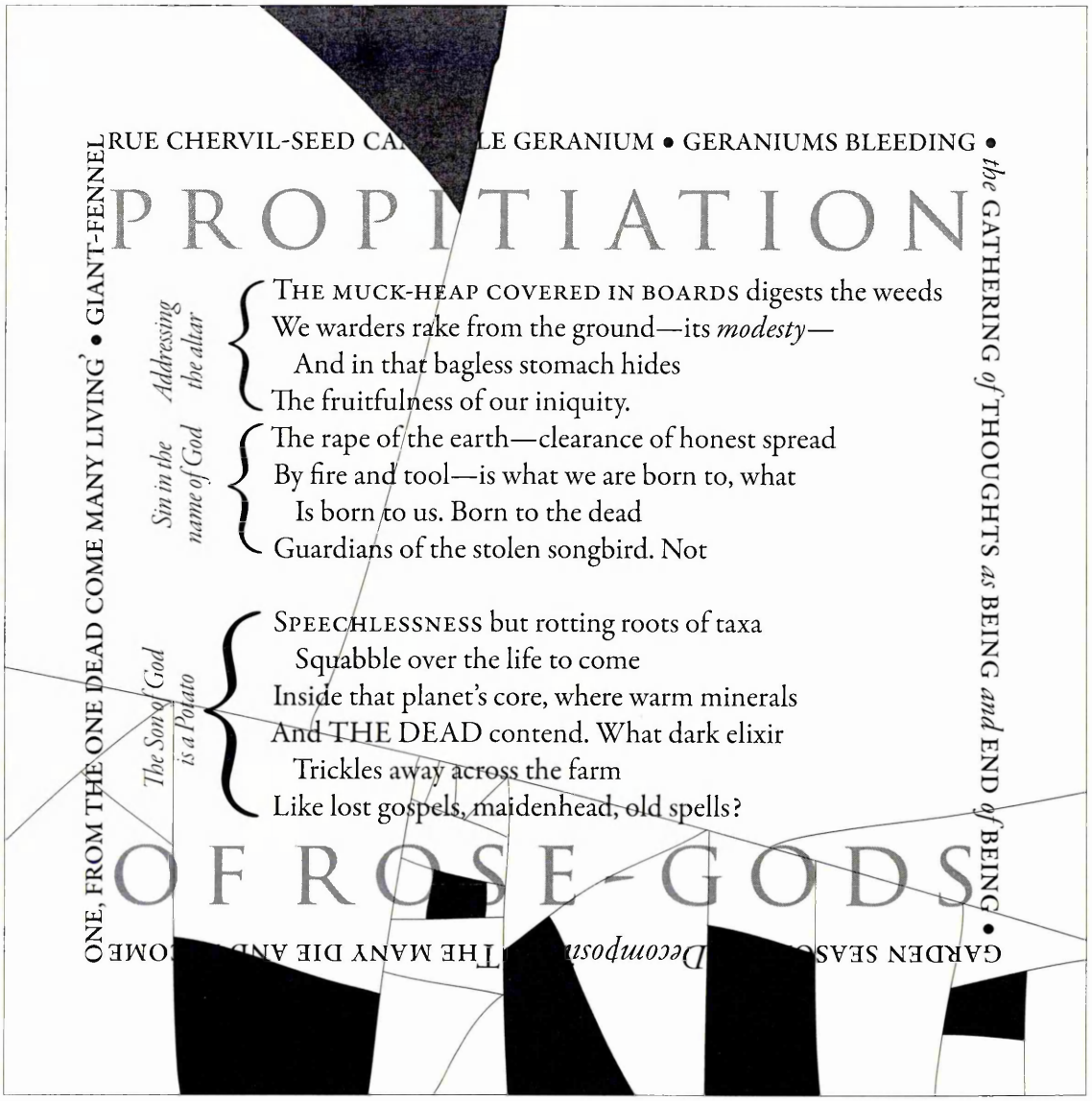
• CIRCLE *of* HELL ABOVE GROUND • CLOUDS IN THE ANTI-SKY •

• SUBMOTET FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF MOLECULES' CONTEMPT, *Phantasy* • SPIRITS FROM A SOJOURN IN THE ELEMENT •


• JOVIAN • ARNULF • KINDATTU • [illegible]ENNONG • BUYAN • & THE WINDS •
POLY-
2 Problem
Doppelgänger falling in the dark,
Blood-loosened from time's unity.
Strange sunset colour of the sow's
Decomposing stench. A forceful twin's
Emergence, sheen-deep proof-of-evil,
Sectional towering, kaleidoscope gathering
Fool's gold, the swine-fleeing angel.
1 Solution
Corpus conclave of miniscules. Host
Fearful and lowly. Lucid river at sunrise,
Flowering, ascension from a primal chamber,
Sight-wrangler, to and from elsewhere,
Vengeful glider, limbs of the twin of the wind.
Maniacal sunrise of LOVE'S dimensions, forlorn,
Co-sensing, heart fluttering of the bird.
PHYSITE
HALVES • Essay 'TOWARDS A CHEMICAL PSALTER' • SECRET NAMES
the NATURAL WAY of THINGS • WHEN KEPT UNDER OBSERVATION
A RARE INTENSITY POLLUTES MY INWARD STREAMS • THE TWO


• HARVEST BEFORE SOWING • CRYING THE NECK • THE RED PLAGUE •
WHEATEN
PINCERS
• FLAME-CLOUDS
'MY PRISON, BY SPACE, TIME AND THE DRAGON'
the CONSIDERATION of ENEMIES is a PASTIME of KINGS • ONE IN
THE EYE FOR LINNAEUS • Catalogue. 'I AM REMOVED FROM HER BY
Figure of separation
STEEL-SCALED BEHEMOTH you eat up the green
Covering of the land, the age-old tranquil
Highways that lay before me, and shall not again.
Scorn for the puppeteer
Over-spanned bridge-guard, high-style
Ouzel spangled in fire, your conjuror
Lord speaks words without knowledge for your feed.
I do not abhor myself
MYSTERY HAS ABANDONED YOU. The great door
Inside cannot be opened. She on her lead
Sighs for her saviour's approach; this is the sound
Trees shall make in the spring winds of my great
Return, when you are flattened into legend.
Figure of ecstasy
Enter her at the centre of the light,
Shaded by the broken cage of your ribs,
Salted by the knowledge I shall absorb.


• CAUCASUS • SACRED STICKS WALKING OFF WITHOUT ORDERS •
CELL-DOOR
• LITHUANIA
'SHIP OF STATE UPON A WISER COURSE'
a LITTLE GAME of HARO with the KING of FRANCE WILL HAVE
Edict
MINISTER OF GLASS and Curving Space:
Curb the echo of a warder's paces,
Stop the draught running through the cellar,
Halt the dawn. Help me to recall
Pleasantry
The object grace consciousness ignored.
Aniseed, greetings, fire and birdsong are eroding
The featureless cobalt of my wiry heart.
I base my policy upon it. Earth
Musing
Turns away and outward when I groan,
Mind pure and feeding on an argon
Sky.
[More bothy]
MINISTER, arrest the tread
Of sand, behead the guards, permit no trade.
Erect a vast tent-frame by the beech trees'
Shadowed plain in hearing of a river.
Fly. Let stone's conceptions barge and steer
This state, let sour caravans arrive.
KHAGANATE
TO WAIT, MY NOBLE FRIEND • Item of Governance. 'ARRANGEMENTS
TO PUT THE


RUE CHERVIL-SEED CA LE GERANIUM • GERANIUMS BLEEDING •
PROPITIATION
Addressing the altar
THE MUCK-HEAP COVERED IN BOARDS digests the weeds
We warders rake from the ground—its *modesty*—
And in that bagless stomach hides
The fruitfulness of our iniquity.
Sin in the name of God
The rape of the earth—clearance of honest spread
By fire and tool—is what we are born to, what
Is born to us. Born to the dead
Guardians of the stolen songbird. Not
The Son of God is a Potato
SPEECHLESSNESS but rotting roots of taxa
Squabble over the life to come
Inside that planet's core, where warm minerals
And THE DEAD contend. What dark elixir
Trickles away across the farm
Like lost gospels, maidenhead, old spells?
OF ROSE-GODS
ONE, FROM THE ONE DEAD COME MANY LIVING' • GIANT-FENNEL
the GATHERING of THOUGHTS as BEING and END of BEING •

OX LOOKING

My diagnosis

THE PROF PREPARES TO CUT the flightless fowl
That sulks upon the meat-plate's salty lake
And incubates a parkland folderol—
A long saw, a shoot, the unending week
Beside a stream, a ha-ha—then looks up,
Stares in alarm at what it was I said.

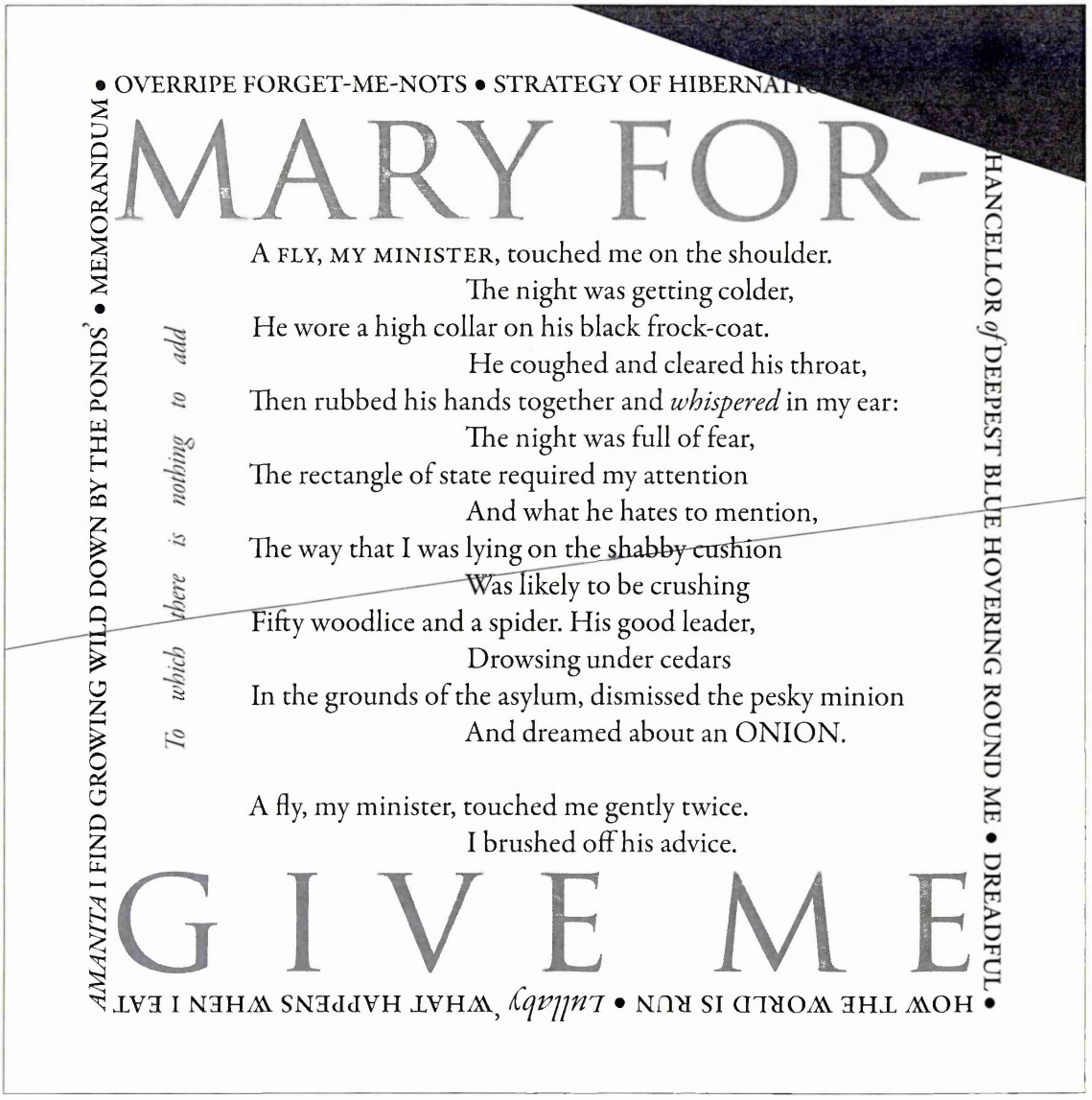
Behind his ego

BUT MY EYE IS CAUGHT by a portrait group
Stiff and morose behind the doctor's head,
Dark as mahogany, as the mind's recess,
Above the dresser's gaudy souk of art,

I find one like myself

And stuffed and mounted, *witness* to my talk,
With witch's head, airless in its glass,
Formally besuited, bare, a great auk,
Mad stare of *magic* at the scientific sport.

BEHIND HIM


• OVERRIPE FORGET-ME-NOTS • STRATEGY OF HIBERNATI
MARY FOR-
A FLY, MY MINISTER, touched me on the shoulder.
The night was getting colder,
He wore a high collar on his black frock-coat.
He coughed and cleared his throat,
Then rubbed his hands together and *whispered* in my ear:
The night was full of fear,
The rectangle of state required my attention
And what he hates to mention,
The way that I was lying on the shabby cushion
Was likely to be crushing
Fifty woodlice and a spider. His good leader,
Drowsing under cedars
In the grounds of the asylum, dismissed the pesky minion
And dreamed about an ONION.
A fly, my minister, touched me gently twice.
I brushed off his advice.
GIVE ME
To which there is nothing to add
• MEMORANDUM
HANCELLOR *of* DEEPEST BLUE HOVERING ROUND ME • DREADFUL •
AMANITA I FIND GROWING WILD DOWN BY THE PONDS'
• HOW THE WORLD IS RUN • *Lullaby*, WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I EAT

• ENDLESS VOYAGE • OVER THE CHRYSOBERYL SEA • UREA PERHAPS •

BALTIC

SUNK IN PRINCIPLE, we float on and away,
Sails torn and daubed with records of our sins.

Unclean seven by seven

NO WINDS CAN TAKE US where our shadows play.
A donkey leads the ballroom in a dance,
Rape of the drunken nuns, the monkey's sad
Refrain and the gleeful dice. The loneliness.

