

The Problem of the City:
Urban Anxieties in Twentieth Century
British and American Poetics

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The Problem of the City: Urban Anxieties in
Twentieth Century British and American Poetics

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For Youngjoo Choi (최영주)

'The she-theorist knew something more crimson than place' (Robertson Occasional Work 238)

'Let there be Geneva Convention on city
and law and what might be proper de-
ployment of violence within the state' (Griffiths *Nomad Sense* 73)

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Preface

This germ of this thesis began with an inexplicably well-placed copy of Burton Hatlen's *George Oppen: Man and Poet* (1981) obtained from the Kenneth Green library at the MMU up to ten years ago. That text, as well as the obligatory copy of his *New Collected Poems* (2002), represents the beginning of a critical engagement with Oppen's work that prompted the conceptual groundwork for the idea of a 'problem of the city' in my own research. It was my MA dissertation at the Manchester Metropolitan University however – A 'Humanitarian Urbanism': George Oppen and the City in Common (2006) – that allowed my burgeoning interest in Oppen's work to coalesce around his most famous poem 'Of Being Numerous' (1968) specifically as it related to debates centred around ethics and modernist city planning. With a subsequent visit to the poet's centennial at Buffalo University in the early days of the PhD, the individual threads of this project transformed into something much larger in scope.

But this work was also created within a climate of increasing fear and insularity, which clearly shaped the trajectory of the project to an equal extent. The thesis started just before the global economic collapse, and was eventually completed on a totally different continent. Penned in the midst of increasingly aggressive attacks on the weakest members of society, and a political culture drifting hopelessly to the right, I hope what is contained within this thesis speaks with an urgency that reflects the conditions that spawned it. Written across continents in Manchester, England and Daejeon, South Korea, by the appendix there is an observational quality to the writing as it monitors a familiar social world unraveling from afar. At that level the research carried out reflects, and has therefore benefitted from, an understanding of cultural

estrangement otherwise unavailable to it. The ‘perilous’ nature of conditions in England, undoubtedly contributed to both the form and tone of the work but also that sense of ‘anxiety’ and ‘panic’ isolated in the poems themselves.

Throughout all of these long, and at the same time incredibly brief, years it has been the same people who have encouraged me to finally hand this in. I would like to thank Nik Duffy and Kate McGowan – first and foremost – for their valued support, even at times of serious self-doubt and financial hardship. For the same reasons I would like to thank my mother and father, who have provided the economic means to make sure I continued. Furthermore, I would like to thank Clare Mullady and Youngjoo Choi, both of whom have lived with the stresses and strains of this project by proxy. Thanks are also reserved for Patrick Gannon and David Wilkinson who were able to make sure that this thesis finally left the confines of Asia.

The following work is also dedicated to Patrick Foley (1920 – 2013) who will be sorely missed.

기쁜마음으로 책을 마치며..

Abstract

The following research involves an engagement with what will become known as ‘the problem of the city’ as it pertains to twentieth century British and American poetics. What this amounts to is an analysis of how the extremely palpable ‘occlusion’ of the city in contemporary poetry is necessarily premised on various socio-political factors rooted in inadequate conceptions of a ‘common identity’ that have undergirded urban social being since the foundation of Aristotle’s *polis*. Isolating the root cause of this situation in romantic and modernist aesthetic practice seen as promoting a desire for ‘closure’ in the poem, the research goes on to examine a variety of approaches that tackle this situation in terms of its opposite. The end of the research pitches writing on the city as a ‘perilous’ undertaking skirting a fine line between the demands for authorial control of the materials, and the necessity to engender a more ‘open’ poetics independent of the writing itself.

The introduction acquaints the reader with the concept of urban anxieties, as well as the key terms ‘urbicide’, ‘necropolis’ and ‘melee’ in relation to Jean Luc Nancy’s text *Being Singular Plural* (1996) and Bill Griffiths’ *A Book of Spilt Cities* (1999). Following on from this chapter one looks, briefly, at the roots of the problem of the city in both romantic and modernist writers, ending with an exposition of George Oppen’s work as a different approach stemming from his engagement with objectivism in the thirties. Chapters three, four and five will branch out to incorporate various postwar understandings of the city that promote aesthetic strategies most able to counter this dilemma in the light of work like Oppen’s. The third chapter sees the boldest attempt in Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, specifically as they continue in that

tradition of objectivism. Olson's 'root city' is juxtaposed with Walt Whitman's New York, Susan Howe's text *Singularities* (1990) and William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* sequence, in order to see how effectively the desire for closure was surmounted from within the bounds of a conservative poetic tradition founded on 'cratylism'.