Utter pointlessness

East is the past, the west's aflame. The dead
North is ice where the sea freezes.
South is the body and the senses' glut.
Compassless and anchored to her own

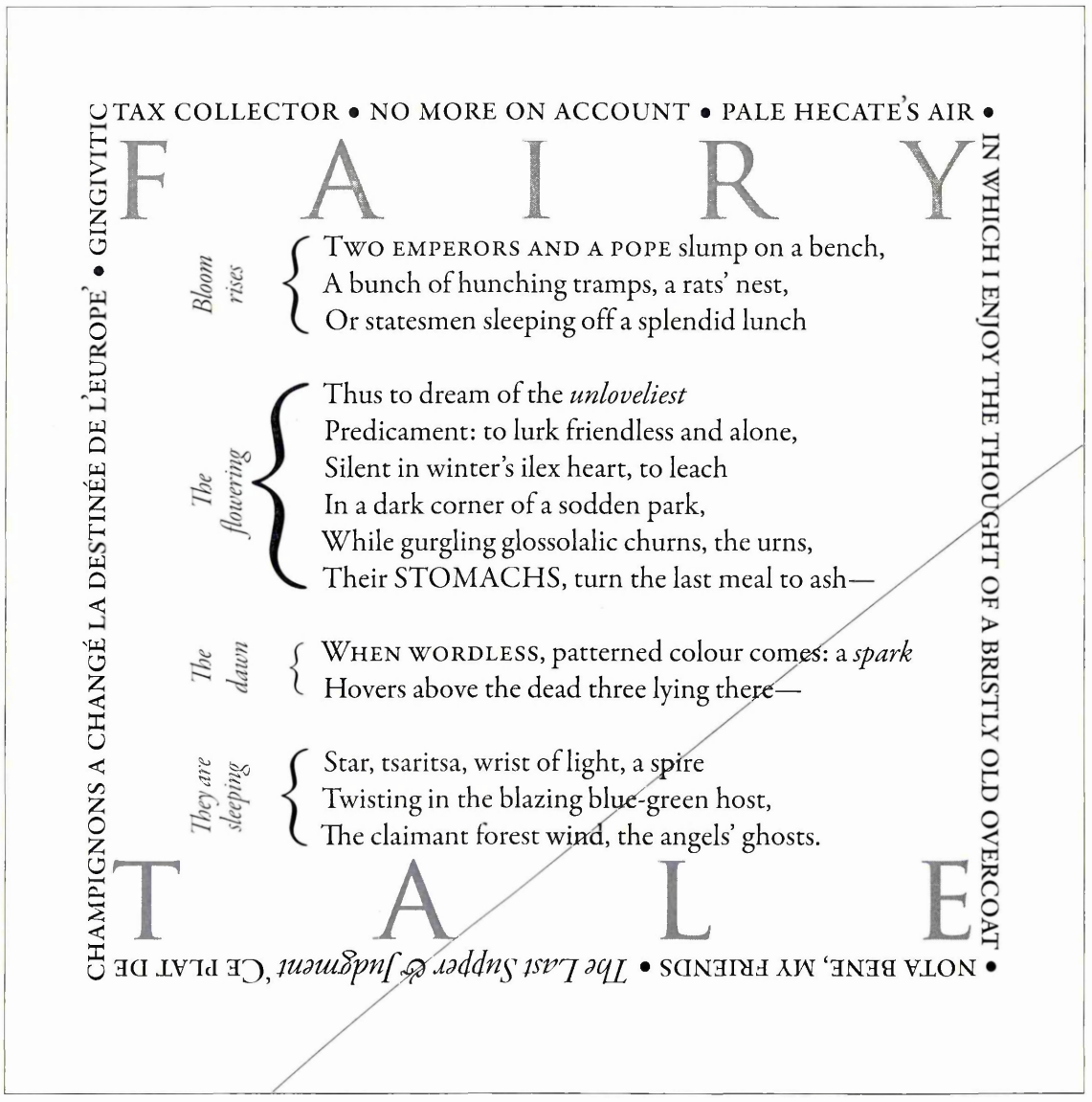
A toast

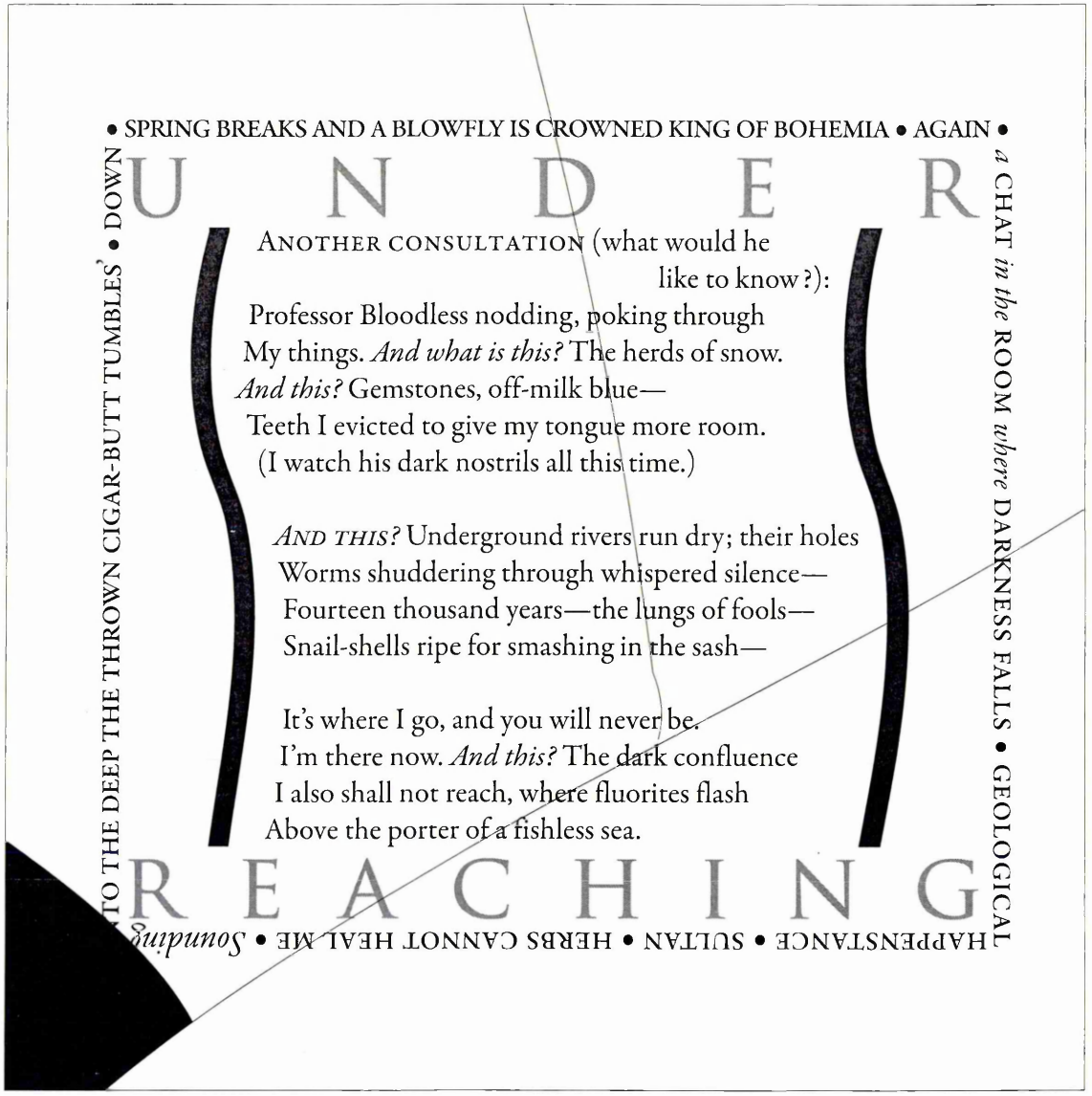
Hull, she drifts where she will. We laugh and groan.
Your own movement knows no cleaner knots.
Fools and slaves, adventurers and rats, all
Fear the plague, and drink the brine of HELL.

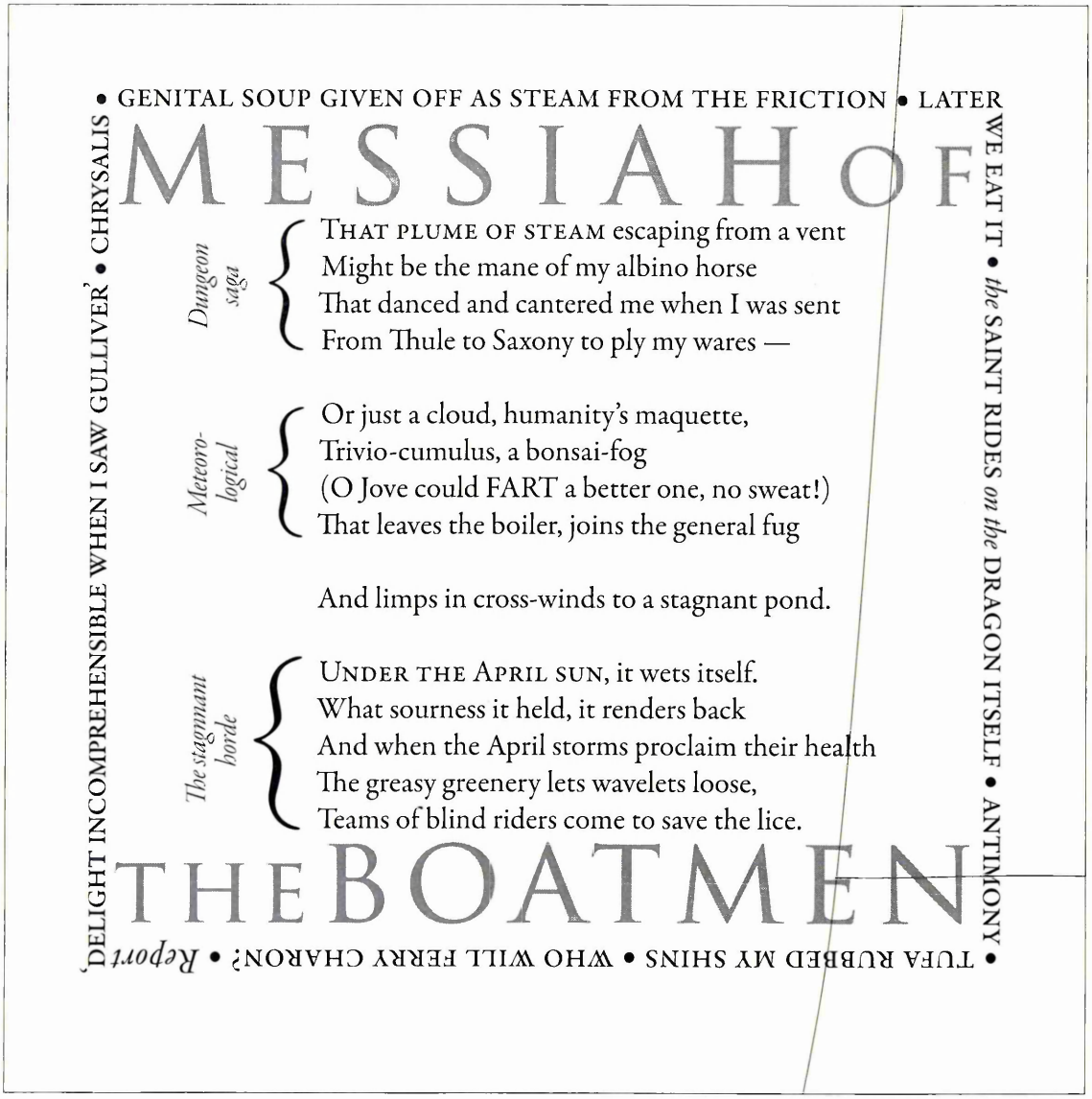
LIFETIMES

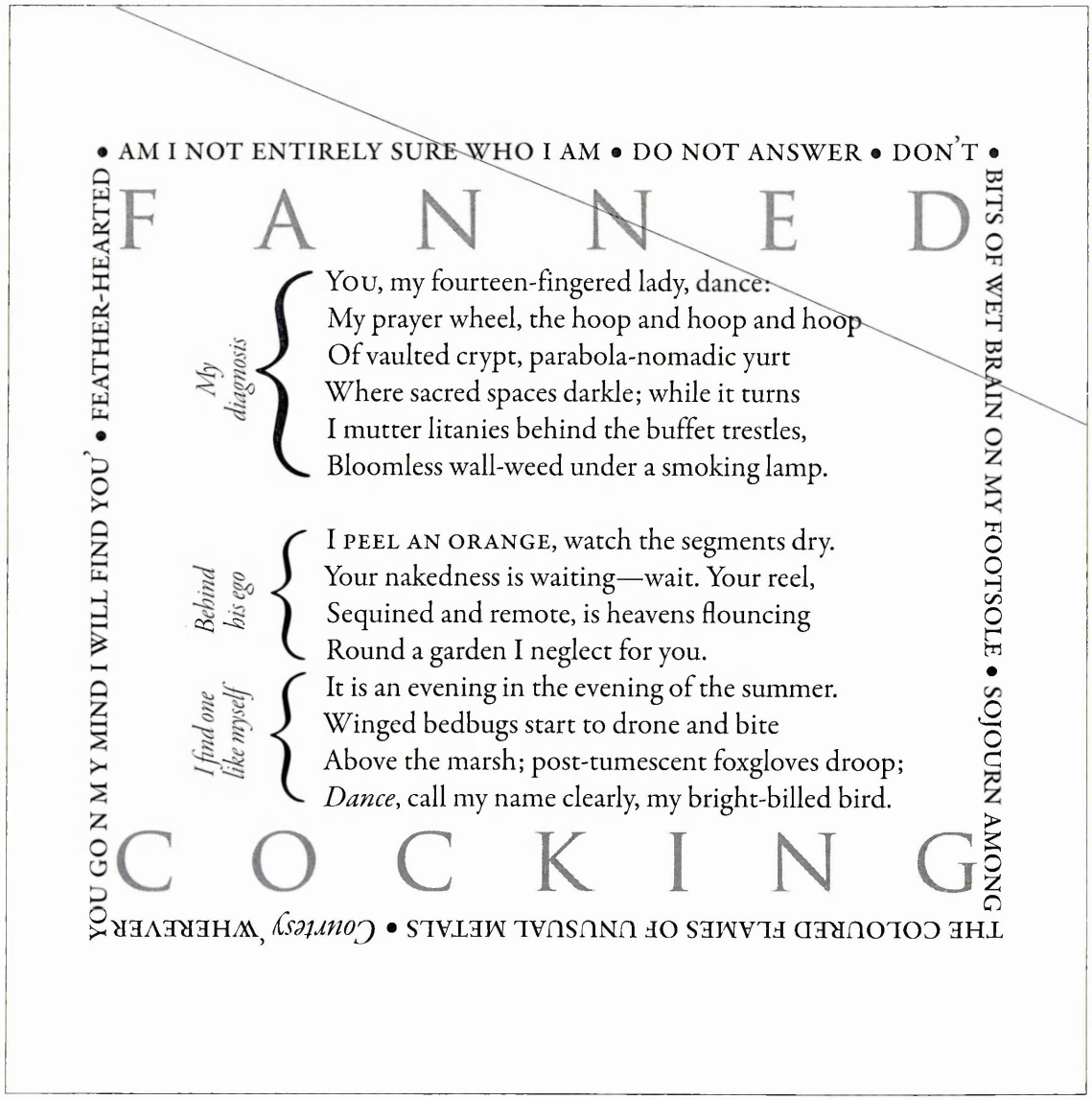
• WOODCUT EXECUTED IN THE DAYS BEFORE PERSPECTIVE • BY THE SHORE OF THE BURNING LAKE' • MONKEYS TRILLING •

• A PRIEST'S CORPSE UPON THE PROW • *Shanty* 'WORSE THINGS HAPPEN


TAX COLLECTOR • NO MORE ON ACCOUNT • PALE HECATE'S AIR •
IN WHICH I ENJOY THE THOUGHT OF A BRISTLY OLD OVERCOAT •
• NOTA BENE, MY FRIENDS • The Last Supper & Judgment, CE PLAT DE
CHAMPIGNONS A CHANGÉ LA DESTINÉE DE L'EUROPE' • GINGIVITIC
FAIRY
TALE
Bloom rises
TWO EMPERORS AND A POPE slump on a bench,
A bunch of hunching tramps, a rats' nest,
Or statesmen sleeping off a splendid lunch
The flowering
Thus to dream of the unloveliest
Predicament: to lurk friendless and alone,
Silent in winter's ilex heart, to leach
In a dark corner of a sodden park,
While gurgling glossolalic churns, the urns,
Their STOMACHS, turn the last meal to ash—
The dawn
WHEN WORDLESS, patterned colour comes: a spark
Hovers above the dead three lying there—
They are sleeping
Star, tsaritsa, wrist of light, a spire
Twisting in the blazing blue-green host,
The claimant forest wind, the angels' ghosts.


• SPRING BREAKS AND A BLOWFLY IS CROWNED KING OF BOHEMIA • AGAIN •
UNDER
a CHAT in the ROOM where DARKNESS FALLS • GEOLOGICAL
TO THE DEEP THE THROWN CIGAR-BUTT TUMBLES' • DOWN
ANOTHER CONSULTATION (what would he
like to know?):
Professor Bloodless nodding, poking through
My things. And what is this? The herds of snow.
And this? Gemstones, off-milk blue—
Teeth I evicted to give my tongue more room.
(I watch his dark nostrils all this time.)
AND THIS? Underground rivers run dry; their holes
Worms shuddering through whispered silence—
Fourteen thousand years—the lungs of fools—
Snail-shells ripe for smashing in the sash—
It's where I go, and you will never be.
I'm there now. And this? The dark confluence
I also shall not reach, where fluorites flash
Above the porter of a fishless sea.
REACHING
HAPPENSTANCE • SULTAN • HERBS CANNOT HEAL ME • Sounding


• GENITAL SOUP GIVEN OFF AS STEAM FROM THE FRICTION • LATER
MESSIAH OF
WE EAT IT • the SAINT RIDES on the DRAGON ITSELF • ANTIMONY •
• CHRYSALIS 'DELIGHT INCOMPREHENSIBLE WHEN I SAW GULLIVER'
Dungeon saga
THAT PLUME OF STEAM escaping from a vent
Might be the mane of my albino horse
That danced and cantered me when I was sent
From Thule to Saxony to ply my wares —
Meteoro-logical
Or just a cloud, humanity's maquette,
Trivio-cumulus, a bonsai-fog
(O Jove could FART a better one, no sweat!)
That leaves the boiler, joins the general fug
And limps in cross-winds to a stagnant pond.
The stagnant horde
UNDER THE APRIL SUN, it wets itself.
What sourness it held, it renders back
And when the April storms proclaim their health
The greasy greenery lets wavelets loose,
Teams of blind riders come to save the lice.
THE BOATMEN
• TUFA RUBBED MY SHINS • WHO WILL FERRY CHARON? • Report'


• AM I NOT ENTIRELY SURE WHO I AM • DO NOT ANSWER • DON'T •
FANNED
BITS OF WET BRAIN ON MY FOOTSOLE • SOJOURN AMONG
YOU GO N M Y MIND I WILL FIND YOU' • FEATHER-HEARTED
My diagnosis
YOU, my fourteen-fingered lady, dance:
My prayer wheel, the hoop and hoop and hoop
Of vaulted crypt, parabola-nomadic yurt
Where sacred spaces darkle; while it turns
I mutter litanies behind the buffet trestles,
Bloomless wall-weed under a smoking lamp.
Behind his ego
I PEEL AN ORANGE, watch the segments dry.
Your nakedness is waiting—wait. Your reel,
Sequined and remote, is heavens flouncing
Round a garden I neglect for you.
I find one like myself
It is an evening in the evening of the summer.
Winged bedbugs start to drone and bite
Above the marsh; post-tumescent foxgloves droop;
Dance, call my name clearly, my bright-billed bird.
COCKING
THE COLOURED FLAMES OF UNUSUAL METALS • Courtesy WHEREVER

• BUST OF THE AU-MANN LISTENING TO THE BELL • MANIKINS •

• FINANCIER • AND SOULS SHALL EMERGE FROM THE DARKNESS' •

ORANGE

Primeval conditions of production

THOSE WHO BRING ME my daily bread: long
Crocodiles, rotting timber in the Pomeranian swamps
MOSS Or fry lurking under them. He of the strong
Clamp-grip chastisement and the burning lamp:

Mutiny amongst the cast and crew

Azazello, Mephisto's friend. Devil
Himself, Professor, they shall play each other
BRUNE In scenes of the greenest and most wholesome evil
Sounded by bells mocking the Insect Luther

Means of heroical tenor

ME, by Hans Christian or dead Franz Joseph
Shown in the reduced colours of earthly light.
JAUNDICE Secretaries and ministers: stone seraphim
Hewn from the Catholics' church. A marionette

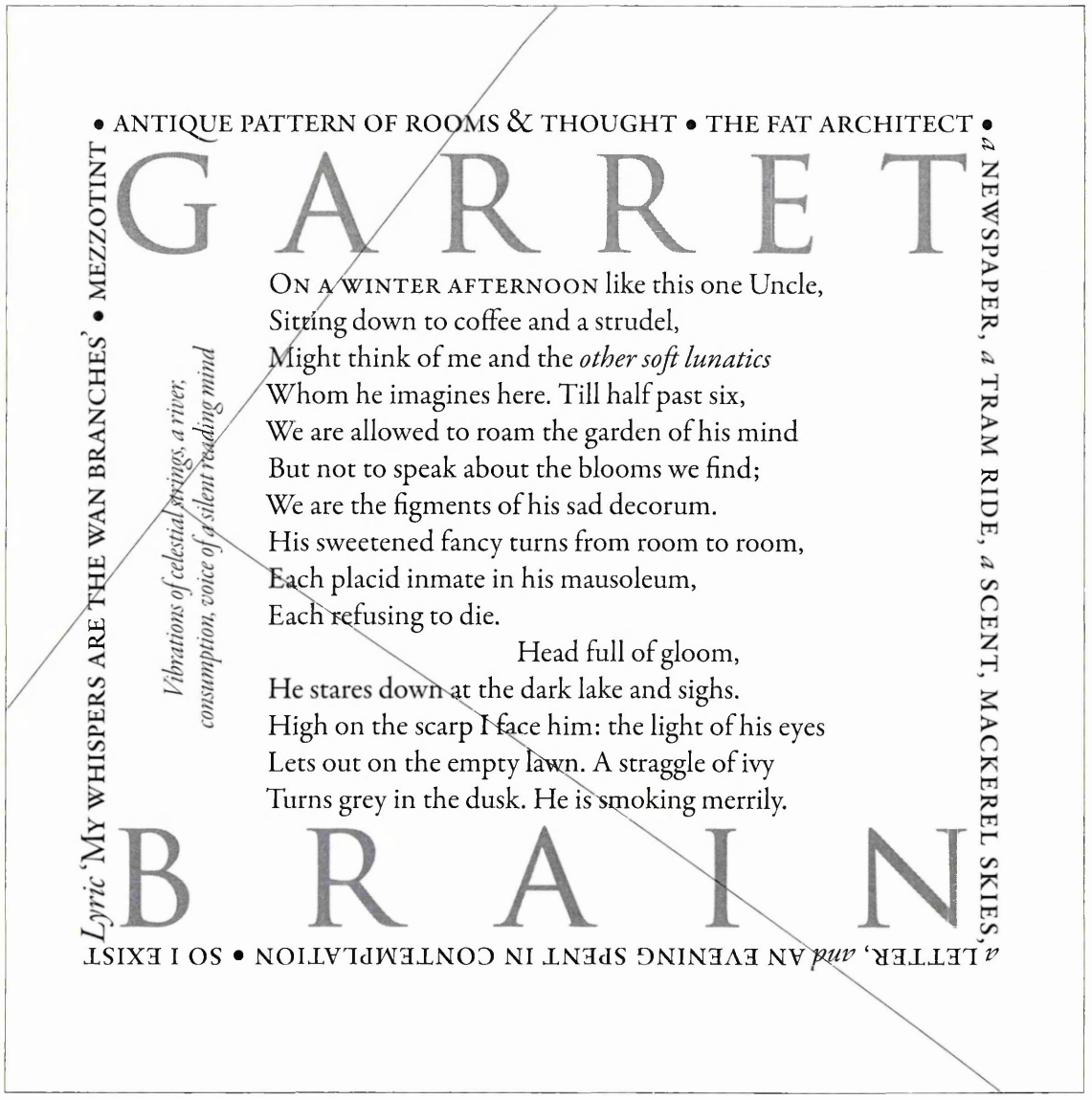
Absorbing climax

SKY For Mary, or theirs in plaster. The final scene:
Her face, eyes without pupils, fills the screen.

EMBERS

• BY CANDLES, CHURCH-GLASS, FALSE MYSTERIES • *Edict of Works:*

• WHO SHALL PLAY WHOM IN THE MOVING PICTURE OF MY LIFE


• ANTIQUE PATTERN OF ROOMS & THOUGHT • THE FAT ARCHITECT •
GARRET
ON A WINTER AFTERNOON like this one Uncle,
Sitting down to coffee and a strudel,
Might think of me and the *other soft lunatics*
Whom he imagines here. Till half past six,
We are allowed to roam the garden of his mind
But not to speak about the blooms we find;
We are the figments of his sad decorum.
His sweetened fancy turns from room to room,
Each placid inmate in his mausoleum,
Each refusing to die.
Head full of gloom,
He stares down at the dark lake and sighs.
High on the scarp I face him: the light of his eyes
Lets out on the empty lawn. A straggle of ivy
Turns grey in the dusk. He is smoking merrily.
Vibrations of celestial strings, a river,
consumption, voice of a silent reading mind
Lyric 'MY WHISPERS ARE THE WAN BRANCHES' • MEZZOTINT
a NEWSPAPER, *a* TRAM RIDE, *a* SCENT, MACKEREL SKIES,
BRAIN
a LETTER, *and* AN EVENING SPENT IN CONTEMPLATION • SO I EXIST

• OINTMENT FOR MY LINEAMENTS • MY SKIN CONCEALS SPEARHEADS •

a SUPPLICANT *from* OUTSIDE *the* MANSION *which* CON[illegible]

E N T E R

The first visitor

A NIGHT BLACK AS A GENTLEMAN'S coat. A moon's
Frightened face: the preface to a scene.
He talks about a sister, whose case is like
My own. When I grin he stops, and smokes

My usual shy manner

For a while in troubled and nervous silence. Sleep
Comes beckoning. Lamplight. His boot scrapes
At the bare board. I say: 'About your sister',
But his face is turned towards the darkening wastes,

The hours

THE WAITING LEGIONS OF THE FOREST, the lake
Pooled invisibly before us. Will he speak,
The NIGHT, that morose, familiar stranger?