It is in chapters four and five, however, that the conclusions of the thesis really begin to take shape. By examining the influence of Olson and Williams on the English writers Roy Fisher, Iain Sinclair and Allen Fisher, a way forward is determined for the city and poetry albeit perched between a the desire for hope and a profound despair. Allen Fisher's *Place* (2005) and his later *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape* (2004) project are positioned as fundamental to this approach particularly in how they work towards an interruption of linguistic closure enshrined in the very materials themselves. In chapter five romantic aesthetic ideals are firmly questioned in line with the innovations made by Lisa Robertson in both *The Weather* (2001) and her longer project on the city *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture* (2003). Her impulse to see social space in terms of noise or 'cacophony' – that is, not the place of a single interpretation of urbanity as much as a residue of different voices – sets the standard by which an open poetics becomes possible. The conclusion and appendix aim to situate this 'delusional' poetics within the context of a city that is both 'panicked' and subject to ever-greater interference by state historical versions of urban space. Francis Crot's text *Hax* (2011) remains fundamental in this climate specifically in how it seeks to disrupt notions of linguistic closure through a determined focus on harnessing the tensions manifest in the city itself.

*The Problem of
the City*

It follows that the state belongs to that class of objects which exists by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal [zoon politikon]...anyone who by his nature and not simply by ill-luck has no state is either too bad or too good, either subhuman or superhuman – he is like the war mad man condemned in Homer’s words as ‘having no family, no law, no home...he is a non-co operator like an isolated piece in a game of draughts (Aristotle 28 – 29).

“the exhalations that hang over the roofs of the metropolises, the opaque smoke that is not scattered, the hood of miasmata that weighs over the bituminous streets. Not the labile mists of memory nor the dry transparence, but the charring of burned lives that forms a scab on the city, the sponge swollen with vital matter that no longer flows, the jam of past, present, future that blocks existences calcified in the illusion of movement: this is what you would find at the end of your journey”. (Calvino 102)

“For a certain type of modern poet, I will argue, “poetry” names an ontological project: A civilizational wish to reground the concept and value of the person” (Izenberg 1)

The Problem of the City

'Who will bring love to a whole city'? (Griffiths *A Book of Spilt Cities* 66)

In his text *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (2000), Peter Barry writes of the 'occlusion' of the metropolis in British poetics over the last two hundred years. As part of an inquiry into why the city has been largely absent from contemporary writing, the critic explains the need for a 're-association' of poetry with *polis* and the destruction of all of the romantic precepts that see 'verse' aligned purely with a pastoral sensibility. 'Breaking the automatic link between poetry and the countryside, poetry and "nature"', writes Barry, 'may therefore contribute a little to keeping it in circulation, and perhaps to broadening its appeal' (4). But something that Barry misses in his text – the *modus operandi* of which, admittedly, only ever extends to 'widening the canon' in the United Kingdom – is the complex socio-political underpinnings that have made poetry so resistant to the city in the first place. Moreover, the limited focus on British poetry fails to identify this 'occlusion' as a phenomenon that extends far beyond the reaches of the United Kingdom itself. The rapid progress of urbanization during this specific historical period – coupled with subsequent fears over social atomization – will be shown in this study to invalidate the desire for a poetics of the city in any classically-accepted sense. It is my intention to suggest that ever since Aristotle's association of the *polis* as the site of a 'common identity', thinking in poetics has found itself continually circumambulating a logic of the *metropolis* that is not only unfit for purpose, but a negation of urban social being considered in its most variegated sense. Whether this is couched in the transparent romanticism of a poet like Wordsworth, or in the various aesthetic positions that have come to define the terms of later modernist writers, in each case the fundamental desire for the institution of a coherent

standard of social organization remains the same. The following introduction sets out the essential terms by which the city has become a 'problematic' concept in western aesthetics, whilst at the same time presenting the key conceptual categories around which an alternative aesthetics of the city might be oriented. This will be accomplished by firstly engaging with Bill Griffiths' London as a synecdoche for the gravity of present conditions, whilst also sketching a theoretical framework within both poetry and urbanism from inside of which these urban anxieties in the writer could potentially be assuaged.

The initial titular inspiration for this study comes from Jean Luc Nancy's text *Being Singular Plural* (1996). In the section in question during his classic work on the concept of community Nancy reads Heidegger against himself in order to point the way to more 'open' conceptions of being together focused on that sense of *Mitsein* (or 'being-with') that the philosopher seemed to give primary importance to in *Sein und Zeit* but which quickly became subsumed within a parochial Nationalism. For Nancy there can never be an effective form of being-with if it rejects that opening towards *alterity* that is intrinsic to its ontological character. His 'problem of the city', therefore, represents the futility of attempting an understanding of urban social being if it refuses (as a fundamental facet ingrained within its 'logic' or 'grammar') to take this 'exposure to the world' as primordial fact:

In one sense, this is the original situation of the West that is always repeating itself; it is always the problem of the city, the repetition of which, for better or worse, has already punctuated our history. Today, this repetition produces itself as a situation in which the two major elements [donnees] compose a sort of antinomy: on the one hand there is the exposure to the world and, on the other, the end of representations of the world. This means nothing short of a transformation in the relation [that we name] "politico philosophy": it can no longer be a matter of a single community, of its essence, closure, and sovereignty; by contrast, it can no longer be a

matter of organizing community according to the decrees of a sovereign Other, or according to the telos [fins] of a history. It can no longer be a matter of treating sociability as a regrettable and inevitable accident, as a constraint that has to be managed in some way or another. Community is bare but it is imperative (35 – 36).

Such a statement becomes foundational to this study in two specific ways. Firstly, Nancy articulates a philosophical framework onto which the continual ‘problem’ of the urban in poetry might be ‘hung’ in futurity. His identification of a repetitious element to apperceptions of urban social being, furthermore, attributes anxieties over the city to an ‘original situation of the West’ that will be surmounted only within the bounds of a conscious intervention by poetic strategies focused on an ‘opening’. Secondly, however, the means by which these tensions might be negotiated are described in terms of an ‘exposure to the world’ suggesting the opposite of the inward gaze synonymous with the city in its historical development. As an attempt to write against ‘closure’, Nancy provides an initial theoretical base to examine the socio-political influence of the city on aesthetics at large.

This is because Nancy’s city foregrounds a conflict between identities that ultimately explodes monotheistic apperceptions of urban space. In the essay “Eulogy of the Melee” (1996), for instance, the philosopher posits the logic of destruction in Sarajevo as down to a sense of the Proper Name in a Derridean sense. The ‘name’ of Sarajevo, therefore, isn’t a point of infinite reference but as Derrida maintained ‘immediately says more than the name: the other of the name and quite simply the other whose irruption the name announces’ (Derrida 89). The taxonomy of Sarajevo as Sarajevo contains within itself the ‘excess’ that it seeks to exclude. Nancy’s use of the term *melee* is vital here for the same reason. Its French root *meler* (that is, ‘to mix’) paradoxically contains the opposite of the message he would like to put forward.

Melee is used by Nancy in the mediaeval sense of a brawl, fight or dissonance. 'A city does not have to be identified by anything other than a name, which indicates a place, the place of a *melee*', writes Nancy in that essay, 'a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering a disjunction' (145). To 'name' Sarajevo is to take away the true 'essence' of Sarajevo itself. Intrinsic to the naming of this city is not only the possibility of this city as a pure place, but the inherent violence exemplified in the war in the Balkans itself. '[T]hose who die in Sarajevo die from the death of Sarajevo *itself*', explains Nancy further, 'they die from the possibility – imposed by gunfire – of identifying some substance or presence by this name' (146). Until this logic of destruction is removed from political thinking in the west, these conflicts are liable to become an increasing feature of liberal democracies. 'The task is enormous, and it is very simple', explains the philosopher, 'it is the task of a culture remaking itself, or the recasting of thinking such that it would not be crude or obscene like every other thought of purity' (147).

Poetry will be encountered throughout this study initially as a means of safeguarding, but then radically breaking down these thoughts of 'purity'. In one sense the poem inevitably expresses the desire for closure (which has undoubtedly been the case through all of its modern permutations), whilst at the same time attempts at a coherent narrative are undermined by the failure of linguistic efforts to assemble a rational vision of the world. Although linked to an insatiable desire to name a world of things directly, language nevertheless fails to express anything beyond the ephemeral. 'Poetry knows nothing of the representation or evocation of the inexpressible', writes Nancy in an essay on the unique formal properties of this ancient art form, '[i]t is thoroughly coextensive with the limits of language's entire area, which it nowhere

overflows' (*Birth to Presence* 308). To Nancy poetry is a 'cadastre' or 'geography', not engaged in the 'creation' or 'making' suggested by Aristotle, but an explicit 'measurement' of the limits of language and its exterior world. As he continues:

Poetry is made of the patience to bear both this excess and this faltering, hence the infinite rarity of poetry. Such patience and such a trial are not at the level of everyday life – which, however, is precisely what poetry must take on in patience. But its rarity has nothing spectacular about it. Rather it takes the form of an effacement: a gesture which itself is, after all, commonplace, which indicates your place, mine, yet another's, and which withdraws (308-9).

The poetry that follows in this study is presented as a genuine attempt to reconfigure a relationship to the city unafraid of this 'faltering'. These are linguistic constructions strangely opposed to the idea of poetic creation, and emboldened instead by a sensibility that privileges the gaps and inconsistencies in the poetic artefact itself. 'Our places are ill-defined and blurred', continues Nancy, '[w]e must cease to imagine that what we have to do is to create, or that an ancient power of creation has been lost' (309). Opposed to the totalitarianism implicit in the act of composition, the city will be mapped at the margins of the urban ideal. Both an intrinsic part of, and solution to, the problem of the city, poetry both inhabits and interrupts the *polis* at one and the same time.

The writing examined in what follows is 'urban' in as far as it remains physically situated in the city whilst reflecting an undeniable impulse towards writing as something 'regenerative' of a perceived social world beyond the immediate construct of the 'poem'. In that sense the thesis reflects recent innovative work on poetics by Oren Izenberg in his ground breaking text *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (2011). In that text Izenberg writes of poetry as

an attempt to 'reestablish or reveal.... the most basic unit of social life and for securing the most fundamental object of moral regard' (1) To Izenberg this 'basic unit' is 'the person' whom he describes in an interview as:

...a being as susceptible to and demanding moral regard on some grounds. It is the meeting place of fact (the qualities or features, potential or actual, in virtue of which the designation is warranted) and value (when a person is present, all questions are moral questions. Or, less dramatically, but more accurately, questions regarding our relations to persons have a normative aspect). In describing the emergencies of the 20th century as crises of personhood, I'm suggesting two things: first, that the grounds on which we judge something worthy of moral regard has become unstable – let's call this your problem of metaphysics. And second, that the consequences of that instability – the widespread inability or unwillingness to treat persons as persons, or detect the presence of persons – had come to seem fatal in a massive, and perhaps total, way (Baird "An Interview").