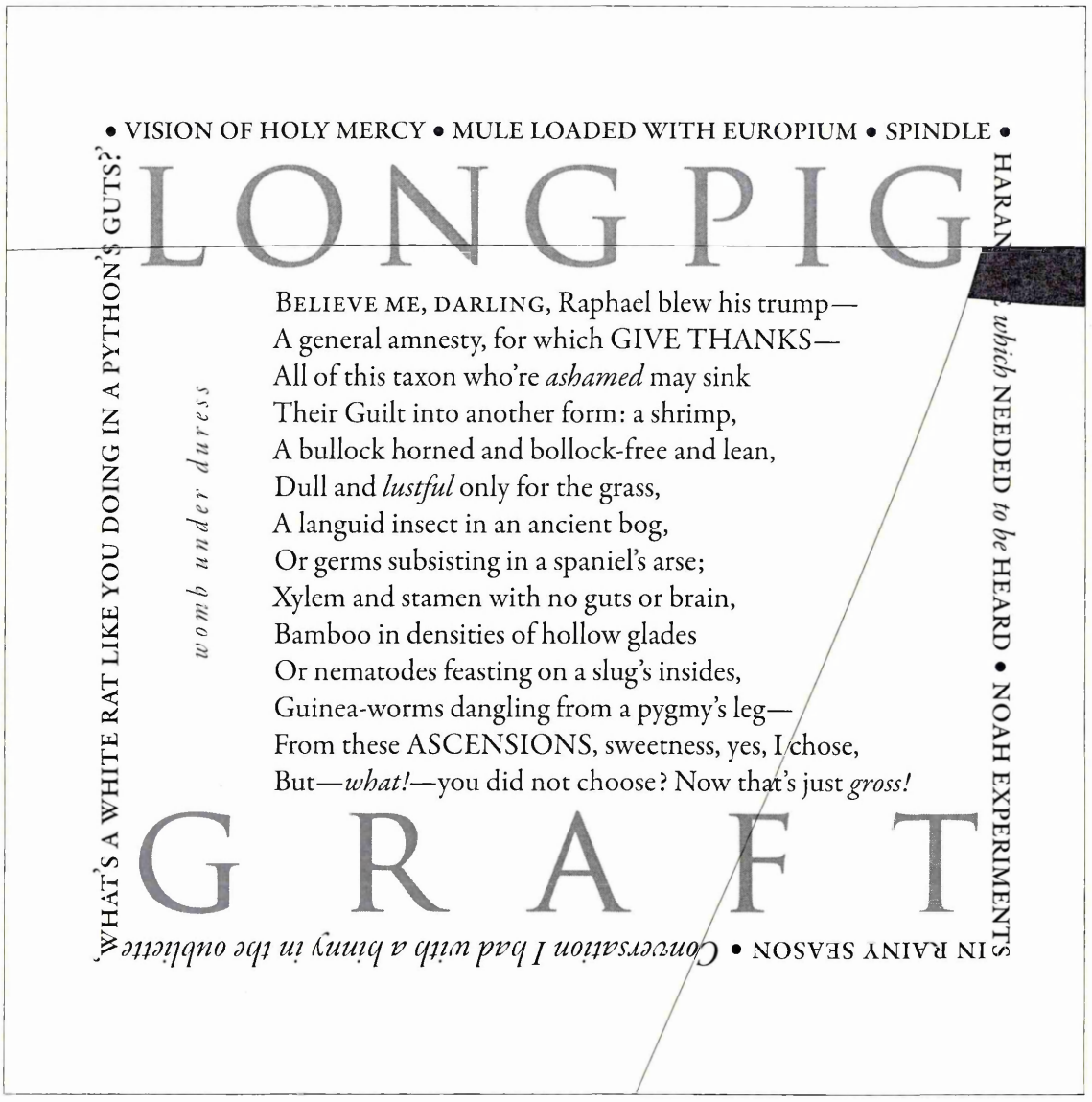
The second visitor

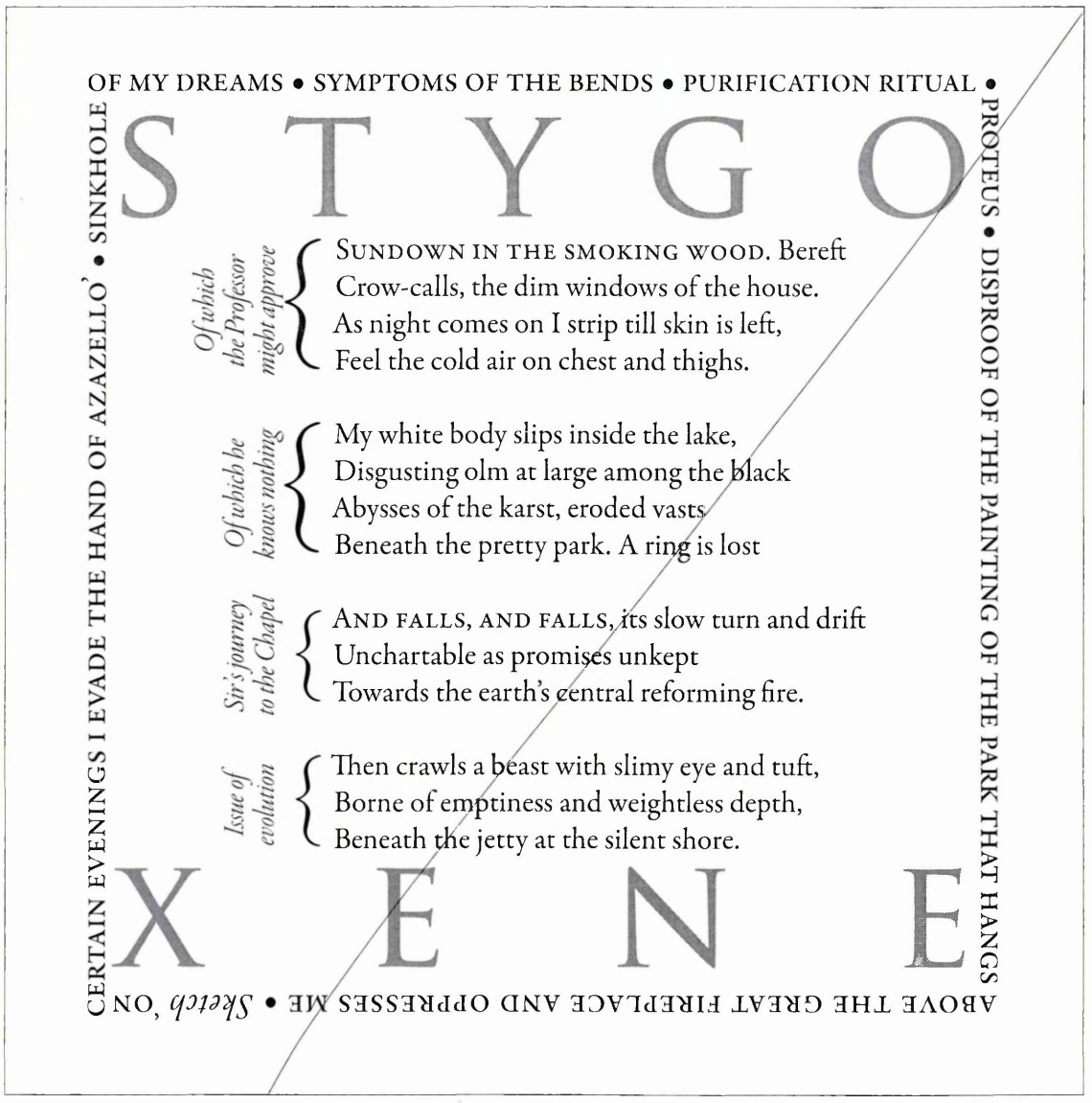
I open the window a crack to let the cold
Air touch us, and a moth enters. Untold
Wanderings. I cannot wait any longer.

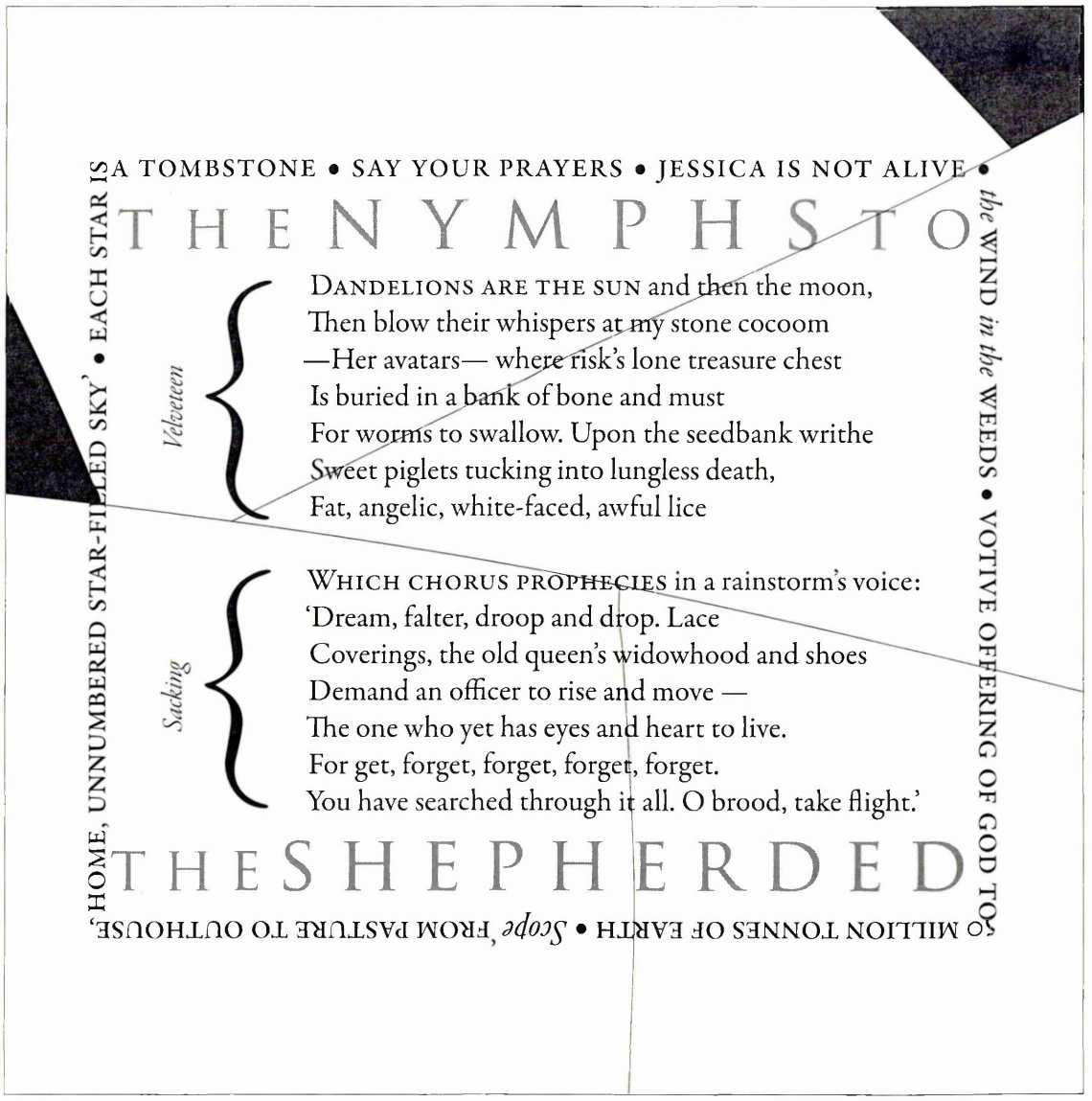
V I S I T O R

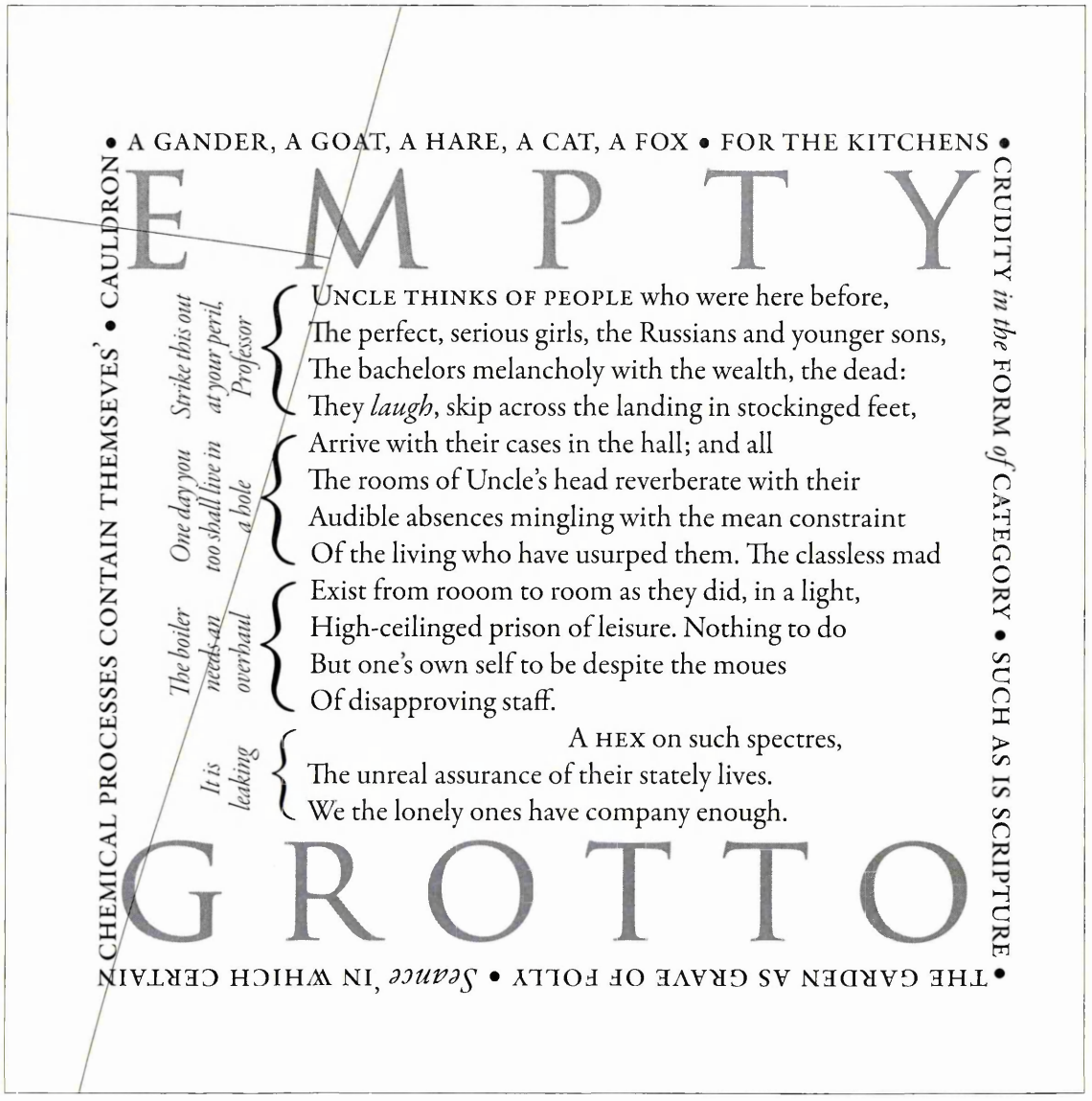
[illegible]NCE OF LIGHT AS MY COMPANION, ALSO PERHAPS ABSENT •

Taxon 'WHICH ENTERS LIKE A BLANK THOUGHT' • OBSIDIAN •


• VISION OF HOLY MERCY • MULE LOADED WITH EUROPIUM • SPINDLE •
LONGPIG
HARAN
which NEEDED to be HEARD • NOAH EXPERIMENTS
'WHAT'S A WHITE RAT LIKE YOU DOING IN A PYTHON'S GUTS?'
womb under duress
BELIEVE ME, DARLING, Raphael blew his trump—
A general amnesty, for which GIVE THANKS—
All of this taxon who're ashamed may sink
Their Guilt into another form: a shrimp,
A bullock horned and bollock-free and lean,
Dull and lustful only for the grass,
A languid insect in an ancient bog,
Or germs subsisting in a spaniel's arse;
Xylem and stamen with no guts or brain,
Bamboo in densities of hollow glades
Or nematodes feasting on a slug's insides,
Guinea-worms dangling from a pygmy's leg—
From these ASCENSIONS, sweetness, yes, I chose,
But—what!—you did not choose? Now that's just gross!
GRAFT
IN RAINY SEASON • Conversation I had with a binny in the oubliette


OF MY DREAMS • SYMPTOMS OF THE BENDS • PURIFICATION RITUAL •
PROTEUS • DISPROOF OF THE PAINTING OF THE PARK THAT HANGS
ABOVE THE GREAT FIREPLACE AND OPPRESSES ME • Sketch, ON
CERTAIN EVENINGS I EVADE THE HAND OF AZAZELLO' • SINKHOLE
S T Y G O
Of which the Professor might approve
SUNDOWN IN THE SMOKING WOOD. Bereft
Crow-calls, the dim windows of the house.
As night comes on I strip till skin is left,
Feel the cold air on chest and thighs.
Of which he knows nothing
My white body slips inside the lake,
Disgusting olm at large among the black
Abysses of the karst, eroded vasts
Beneath the pretty park. A ring is lost
Sir's journey to the Chapel
AND FALLS, AND FALLS, its slow turn and drift
Unchartable as promises unkept
Towards the earth's central reforming fire.
Issue of evolution
Then crawls a beast with slimy eye and tuft,
Borne of emptiness and weightless depth,
Beneath the jetty at the silent shore.
X E N E


A TOMBSTONE • SAY YOUR PRAYERS • JESSICA IS NOT ALIVE •
THE NYMPHS TO
the WIND in the WEEDS • VOTIVE OFFERING OF GOD TO
MILLION TONNES OF EARTH • Scope, FROM PASTURE TO OUTHOUSE,
THE SHEPHERDED
HOME, UNNUMBERED STAR-FILLED SKY' • EACH STAR IS
Velveteen
DANDELIONS ARE THE SUN and then the moon,
Then blow their whispers at my stone cocoom
—Her avatars— where risk's lone treasure chest
Is buried in a bank of bone and must
For worms to swallow. Upon the seedbank writhe
Sweet piglets tucking into lungless death,
Fat, angelic, white-faced, awful lice
Sacking
WHICH CHORUS PROPHECIES in a rainstorm's voice:
'Dream, falter, droop and drop. Lace
Coverings, the old queen's widowhood and shoes
Demand an officer to rise and move —
The one who yet has eyes and heart to live.
For get, forget, forget, forget, forget.
You have searched through it all. O brood, take flight.'


• A GANDER, A GOAT, A HARE, A CAT, A FOX • FOR THE KITCHENS •
EMPTY
• CRUDITY *in the* FORM *of* CATEGORY • SUCH AS IS SCRIPTURE
• CHEMICAL PROCESSES CONTAIN THEMSELVES' • CAULDRON
Strike this out at your peril, Professor
UNCLE THINKS OF PEOPLE who were here before,
The perfect, serious girls, the Russians and younger sons,
The bachelors melancholy with the wealth, the dead:
They *laugh*, skip across the landing in stockinged feet,
One day you too shall live in a hole
Arrive with their cases in the hall; and all
The rooms of Uncle's head reverberate with their
Audible absences mingling with the mean constraint
Of the living who have usurped them. The classless mad
The boiler needs an overhaul
Exist from rooom to room as they did, in a light,
High-ceilinged prison of leisure. Nothing to do
But one's own self to be despite the moues
Of disapproving staff.
It is leaking
A HEX on such spectres,
The unreal assurance of their stately lives.
We the lonely ones have company enough.
GROTTO
• THE GARDEN AS GRAVE OF FOLLY • *Seance*, IN WHICH CERTAIN

• FLYING BEDSPREAD • TETHERED TO BLOODSTONE • CONFESSION •

H E L I O

• EVIDENCE • 'THE JOVIAL INVENTOR IN A HOSTILE WORLD' • *theatre*

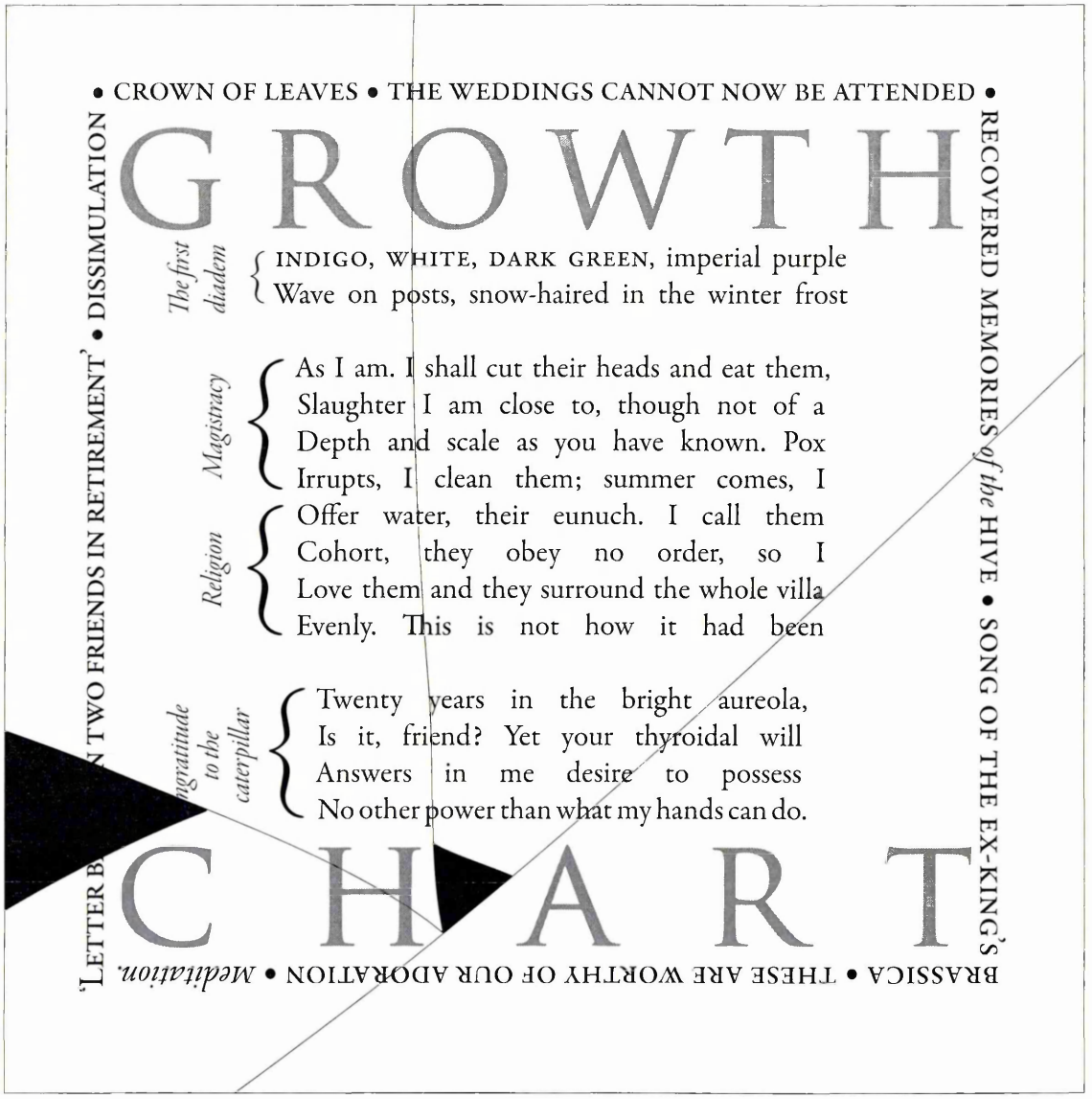
• *a* MODEL CITIZEN • *the* ULTIMATE HUMANISM • UP FROM THE ASHES •

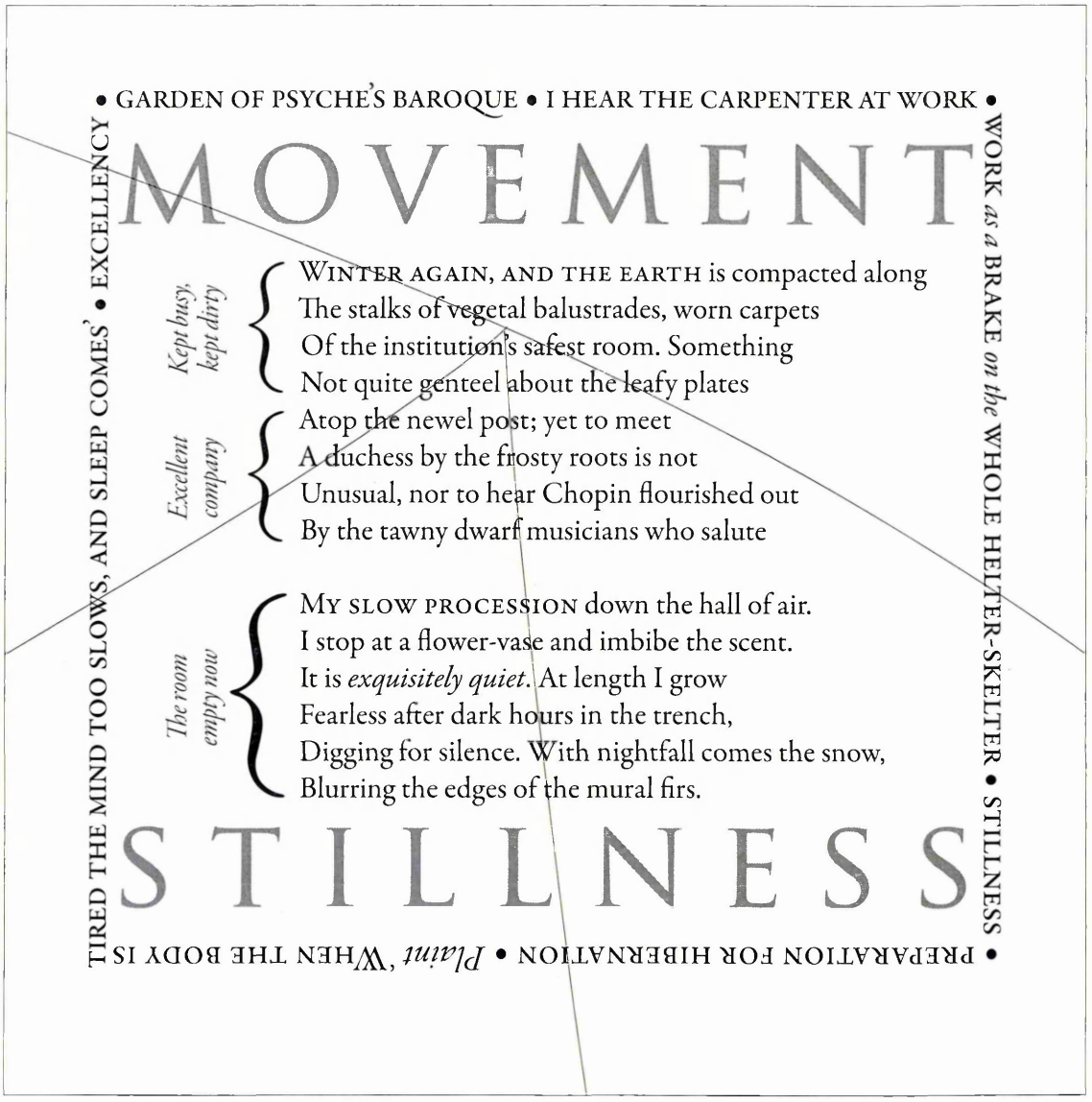
HUMAN HIDES ARE stretched on a bird-bone frame
Above a basket wherein, whispering my name,
The raw torsos of a tawdry choir
Expel the effluent that lifts us higher,
Mellifluous bellows for the great balloon
Drifting through cloud-banks like a hellish moon
Or swelled head loud with discontent
As I was telling that free-thinking gent
Whose frank solicitude fell back to earth,
And ego withered, when I chalked his girth
With Austria's extent, so I could stitch
It to the pelt of that Dalmatian bitch
Professor's P's ~~so fond of~~, make a globe,
Pronounce a sentence on the God of Job.