The analysis that follows this introduction is no longer concerned with that sense of 'creation' in the poetic work, but of 'open[ing] up powerful channels of communication' that whilst necessarily frayed or 'faltering' nevertheless contain an implicit awareness of the social capabilities of writing (Baird "An Interview"). But these 'channels' are no longer the end goal of the poetic work, as much as a foundational reason for writing poetry in the first place. Indeed, the focus is no longer on the poem *per se* but the reasons by which the poet turns to writing. 'Poems... might not be the center of their concern with poetry', explains Izenberg, 'the work of art has a slant, oblique, even antithetical relation to the other commitments that bring them to poetry and sustains them within it' (Baird "An Interview").

The relationship of poetry to urban sociality, however, occupies something of a 'double bind' in a perspective like Izenberg's. Because as much as the poem is a genuine attempt 'to redress the failures of human sociability', as he puts it in his text, it has also 'been understood to be

profoundly implicated in them' (Izenberg 2). The poets chosen for this study – especially as the thesis progresses towards its final stages – are more than aware of the potentialities for writing to both challenge and reinforce the penchant for 'closure' and 'purity' that undergirds the problem of the city. To some extent these concerns mean that they explicitly revolve around a kind of 'anti-writing' whereby the materials of the poet are constantly 'tested' against the idea of an 'exposure' to the world:

The ability to recover—by reading poems—a conviction in even the solitary person's innate and "primitive" capacity to formulate "we-intentions" may, I suggest, have a transformative effect on one's felt capacities for relationship, and reorient the person toward a shared world. The question that the poets in this tradition pose to social thought is of the most fundamental kind: not how to distribute fairly the privileges of identity, but how to secure the ground of identity; not just of how to do things with persons, but how to know that a person is there at all (Izenberg 39).

To Izenberg this means thinking of aesthetics in a manner that completely disrupts the ideals of 'purity' and 'beauty' that have troubled poets since the romantics. Instead of reproducing techniques that promote the closure of meaning – techniques that do not effectively approach a 'social world' at all – poetry must reflect the reality of urban conditions. In that respect, my research looks for initial inspiration in objectivist experiments by poets like Oppen and Zukofsky in the urban site of the Bronx in the 1930s. '[T]his art [stated that] what was most important to bring to light about persons and poems was their individual "sound" or "feel"', writes Izenberg on Oppen, 'their thousand-fold particularities and social distinctions, rather than their basis in the truth of one common "thing"' (105).

The focus of what follows, however, is in no way an attempt to merely graft a ‘Nancian’ conceptual framework onto the history of anxieties in western conceptions of the city and poetry. Indeed, such a project would not only contest the hoped for ‘opening’ that lies at the heart of this thesis, but constitute a much more concentrated engagement with Nancy than the scope of the analysis allows. To that extent the work engages with recent theoretical treatises on poetics engaged in the exploration of ‘anti-closural’ practice in the poem itself. Pierre Joris’ work remains a key influence in this regard especially in his focus on the importance of nomadism in contemporary writing. As the ‘noet’ writes in *A Nomad Poetics (2003)*:

NO stands for play, for no-saying & guerilla war techniques, for gnosis & NOetics. ET stands for et cetera, the always ongoing process, the no closure: it stands for ExtraTerritorial, for the continuous state of being outside (not a margin that would be always definable as the margin of something called the real (territory)). ET stands for Electronic Terrain, where the poem composes, recomposes, decomposes before your eyes, de- and re- territorializing at will or chance – without there being the ability to tell which of those two determinants it is (31)

Such an aesthetic remains wholly opposed to the desire for harmonious ordering processes in literary works. ‘As far as moral or social values are concerned’, writes Joris, ‘total miscegenation is the only goal we believe in. Purity is the root of all evil’ (31). Such a perspective builds on innovations such as Olson’s ‘open field’ in order to reposition writing on the city today as concerned with the precise opposite of *polis*. ‘We can still use Olson’s statement that the need is to move, instanter, on’, writes Joris, but no Interzone for us, no Idaho, in or out, no Gloucester hankering for a more perfect past’ (31).

Thinking on language in this thesis always comes back to the kind of innovations made by Hilary Lawson in his text *Closure: A History of Everything* (2001). 'No philosophy', according to Lawson, 'can be taken seriously unless it is a response to [the question of closure], yet no philosophy has been able to provide a satisfactory response' (59). This is because 'closure' is manifest not only in terms of language *per se*, but a logic of thinking that can be sourced right back to the enlightenment and its focus on 'truth' or the direct apperception of an 'independent reality'. Indeed, to Lawson, this is simply because:

Language does not provide the limits either to our experience or to our world. There is plenty, not to say almost everything, outside of the text. It is closure as a whole, not language as one small subset of closure that provides experience (60).