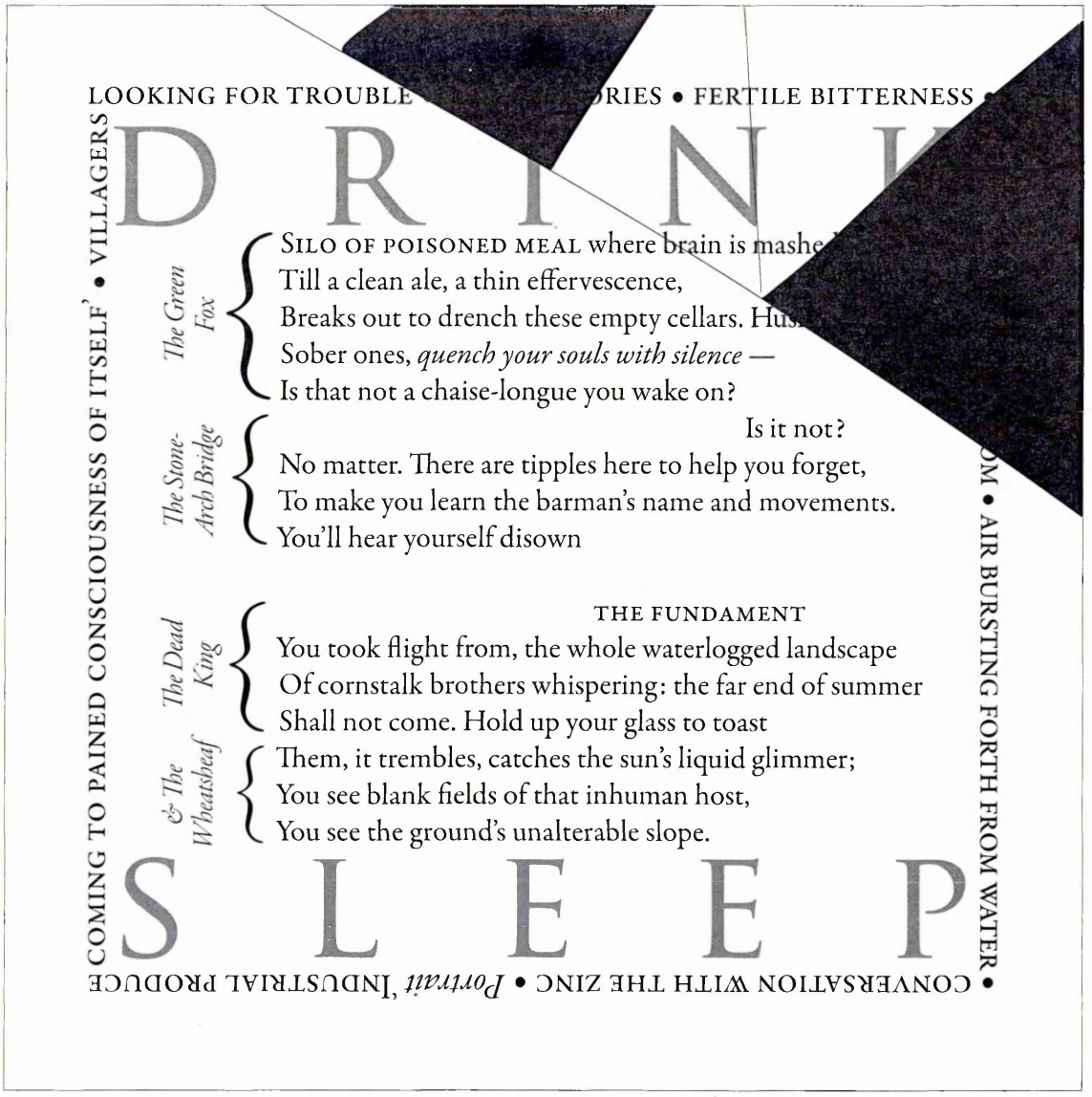
Which carries
me along through
emptiness

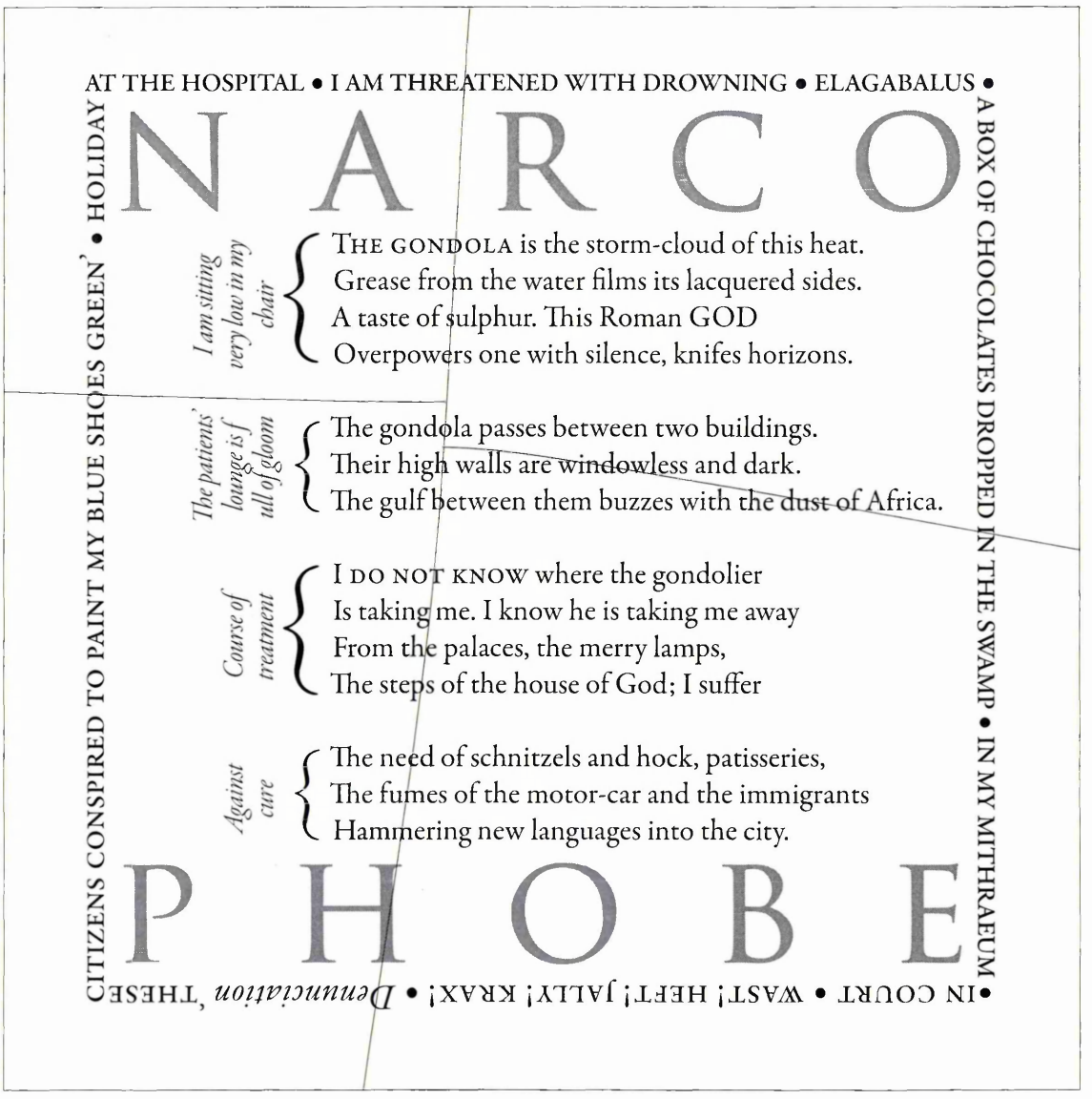
T R O P E

• WINDMILL MILLING • LOLLIPOP *of the* MIND • *Idea for a musical*


• CROWN OF LEAVES • THE WEDDINGS CANNOT NOW BE ATTENDED •
GROWTH
RECOVERED MEMORIES *of the* HIVE • SONG OF THE EX-KING'S
DISSIMULATION
The first diadem
INDIGO, WHITE, DARK GREEN, imperial purple
Wave on posts, snow-haired in the winter frost
Magistracy
As I am. I shall cut their heads and eat them,
Slaughter I am close to, though not of a
Depth and scale as you have known. Pox
Irrupts, I clean them; summer comes, I
Religion
Offer water, their eunuch. I call them
Cohort, they obey no order, so I
Love them and they surround the whole villa
Evenly. This is not how it had been
Ingratitude to the caterpillar
Twenty years in the bright aureola,
Is it, friend? Yet your thyroidal will
Answers in me desire to possess
No other power than what my hands can do.
CHART
BRASSICA • THESE ARE WORTHY OF OUR ADORATION • *Meditation.*


• GARDEN OF PSYCHE'S BAROQUE • I HEAR THE CARPENTER AT WORK •
MOVEMENT
Kept busy, kept dirty
WINTER AGAIN, AND THE EARTH is compacted along
The stalks of vegetal balustrades, worn carpets
Of the institution's safest room. Something
Not quite genteel about the leafy plates
Excellent company
Atop the newel post; yet to meet
A duchess by the frosty roots is not
Unusual, nor to hear Chopin flourished out
By the tawny dwarf musicians who salute
The room empty now
MY SLOW PROCESSION down the hall of air.
I stop at a flower-vase and imbibe the scent.
It is *exquisitely quiet*. At length I grow
Fearless after dark hours in the trench,
Digging for silence. With nightfall comes the snow,
Blurring the edges of the mural firs.
STILLNESS
• WORK *as a* BRAKE *on the* WHOLE HELTER-SKELTER • STILLNESS •
• PREPARATION FOR HIBERNATION • *Plaint*, WHEN THE BODY IS TIRED THE MIND TOO SLOWS, AND SLEEP COMES' • EXCELLENCY


LOOKING FOR TROUBLE
RIES • FERTILE BITTERNESS
DRINK
The Green Fox
SILO OF POISONED MEAL where brain is mashe
Till a clean ale, a thin effervescence,
Breaks out to drench these empty cellars. Hus
Sober ones, quench your souls with silence —
Is that not a chaise-longue you wake on?
Is it not?
The Stone-Arch Bridge
No matter. There are tipples here to help you forget,
To make you learn the barman's name and movements.
You'll hear yourself disown
THE FUNDAMENT
The Dead King
You took flight from, the whole waterlogged landscape
Of cornstalk brothers whispering: the far end of summer
Shall not come. Hold up your glass to toast
& The Wheatsheaf
Them, it trembles, catches the sun's liquid glimmer;
You see blank fields of that inhuman host,
You see the ground's unalterable slope.
SLEEP
COMING TO PAINED CONSCIOUSNESS OF ITSELF' • VILLAGERS
OM • AIR BURSTING FORTH FROM WATER •
CONVERSATION WITH THE ZINC • Portrait, INDUSTRIAL PRODUCE


AT THE HOSPITAL • I AM THREATENED WITH DROWNING • ELAGABALUS •
A BOX OF CHOCOLATES DROPPED IN THE SWAMP • IN MY MITHRAEUM
•IN COURT • WAST! HEFT! JALLY! KRAX! • Denunciation 'THESE
CITIZENS CONSPIRED TO PAINT MY BLUE SHOES GREEN' • HOLIDAY
NARCO
PHOBE
I am sitting very low in my chair
THE GONDOLA is the storm-cloud of this heat.
Grease from the water films its lacquered sides.
A taste of sulphur. This Roman GOD
Overpowers one with silence, knifes horizons.
The patients' lounge is full of gloom
The gondola passes between two buildings.
Their high walls are windowless and dark.
The gulf between them buzzes with the dust of Africa.
Course of treatment
I DO NOT KNOW where the gondolier
Is taking me. I know he is taking me away
From the palaces, the merry lamps,
The steps of the house of God; I suffer
Against cure
The need of schnitzels and hock, patisseries,
The fumes of the motor-car and the immigrants
Hammering new languages into the city.

• DIZZY WOBBLES • A LOVELY LITTLE OUTING • GURG! RATTA-RATTA! •

LAST FREEDOMS

confession of disgusting weakness

HE SPENDS THE EVENING in the park. A walk.
Solemnity of large hotels, and people
Coming off the beach. A quiet laughter.
Wine. Street songs and the threat of harm

Contained in foreign talk nearby. The dark
Descends: above the rooves he sees the steeple
Of a church, and makes for it as if to
Claim some shelter from the threatened storm.

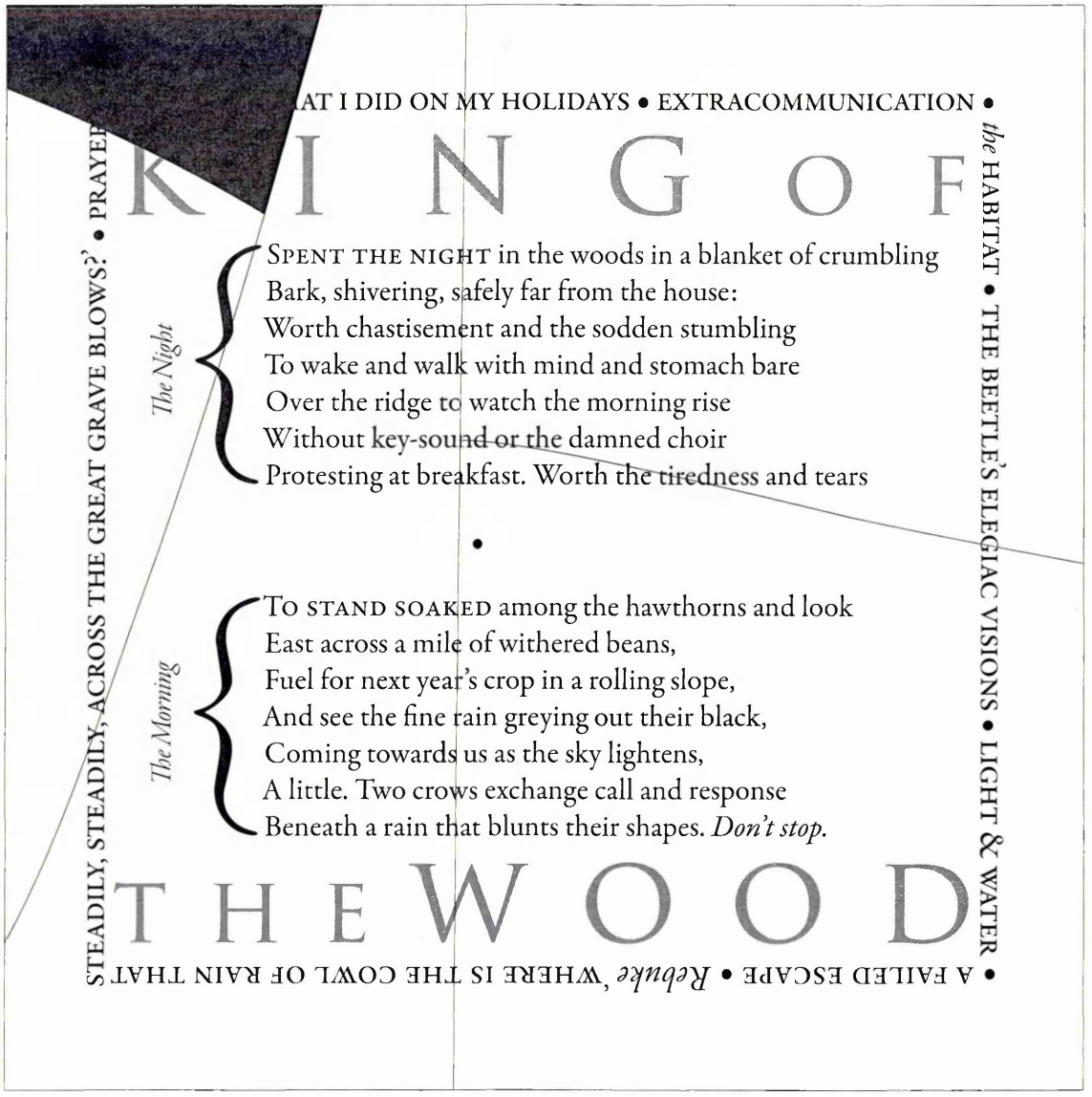
EXCEPT FOR ONCE HE FEELS no danger, but a warm
Unendingness of street and wine and fire
And gentle sadness, not a hint of fear;

Perhaps the long vocation's run its term.
He finds himself outside the church's door
And hears the cadence of an absent choir.

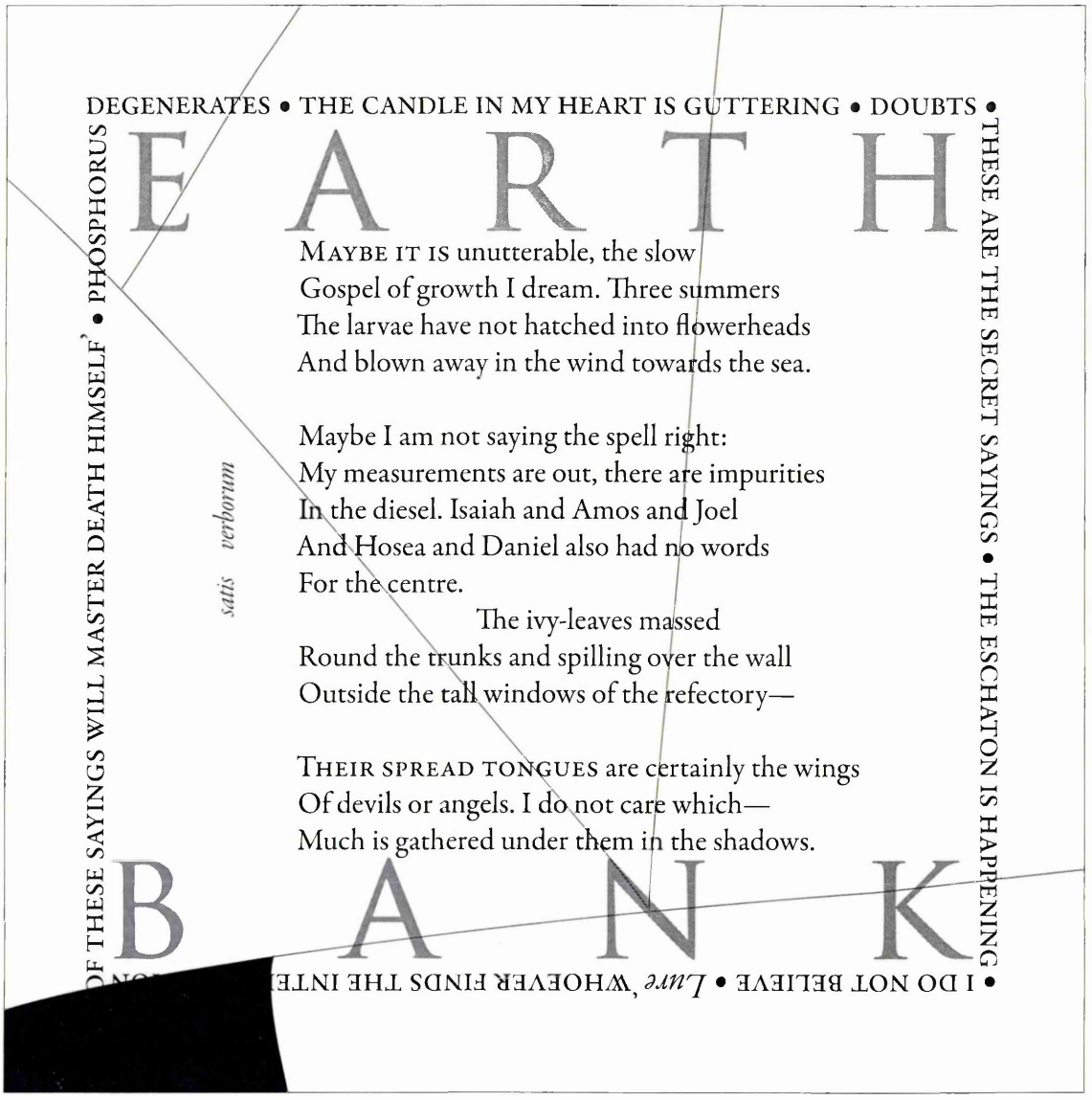
• *a* BREAK *from* WORK *can* DO GREAT GOOD *or* HARM • CESSATION •

• FLOPPING DOWN • DIZZY WOBBLES • A LOVELY LITTLE OUTING • GURG! RATTA-RATTA! •

• *a* BREAK *from* WORK *can* DO GREAT GOOD *or* HARM • CESSATION •


AT I DID ON MY HOLIDAYS • EXTRACOMMUNICATION •
KINGOF
the HABITAT • THE BEETLE'S ELEGIAC VISIONS • LIGHT & WATER •
STEADILY, STEADILY, ACROSS THE GREAT GRAVE BLOWS?' • PRAYER
The Night
SPENT THE NIGHT in the woods in a blanket of crumbling
Bark, shivering, safely far from the house:
Worth chastisement and the sodden stumbling
To wake and walk with mind and stomach bare
Over the ridge to watch the morning rise
Without key-sound or the damned choir
Protesting at breakfast. Worth the tiredness and tears
•
The Morning
TO STAND SOAKED among the hawthorns and look
East across a mile of withered beans,
Fuel for next year's crop in a rolling slope,
And see the fine rain greying out their black,
Coming towards us as the sky lightens,
A little. Two crows exchange call and response
Beneath a rain that blunts their shapes. *Don't stop.*
THEWOOD
• A FAILED ESCAPE • *Rebuke*, 'WHERE IS THE COWL OF RAIN THAT


• THE MENTAL PANOPTICON • THANKSGIVING FOR FENCES •
GEISSLER
• EIGHT HOOTING LABOURERS
the PAGE WHO HELPS PUT ON
Bascinet
HE IS THE FATHER. His order bids us speak,
We oblates of the desert rose. Our tomb
Is oratory in Babel's hall and park
In green Egypt or Syria's wooded gloom
Where icons of heretical saints confront
Their own unholy synod of dissent
With tearful vulgates of a joy that stays
Unspoken.
Psalter and halter is his way,
Vox Dei
This patriarch, Joachim, Janus, fond
Inquisitor, orthodox foe and friend:
Our habits bind us, and our whispered prayers
Echo down the mansion's central stairs.
Carnival
EACH CELL'S a distant platform in the sand
He visits in a wide expanse of mind.
Query 'ELI, ELI, LEMA SABACHTHANI?'
OUR • GREAVE & BESAGEW
LIEDER
• ROMAN RHETORIC • ROMAN GRAVITY • A BROTH OF SPRAT •


DEGENERATES • THE CANDLE IN MY HEART IS GUTTERING • DOUBTS •
EARTH
THESE ARE THE SECRET SAYINGS • THE ESCHATON IS HAPPENING •
PHOSPHORUS
satis verborum
MAYBE IT IS unutterable, the slow
Gospel of growth I dream. Three summers
The larvae have not hatched into flowerheads
And blown away in the wind towards the sea.
Maybe I am not saying the spell right:
My measurements are out, there are impurities
In the diesel. Isaiah and Amos and Joel
And Hosea and Daniel also had no words
For the centre.
The ivy-leaves massed
Round the trunks and spilling over the wall
Outside the tall windows of the refectory—
THEIR SPREAD TONGUES are certainly the wings
Of devils or angels. I do not care which—
Much is gathered under them in the shadows.
BANK
• I DO NOT BELIEVE • Lure, WHOEVER FINDS THE INTE
OF THESE SAYINGS WILL MASTER DEATH HIMSELF'

• COLOURED-IN WORLD • VIOLENT ARRANGEMENTS • TOO MUCH •

BRIGHT MARCH

précis of an exhalation

THE GARRETS OF THE MAD let out on cloud-banks,
Caravanserai, the fevered patterns of exotic courts,
And air—air soupy and sea-like, air
The tongueless language distance thinks itself with—
Then comes the tea-tray looming at the door.

The sparrow-like leaves have departed, the creaking chair
Dispenses its visitor. A stink of stone and gravel
Sweeps the lawns. A chill parade across the crow-flecked square:
The charcoal greatcoats, serge and silverware,
Bright bands, sharp shadows, militaria in emptiness—

A HARD REFLECTION OF THE LUCID, rippling pond—
The ducks' bills, insignia, the wound
Through which true hierarchy threatens to reveal. It is
The cauldron of it all, is paintings of angels on the shutters,
Eye painted on the wall of each eternal tomb.

I stare skywards. A blast of brass announces the glass world
Anointed this morning, elaborate leatherwork, the held
Voltage of the stiff-limbed nags. My calves twitch to the tune.

• A DANCE *in the* SAWDUST AFTER *the* STORMS • STOPPING TO LISTEN •

• A CANDLE GUTTERING • *Monody*, 'ON MY FRIEND, WHOSE DREAMS WERE REPORTED TO THE AUTHORITIES, WITH PATHETIC RESULTS' •


• HIS WIFE IS A DRUNK • SO I CHASTISED HER • FROG CATCHER •
• SUBSTRATUM DREAM of a FLAG-POLE SKATER • HEIGHT & BLUE •
CIRCLES; INNUMERABLE CIRCLES' • INCONCEIVABLE
• SEATED VERY GOOD & QUIET AT A DEAL TABLE • Story DRAWING
FLIGHT
LESS
WORLD'S IN A SPIN. A hearse-like pram
Describes a circle in the grounds, a cover
For a dwarf escaping. Very scenic:
Coastal now, this parkland anti-mecca,
The first circuit
The usual mix of here and now and dream.
A sardine boat, an ornamental acer,
Cries of seagulls and a glad hysteric,
And round and round my high aesthesia.
The second circuit
SLOP-HOUSE AND FACTORY let out clouds of steam
That rise to blueness past the tired skater.
Circles are perfect, but also slightly manic.
The sea air. The platform's sad lacuna
The third circuit
From the earth's mine from America.
I am a long way from any America.
Central point

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Appendix 1: Interview with Peter Didsbury

at his home in Hull, Thursday 29 March 2007

The interview was preceded by a walk around the Avenues, the area of Hull around Pearson Park which is the basis for much of Didsbury's and Sean O'Brien's work; Didsbury talked about the area and its relation to his poetic sensbility and practice.

TW: It seems to me that your work is pastoral in some ways; some aspects of your work seems to be similar to Sean O'Brien's, not just in the sense of being set in the same place but being interested in things like woodsmoke.

PD: We have the same props, if you like.

TW: Yeah. But on the other hand, you don't seem to be directly kind of interested in social and political concerns in quite the same way as Sean is, or it's not a direct interest.

PD: No, it's not with me, I mean there are obliquely political things, like the British Museum poem, and that was a dream and it was only when I'd written it out that I realised it was making a political statement about hunger and the empire and everything... I don't think as a group of poets and painters and hangers-on and friends we spent a great deal of time discussing politics except in the way that everybody did. We didn't have a political agenda. But I think if Sean's poetry is more overtly political you can probably trace it in the work, the point at which it happened, it was very much the Miners' Strike.

TW: You mentioned 'The British Museum' and the idea of it being a dream. There are other ones, things like 'At North Villa', 'The Globe' and 'Back of the House' and 'Glimpsed Among Trees'; all of those poems seem to me to have some sort of political dimension. Part of what they're about is the end of empire; they have an interest in empire, often elegiac.

PD: 'Back of the House' certainly, yeah. I'm just trying to remember all the kind of things that came out in 'Glimpsed Among Trees'; there's all that stuff about 'sailed down the estuary' isn't there? Yeah, I think you're right. The area we've just walked

about, it almost invites you to... These are houses of people of the Victorian middle class of Hull, and the merchant classes. It's the old thing about how the ordinary working guy round here might not have a lot going for him, but he had cheap tea — because we were enslaving the people on the Indian tea plantations.

TW: So a sense of empire, a sense of the historical context is *in* the landscape?

PD: Yeah, I think one of the most important things about 'Glimpsed Among Trees' — which came out in the [*Metre*] interview with David [Wheatley] — was that I was imagining the area of the allotments in a state of nature, you know, the water meadows before all these buildings were built and all the rest of it.

TW: The pastoral interest seems to be related to an interest in classicism — for example the bit in 'The Classical Farm' where you say 'Small fires smoke on every allotment below/but the source of the incandescence/is in the big red eyes of the Academy' — that seems to contain both those aspects.

PD: Yeah. The person who's translating Horace in his garden shed is actually me, because although my Latin by then was twenty years out of date I found that with a dictionary — an old Edwardian edition I found in a bookshop — I was out of work and just enjoying reading Horace's *Odes* in Latin for the first time, laboriously. And I remember leaving the allotment that particular night, and passing one these old brick 1870s schools of this area. The sun was setting in the windows of the school. It was the school my son was attending at the time. You just got the feeling that you were being watched. It was this idea of what education as such — the whole of the language, the whole of English literature stretching out behind you — allowed you to apply it and to understand, to use it… A lot of the things that make me write poems are quite inchoate, a sensory kind of longing, excitement. So it's about trying to find some way of getting them out of you, and it's education which does it.

TW: So the classics unlock that refined thing… And a classical education provides a means of getting at those feelings.