Poetry is one of the primary culprits of such thinking, because of how it has traditionally found itself working closely with language systems sometimes with the sole aim of establishing a regime of linguistic purity. Whether this is in the romantic sense of a 'common dialect' in the *Lyrical Ballads*, or the later modernist focus on things in themselves, in each case the desire for closure in the work is the same. But the specific nature of poetry comes in its ability to write against closure. 'In poetry', writes Lawson, 'the avoidance of closure is often found at both the level of ambiguity of the mark and at the level of the text as a whole' (220). Poetry works, semantically, at the level of 'individual words' or 'sentences'. Rather than being orientated to what Lawson calls 'the text or whole', in the poem it is possible to exploit the ambiguities of language in a manner that would be much harder to accomplish in prose.

For the introductory section of this thesis the poetic response to these conditions is manifest in Bill Griffiths' *A Book of Spilt Cities* (1999). To Griffiths the city of London is displayed as a hive of

confusion the precise opposite of *the polis*. Moreover, the discursive practices that make up the urban realm are premised on an exclusionary rhetoric that has always defined the state. 'He walks with a kind of grace through this polluted, economically-distressed island', writes Clive Bush on the relationship of his poetics to the territorial space of England, 'whose historically-developed instincts for class-privilege and state power have only been minimally-challenged' (Bush 35-36). Gesturing to urban conditions that can no longer be adequately labelled as 'split', Griffiths' confusion makes him use the word 'spilt' instead. As Iain Sinclair writes in the introduction to the text, the London Griffiths portrays is one where poetic conventions are no longer able to account for the city in any guaranteed sense:

Nothing is forgotten, everything is re-remembered. In stomping across Wordsworth's Westminster Bridge epiphany (sublime copywriting), Griffiths encourages amputated phrases to take flight. The sonnet is alarmed to find itself auditioning for an Objectivist anthology. We've misplaced our cultural markers. The riverscape has been tricked out with so many authentic fakes. This is the 'head-skull film' to which we are now addicted. Dud oratory. Commissioned buildings that nobody wants. Over-funded follies with no appropriate laureate to disguise their hubris ("*Intro*" xi).

In this poetically unrecognizable territory of London, the writer does not identify the city as a repository for any kind of cultural production other than the megalomaniacal, and vacuous, landscape of 'commissioned buildings nobody wants'. Neither the place of the sonnet, or even a more contemporaneous 'objectivism', the precise formal qualities of a space such as this are yet to be effectively discerned. 'Griffiths', writes Sinclair, 'in his centrifugal frenzy is the counter-motion' (xi). His poetry must find a way of countering the balance, or at least coming to an effective understanding of the place of poetry amongst such a dystopian mess. 'His poetry revives a sense of wonder within the wreckage', continues Bush, 'and in so doing reconstructs a new poetry beyond the limits of cynicism and irony' (Bush 36).

With Bill Griffiths the London exposed is one where the fantasies of planners are couched in the hollow Blairite London of 'cool Britannia'. In the first section – *The Trauma of the City* – the poet describes a walk around London as somehow like a walk around Rome, where even though the Blairs are smiling patronizing from the front pages the 'past bigotries' of the state are still immutably present in the urban fabric:

In some ways
it is like living in Rome:
and the ruins of past bigotries leap out
and obstruct you at every turn (8)

The city is a constant battle, it seems, between what he dearly wants it to be, and the grudging acceptance of what built those streets in reality. It is impossible to escape the 'controls' of a powerful elite because they glare down from you each day from the 'penile and montane edifices' of their buildings. The history of the powerful 'leap[s] out' at him, not as something that is easily accepted, but an 'obstruction' that reinforces the city as a space of 'enclosure' where the walls serve only to buttress dominant social mores:

cores and founding-rims, uric cones
tumble in
of hellish boat consignments.
the coffee-tradin00g in bodies fruiting in vast capital charities
& linefold laws that ate monk-lands their flower is the
defielding of many, enclosing movement
there are the walls and the square blindnesses,
mazes and wants,
old traps (8).

The city is encountered as a place of 'walls', 'wants' and 'traps'. Its very existence is premised on the stealing of property, of the 'defielding of many' that forced people into cities like London as a result of the enclosure act. This 'fenced commonwealth of decay' represents the

neoclassical stamp of authority that various rulers have craved (9). These parade grounds, statues and palaces – to Griffiths no better than ‘square blindnesses’ and ‘mazes’ – are the paraphernalia of a single narrative that pervades each and every street issuing out from the centre. Griffiths accuses them of trying to ‘rewrite our history’ amidst such pomp and self-congratulatory exclusion. It is the task of the poet ‘to bring love’ to these clinical and cynical spaces. ‘For what uglier things could thrive’, he writes, ‘behind limed laced rings and rounds’ (9).

This is certainly where Griffiths poetry brings something original, but at the same time familiar, to the materials of the city poem. He initially seems unafraid of reviving those utopian currents that emphatically undergirded the romantic city. His stated aim in the first section of the poem he describes in an interview with William Rowe as a ‘mock psychoanalysis of the city attempting to get back to its basic urges and motivations’ (Rowe 192). But the psychoanalysis he draws upon isn’t the famous model sketched out by Freud, but that popularized by his former student Wilhelm Reich. In this context the recent riots would be described in terms of the bubbling over of sexual energy long since oppressed by the state and its organs of control. ‘The essential requirement to cure psychic disturbances is the reestablishment of the natural capacity for love’, wrote Reich in his text *The Function of the Orgasm* (1967), ‘It is dependent upon social as well as psychic conditions’ (6). Indeed, a phenomenon like ‘rioting’ in the city would be seen by Reich purely in terms of this ‘orgiastic impotence’:

The unity and congruity of culture and nature, work and love, morality and sexuality, longed for from time immemorial, will remain a dream as long as man continues to condemn the biological demand for natural (orgiastic) sexual gratification. Genuine democracy and freedom founded on consciousness and responsibility are also doomed to remain an illusion until this demand is

fulfilled. Helpless subjugation to chaotic social conditions will continue to typify human existence. The destruction of life by means of coercive education and war will prevail (Reich 8).

The poet starts by positing the state itself as responsible for the 'damming up' of London's collective libido. The prudes in Whitehall are responsible for the alienation and anxiety in the streets of the city. In order to counter this Griffiths explains that he will 'analyse' and 'endupe' 'psycho-sedate' and 'probe... the city's mass' (Griffiths 13). He will strip London of the trappings of power in order to encounter it in its purest state. 'Clean it of image and identity', writes Griffiths, 'scour it to calmness/ once more to its core' (13).

But in all actuality Griffiths London is a disappointment. The poet still finds power in the same hands, and the city itself unrecognizable in any evocative sense. London is a place where the 'CENTRE' is 'BOWELLED OUT' with only the 'LIVING RIM' sustaining any sort of meaningful 'LIFE' (6). After spending his early years in amongst the radical poetic communities that existed in London in the late Sixties and early Seventies – a London that, for him, was the site of a 'common bond' – all that greets him is the ultimate Millennial dystopia:

What is the city doing?

Its past a terror
Present a confusion
Making for more malfiguring of the Past.
No wonder everyone is in alarm (6).

Indeed, to Griffiths, rather than resembling a coherent manifestation of social space the city is 'discontinued' or where 'something organic has snapped':

Its cogent limbs of population

Are disburst –
Uncopulant disgagment treks them
So that they knot, get at
The molecule-thin edge logic
Demand audience of the Ego
(who is nowhere near eros) (6)

The emphasis here is on the '*dis*' of 'disburst' and 'disgagement'. These *disordered* terms – especially the neologisms – betray a poet juggling with the appropriate terminology with which to describe the city. Rather than a sense of homeliness, in London as it stands at the turn of the millennium there is only dissonance. This 'disorder', therefore, extends to the writings of Griffiths himself. 'Can the poet be as mad as the city?' writes Sinclair in his introduction to the text, 'Griffiths is a master of the distorted monologue: Robert Browning after ECT. We are all now involuntary clients of the state. There is no public place for this public poem'(xi). It is that sense of the city as being irretrievably bound up with a state logic that leads Griffiths to view London as some kind of monolithic edifice where the 'Millennium Dome' stands for the planning aspirations of a vacuous Blairite elite. '[G]esture of Troy', writes Griffiths of the blanched ambitions of such neoliberal structures, 'beggars/ planners' (8). Rather than produce buildings consonant with one of the most populous sites in world history, the planners run cap in hand to the government in order to create self-gratifying monuments to its power. The tacky Millennium Dome stands in not only for the failure of the city to engender an effective model of social space, but for the corruption and twisted logic that now indefatigably occupies the centre.

Moreover, what the poet eventually divines at the core of the city is anything but the orgiastic potential of a rejuvenated collective psyche. In the same interview Griffiths describes Eros, as the primary 'motivation towards violence and power' (Rowe 192). To Griffiths Freud, and his

disciples like Reich, are 'dangerous' because the 'inherited genetic urges' towards sexual fulfillment they popularized come with no real checks and balances. Eros, in other words, becomes an excuse, or an 'urge' by which you can 'justify anything'. '[W]hat happens in the popular mind is that Eros is the justification, is the source of anything and everything', explains the poet, 'so it ends up that once you've established that there is any sort of inherent motivation, that in fact you can use that to justify whatever you like' (Rowe 192). In the final section of *The Trauma of the City* entitled 'The Awakening', Griffiths, instead, returns to what he believes to be the primary motivations behind a city like London:

We too are part of the fabric.
We too are worked and eaten,
bulled into strain of
all the systems of control
and aim to produce
that enlarges our own
place of winning (21).

The human being is simply caught up in the production cycles of a city seen entirely as a place to 'produce rubbish' and useless consumer trinkets. These 'systems of control' see human life as no different from the buildings themselves: objects to be manipulated, bought and sold. The primary motivation that drives this conurbation isn't Eros, as much as the rules and regulations put in place by the powers that be:

Limits: there will be yards and boxes,
Exposure by handcuffs
Stress by dying
To help make work the city.
Limits: capacity is not permission
And all those latinate things that mean shades of NO (21).