PD: It did for me. I mean, I was never a classicist in the sense of having a classical route through school, I mean Sean did A-level Latin, I stopped at O-level. It's just this interest in etymology. You could talk for hours about 'Glimpsed Among Trees'. There's so

much in it that's connected with my life at the time, like washing the button under the tap. I'd left teaching basically and I got a temporary job in Hull Museum and needed a new career which is how I got on to archaeology because the guy in charge of the museum said that I could have a job. I said that I had no qualifications and he said, 'yes, but you're educated so you can catalogue things'. So I was doing a lot of fieldwork, I was continually digging up Roman pottery and even glass buttons off the allotment. I suppose it was just fantasising about, you know, the glass button unlocks the whole Edwardian past: ploughs being chained across the field, the wild fowl … But I was the guy who was writing poems late at night and drinking cheap cider and cooking marsala…

TW: One thing that I'm interested in about 'Glimpsed Among Trees' is the way that bits of metre are hidden — or, not hidden, but occur — and especially the way that as it goes on it gets more dactylic; it seems to start off quite iambic and turns dactylic.

PD: It's unusual for me because Sean's the.. I'm very, very much iambic.

TW: With the long line it seems almost to have a classical feel, to be gesturing towards that sort of metre.

PD: It's just that once I get going, especially with iambs, I'm just aware of falling in... A lot of my poems start off like you do when you're starting to walk. You start off with short steps, in a low gear. I'm not at my best in long poems actually. The long ones are relatively formless, but they do build up to a kind of rolling rhetoric, and then it subsides. It gets to a certain point and then just dies. I'm just noticing an iambic here: [*reads*] 'I say my prayers and do my certain sums. I like the number ten.' It just seems to be the natural voice.

TW: That middle section of the poem... The line just on from there where you have ten stresses and it's the line about 'ten sweet farts, ten persons of Belgian nationality, ten fascicles of tens', I mean it enacts it jokily.

PD: The trouble is you just wonder when you do this kind of thing — it's great fun — whether… It's always surprising when people do request things [to be read at readings] or say 'Oh, a poem I really like of yours…' and they mention one and you think 'Not in a million years would I have thought...' But when you do this kind of thing you wonder

whether is it just too referential in one's own life for anybody to make anything out of. I suppose if the rhetoric carries it off then it just works like a picture really.

TW: I like this one a lot. Although I can see that lots of references are opaque.

PD: Oh yeah. I don't know what I would make of, er… 'the broken bowl of an eighteenth-century clay/inverted as helm upon, and making to seem Mongolian,/the head of…' My son David was about eight at the time and the house was full of these little metal soldiers. I seem to recall he had a broken eighteenth-century clay pipe-bowl stuck on to the top of one of them which obviously you've got to know looked like a Mongolian helm.

TW: But that's a detail that the reader can recognise.

PD: Yeah, you can get to a few of those.

TW: The subject of the poem seem to begin as the house and the house being in some sense conscious.

PD: The feeling of being overlooked and watched, yes, by this great Victorian house. In fact this must have been fairly close in time to 'The Classical Farm' itself. I can remember what the order was because I only had that allotment for two seasons. It was probably the same summer. I've just realised that in both of them one is overlooked, in one case by the school and in the other by this big Victorian house.

TW: It seems like the house is overlooking the man but the man is also the house. There's a kind of identification between the individual and the house and also the individual; and, in some sense, 'tradition' is overlooking him.

PD: Yeah, there's something... I was very aware of pulses of information, streams of information going backwards and forwards. I don't know what school physics books were like in your day, but I remember all kinds of diagrams showing, you know, dotted lines showing the direction of light going into the eye and all this kind of thing. It's a bit heavy when it starts off in some ways, this feeling that there's something almost supernatural going on, and it gets much more celebratory as it goes on. And the language becomes clearer. There's a real joy, I think, about imagining the wild fowl on the drain and ancient evenings and all the rest of it. There's a different kind of feel to it.

I suppose in some ways this is an English version of the New York Ashbery stuff I was trying to write years before. Because everything I was doing at the time comes into it, like *Wuthering Heights* and so on.

TW: It's the sort of poem that when I'm thinking about it or trying to write about it it's constantly inviting you to say something specific about it — how it dabbles in the Gothic with the idea of the house being alive, for example, — but it isn't simply a ghost-poem, its tensions can't be resolved so easily. All you can do is point to various things.

PD: I don't know what I would write about it either… I think maybe one thing is that some of my poems are really just having fun, indulging, just enjoying rhetoric. Once it builds up, when you know the poem is going to get written, you have a brilliant relationship with what's going to become; it's like a third person, you *and* the poem, it really is. I much prefer people to talk about Muses and divine inspiration than making it fit an academic theory. Lines are given; they appear out of nowhere. It's a complete joy. One line that happened like that in this poem, I remember it now, is the line about 'Its stored reflections will always include the poles of the ferry at Hell'. I remember sitting there thinking of the traditional imagery of ferrying across the water, and I thought, yeah, the ferry must have been tied up to poles, waiting. And then — yeah, a kind of joy.

TW: So you would be suspicious of any attempt to say, 'Didsbury says *this* in this poem, this poem is *about*…'?

PD: I think if somebody said 'Didsbury's having fun, really enjoying the English language in this poem, enjoying all the things that fuelled his imagination at the time', that's about it really. And enjoying the rhetoric.

TW: One of the things you seem to keep going back to is this idea of everyday experience as being somehow special or epiphanic or religious. I don't want to intrude on the life as opposed to the poems… It seems to me that one the one hand you've got the comic poems like 'That Old Time Religion' that seems to mock theology and to mock specific theologies, and then they seem to contrast with the ones which insist that any mundane experience can also be religious.

PD: What I always say about the first of those poems — you know, in the brief intro you give to an audience — I always say its about the problems of omnipotence, now clearly, when I sat down at the kitchen table writing it... It started off just because I had an image of that old sort of cosmogony where God is a real person in a place, surrounded by angels, and I just thought for some reason they were out of Noel Coward play, rather petulant and rather effete and all the rest of it. It's only when you've written it and had the fun of writing a comic poem, that you start thinking about what is coming out here. I think what I realised was coming out was this 'What if we hadn't moved on, what would God be like if he really were omnipotent in this kind of very simple, real, imperial fashion?' There's a serious point but I don't start out to make points. You don't write poems to put down what you know, you write poems to find out. But at the other end of the spectrum, yes, it's just this feeling, absolute joy or chemical reaction or epiphany. It's certainly still with me, although it was more insistent when I was younger. And various attempts… I don't mind intruding on the life. A potted history is that I never had a religious upbringing, but I got interested. I partly got interested in formal religion simply because of those experiences, and was there any way of channelling this or corralling it. There was a brief experience with university Christianity. Later I got very interested in Zen Buddhism, never practised except to meditate enough to convince me that there's a lot more to know about your mind than… And I was taken by this notion of 'marvellous emptiness': there's nothing you can pin down or grasp, everything is… It's this phrase, and again I use it in one or two poems, 'The universe is empty but marvellous, marvellous but empty'. That's the feeling really behind that poem 'The Shore'. There is an epiphanic moment. I was stood on a real day on a real beach but it's only in recollection later when you're writing it that you realise… I didn't realise what I'd said till I'd put that barge coming along the estuary with nothing in the hold, and I realised what I was doing was actually concretising that 'empty but marvellous, marvellous but empty' thing.

TW: That reminds me of your poem '[Part of] the Bridge', which seems to talk about the bridge not being conscious but then to speak about it as if it is conscious.

PD: I was never quite sure what I think about that poem. There's one line in it which I don't quite understand. But again it was just that feeling of being in the presence of… Sometimes things can be so big architecturally that you feel you're in the presence of something sentient, and that's really all I wanted to say in that poem.

TW: Am I right in assuming that it's the Humber Bridge?

PD: It's the Humber Bridge.

TW: That's one thing that I wanted to ask you about. Because your poetry is tied to certain places, certain objects, is it important what the objects are that are producing the work, that it is for example a city garden, or is it just that these are the places you happened to be when you had those experiences?

PD: It's just complete coincidence. Sometimes the experiences are real enough. Sometimes there are real epiphanies which I decide I want to write about consciously, like the bridge. Other times you don't realise there's an epiphany going on until you actually write the poem. All I'm struggling to say is that there was an actual epiphany or feeling of warmth driving by the park, with the water-birds, there was one on that beach a few years back and 'Traffic', you know, just tells it like it was. Pat and I when we first met were sitting there, it was absolutely pouring down in Hull city centre, we came out of the library and it was so heavy we went into the kind of naff cafe that you never go in. We went in there and sat in the window waiting for it to stop raining, and she saw a big yellow truck just roll by with 'Ocean Derived Aggregates' on the side, an absolutely ludicrous phrase. But the important thing for me in that poem, I'm never quite sure how it works, was that I didn't actually see it, she only told me about it.

TW: I'm reminded with that one of the William Carlos Williams poem ['The Great Figure'] about seeing the lettering on the side of the lorry — was that a conscious allusion?

PD: I don't know that poem. If I did know it I don't know it now. No, it wouldn't have been conscious, I probably wasn't aware of it. I've never read much American poetry actually... Going back to religion, to relate the life to the poems, I became a practising member of the smells-and-bells end of the Church of England for some years. The last couple of years I haven't attended very well and don't know where I stand at all. I got picked up in a review [by William Wootten] for using quotation-marks round the word 'religious'. He seemed to think it was an elaborate joke, or... He asked what kind of religion is it that goes around in quotation marks. What I was trying to say is for want of a better word let's use the word 'religious' despite all its baggage of horror, narrow morality, small-mindedness, everything we know is wrong with formal religion. What

particularly irritates me nowadays is the talk about 'spirituality', these awful Sunday-morning spiritual programmes with no underpinning of faith.

TW: It's a strange area of life for a poet to be barred from.

PD: It is, yeah. But I think poets... You know that the kind of excitement that writing a poem can take you into is so close to what might be religious areas — you know, surprise. Just the intensity of the joy of a nature poem, for example.

TW: I suppose what might be unusual is that you're prepared to recognise it as religious.

PD: Well, what's the alternative, really? The alternative is the knee-jerk reaction of the awful potted rationalists like, er, what's his name, whom I rather admire for his *absolute* atheism.

TW: You mentioned those terrible Sunday-morning spiritual shows, non-denominational, non-religional, and you talked about it not being underpinned, which is quite interesting because it recalls the way that your work seems to be underpinned by classicism or education. Do you see it as an aspect of the same thing?

PD: It sounds snobbish but you just feel that many of the people who pontificate about religion in our media now don't even know about it. And I don't just mean know in the sense of formal education and knowledge but just native wit and nous. We live in a culture of sentimentality don't we? Anybody who has a sentiment is as good as anybody else, but you can't back it up. I think it's this feeling that it's this wishy-washyness. It's not that I want people to have dogma. The last thing Christ would have done is founded the Christian church. It also seems to me that if there were a person or entity called the devil, the first he would do is found the church. Because it does, it narrows down into sexual morality all the time, and all the rest of it... It's just this feeling that if you think about existing at all, it is so powerful and so frightening and so mind-boggling — if it doesn't inspire you with a mixture of joy and terror, there's something wrong with you. Thinking about the joy and terror is religion, experiencing it is religion.

TW: You talked about the reading of some John Ashbery poems being a turning point in your own work. Were there any other formative influences?

PD: It basically all started off with A-level English at school... It was very plodding old, well, classical, completely useless English teaching, taking some poem and saying 'you read the next twenty-five lines. What does that word mean?' And suddenly this new guy came on the scene recently out of Bristol University and he loved poetry, so he chose every single poetry option on the A-level syllabus. He exposed us particularly to Donne and Hopkins. One particular week he said 'I'm not setting an essay. I going to ask you to try writing a poem in the style of Gerard Manley Hopkins'. He wanted to show us it was not just saying whatever came into your head; and I must admit I did it rather glibly, and I thought, 'Oh, there's nothing else I want to do'. So really it started off with Donne and Hopkins, then Eliot, Christopher Middleton a couple of years later. I don't actually read a great deal of poetry, I never did.

TW: This thing about having fun with language seems to be connected with — something you find in Sean's work too — a delight in expertise or trivia, the knowledge which can't really be turned to any purpose.

PD: [*laughs*] Yes, absolutely.

TW: Is there a joy in knowledge partly because it can't be used?

PD: It may just be to do with the kind of school we went to, actually, the personae we've got. In my case it's etymology. I'm more interested in the past in many ways than I am in the present or the future. It's just something constitutional. I suppose it's equivalent to Auden's fascination with geology. For something to interest me it simply has to be ancient, ancient or natural. I'm very interested in natural history. I would be much more interested in a valley with a heap of tumbled stones in it than a valley without, although the valley would still speak to me.

TW: History seems to come out as a history being present in the poems, where you have a present landscape or place but it's got history in it — something like 'Old Farms' but also 'The Village, or Festive Schadenfreude', where you're wandering round among the heritage boards but the whole historical village is there too.

PD: I never thought I'd brought that poem off entirely at all. I think the bit where it's most successful is towards the end. We had a visitor and we had small children at the time. We went to a fairly tame village on the outskirts of Hull and walked around this

village pond; it was the kind of place that had these heritage boards. We started to fantasise about wild fowl around the pond. That headless goose was real. That's all absolutely true. And of course this feeling in the poem as it builds… As the night fell, lights were coming on, we were almost like demonic figures looking into these cosy little houses plotting all kinds of mayhem for them.

TW: At the end you mention the foxes, and you mention 'the old Brer Rabbit method' — so you're casting yourself as those dangerous fairy-tale characters?

PD: Oh yes.

Pat D: [*interjects*] You don't get Brer Rabbit any more, do you? Not very politically correct.

TW: It's interesting that there really was a headless goose —

PD: Yeah, that's absolutely true. It may have been that that made me… It was this feeling of the gap between the village as it exists today and when it was a real working village. And these sepia photographs — and all the names are right as well — Disraeli Gardham and Waxy Oliver. In fact Waxy Oliver has become a personal mythological character. You know these guys standing round a very solid cart outside the blacksmith's shop with moustaches and things.

TW: I managed to find Disraeli Gardham and so to place the poem, but I hadn't found Waxy Oliver. I thought that he must be a real person.

PD: How did you place Disraeli Gardham?

TW: Google.

PD: Google, yeah.

TW: Thank you, Peter.