London, indeed every western city, is portrayed as simply the place of ‘permissions’ and restrictions that are part and parcel of the state’s biopolitical controls. To Griffiths London is a place of exclusion, codified in a legalese unrecognizable to most of the city’s inhabitants. Indeed, in that interview Griffiths refers to Foucault to claim that the ‘basic urges’ that he is trying to identify, are actually kept in check by precisely such ‘cultural pressure[s]’. ‘I found that a very liberating approach because you don’t have to pay reverence to any idea of a fixed human or a fixed culture or what have you’, he explains, ‘you can go broader’ (192).

Griffiths draws, here, on the whole idea of a ‘repressive hypothesis’ in psychoanalysis. To Foucault in *the History of Sexuality* (1978) it isn’t that Eros is ‘repressed’ as such, but that we identify with a sexuality that is implicated within multiple ‘regimes of power’. As he writes in part one of his text, things are much more complicated than a psychoanalyst like Reich suggests:

The central issue, then (at least in the first instance), is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and view points from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to think about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the overall “discursive fact” the way in which sex is “put into discourse” (Foucault 11).

To Griffiths we are not immediately ‘explained’ by a ‘basic urge, or in his own words there isn’t a ‘basic urge which defines a human’ (Rowe 192). What matters isn’t the recovery of repressed social desires, but the ‘channels’, indeed the ‘restrictions’, that are put in place as a result of the various discourses of power. ‘He’s saying that our real basic urge is to think that we are human’, explains Griffiths of Foucault’s questioning of psychoanalysis, ‘[a]nd the lengths we go to in

order to ensure this safety of identity are quite miraculous' (Rowe 192). The repressive hypothesis is unacceptable to Griffiths, because it thinks of systems of power as a purely negative phenomenon focused on 'prohibition', when in all actuality they are implicated within our lives as an effect of governmental systems of control in which we 'work by ourselves'. The point is that there isn't a single, visible 'bogeyman' out there as much as systematic series of controls that 'produce' ideological subjects on an everyday basis.

So the primary 'motivation' behind the city, now that he has stripped it clean, has nothing to do with Eros. Indeed, Griffiths isolates its base desires and wants in a single term, 'sacrifice'. The city isn't an altruistic entity at all, and instead builds itself upon the destruction of countless human lives, or the crushing of that which doesn't fit into the limited rubric of its 'planning'. The economic base of the city is founded on the obliteration of not only those in London, but spread across the length and breadth of the entire world. '[I]t does seem to me ultimately that our culture works to define a human by sacrificing others', Griffiths states in his interview with Rowe, 'the First World maintains its priorities both economically and culturally by sacrificing the third world' (192). In *Spilt Cities* the legacy of the powerful in history still reverberates in the walls of the buildings, a cacophonous hymn to the sanctity of long since disappeared generations who exploited both trade winds and people equally:

Truly, I fear not the dead
but what they still do.
They hand on themselves, excuses.
It runs like fire through the ground,
Bursts in the buildings (10 – 11)

'This is no show', writes Griffiths, 'but a diorama' (11). The space of London is not a physically animated place, but a hollowed-out plaything for its masters to tinker with in the most unalloyed manner. The 'legacy of the myth of the beloved imperial ruler' lives on in the 'lofty columns', 'icy-white and curly gold.... dedicated to Rome' (11). The fantasy of control is sourced deep beneath the city streets, in layer upon layer of historical attempts to mould its inhabitants. 'We do not even see it', explains the poet, 'go like dough,/ the shaping of society, / the semi-hinted wish-dynamics of population' (12).

Just like in Griffiths' poetry, then, the problem of the city today is that the appropriate terminology no longer exists to describe it. The urban environment is subject to a new form of stress showing itself not just upon the physical site of the city but in the conceptual space that has traditionally marked out the boundaries themselves. Under the lure of a singular ideal of identity, moreover, urban space contracts into the infinitesimal spaces most representative of its paranoid desire for control. In its sheer monumentality today's metropolis no longer seeks to expand but to effectively destroy all alternatives. An appropriate lexicon for urban space in the contemporary might be more adequately encapsulated within a term like 'urbicide'. Referring to the conscious destruction of the urban environment – particularly 'public' sites or significant monuments – urbicide is etymologically linked to the conditions surrounding internecine conflict or war. In Martin Coward's text *Urbicide: The Politics of Urban Destruction* (2009), for example, he widens this definition to include any urban policy that manifests itself in a pitched battle between different ideas of what 'city' is:

The term Urbicide has been invoked by a number of commentators in order to draw attention to the need for a consideration of destruction of the built environment as a form of violence in its own right. Originating in discussions of urban renewal programs in America, the concept of Urbicide was intended to indicate the manner in which the city, both as architectural form and socio-political experience, was under attack in twentieth century urban planning and development... The new buildings of the Columbia University Gym and the World Trade Center are taken to represent disruptions of an urban ideal. Along with road-building projects such as the Lower Manhattan Expressway, these developments are taken to comprise a wholesale assault on an ideal notion of urbanity (36)

The 'ideal notion of urbanity' Coward refers to symbolizes various 'disruptions' as to different perceptions of the function and heritage of urban space. Columbia University's Gym, for instance, is a political hot potato because of the encroachment of that white middle class institution's territory onto the predominantly black working class space of Harlem in 2008. To that university such a project might be labelled a financial necessity, or simply economic 'expansion', but to the local people involved it becomes erasure, or the violence implicit in a singular ideal of urban space. In Coward's text he points to Mostar in Bosnia as an example of urbicide *in extremis*. The destruction of the Stari Most – a bridge that effectively formed a link between Muslim and Christian communities in the area for generations – is portrayed by Coward as an attempt to 'cleanse' Bosnia of 'non croats' (1). The sixty shells that fell on the bridge on that fateful day in 1992 were a conscious attempt to delete alternative possibilities from existence. Not so much an 'occlusion', but a logic of destruction. This is a 'common identity' operating at the most base level imaginable. By destroying the civic infrastructure *urbicide* is the ultimate symptom of territorial closure in both a spatial and linguistic sense.

What is needed in this study, then, is a conception of urban space that exceeds the merely rational. *Polis* should be opened out, or interrupted, by representations of urbanity more fitting

for the modern stage. Before poetry can engage with the city once more, the precise shape of the *polis* in the twenty-first century needs to be sketched out. Bill Griffiths' *Book of Spilt Cities* was the initial poetic shape of this enquiry, but a subsequent frame of reference needs to be isolated for the city itself. Giorgio Agamben's etymological analysis of the space between the words *polis* and *metropolis* is fundamental in this regard:

The first instructive observation suggested by the etymology is that the word metropolis has a strong connotation of maximum dislocation and spatial and political dishomogeneity, as that which defines the relationship between the state, or the city, and colonies. And this raises a series of doubts about the current idea of the metropolis as urban, continuum and relatively homogeneous fabric. This is the first consideration: the isonomy that defines the Greek polis as a model of political city is excluded from the relation between metropolis and colony, and therefore the term metropolis, when transposed to describe an urban fabric, carries this fundamental dishomogeneity with it. So I propose that we keep the term metropolis for something substantially other from the city, in the traditional conception of the polis, i.e. something politically and spatially isonomic (Agamben "Metropolis")

The city today, then, is defined by the 'dishomogeneity' of this *metropolis* – a term that is also readily encapsulated in the work of Griffiths himself. As concept *polis* shatters against the weight of expectation, emptying itself of meaning across a gridiron pattern now conceived as sprawl. '[I]n every skyscraper there is someone going mad', explains Italo Calvino in his seminal text *Invisible Cities* (1973), 'the city is redundant; it repeats itself so that something will stick in the mind' (19). The problem of the city becomes the desire to search for moments of fixity within urban environments such as these, which is a futile gesture premised on the denial of the city in itself.

The *polis* as a single dialect – or idiomatic speech – is premised entirely on its exclusive sharing. The problem of the city, then, is nothing less than the space of the *polis* reacting to its own conceptual annihilation. This anxious response is symptomatic of a crisis in western conceptions

of being together eager to reassert 'coherence' as its *a priori* function and goal. Furthermore, this battle is a linguistic one because it encompasses the refusal to see the city as anything other than a 'common space' in line with the logic of the state. To Warren Mitchell this 'problem' originates quite specifically with the deployment of horse drawn artillery pieces in 1494 by Charles VIII of France. This is because the 'walls' of the city – or, the enclosure that defines it – became immediately penetrable and as a result lacked the physical shape that makes '*polis*' possible. Moreover, the friend/ enemy distinction that defines what is 'inside' and 'outside' doesn't hold true now that these walls have been breached:

In the past, defenders of places and populations could mostly depend on more traditional strategies for distinguishing between friends and adversaries. The matter could often be settled, very simply, by relationship to physical boundaries; if you were inside the city walls, the default assumption was that you were one of us, but if you were outside, then you were presumed to be one of them (Mitchell 53)

No longer do human beings live 'inside' or 'outside' the city as an identifiable *topos*, but instead within a vast network of communications that penetrates beyond any idea of enclosure to encompass the world. There is no immediately accessible identity either inside the compound or exterior to it. 'Extension and entanglement trump enclosure and autonomy', explains Mitchell, 'in a networked world, foes are sometimes shadowy, spatially dispersed and mobile' (53).

If *polis* or small, contained social spaces are no longer possible, it is quite feasible to see the vastness of today's cities as the opportunity for an opening. In answer to such questions the architect Rem Koolhaas has proposed a thinking of social space that reclaims the disparate urban topography of the present. His theoretical lexicon to encapsulate this reclamation turns

on the word 'Bigness'. To Koolhaas Bigness is a middle-fingered salute to classical ideas of social space. 'It exists; at most, it coexists', writes the architect, 'Its subtext is *fuck context*' (502). Or, as he explains further:

[I]n spite of its dumb name, Bigness is a theoretical domain at this *fin de siècle*: in a landscape of disarray, disassembly, dissociation, disclamation, the attraction of Bigness is its potential to reconstruct the whole, resurrect the Real, reinvent the collective, reclaim maximum possibility' (S,M,L,XL 510).

Bigness is a non-totalizing conception of urban space that retains a revolutionary dimension.

'Instead of enforcing coexistence', continues Koolhaas, 'Bigness depends on regimes of freedoms, the assembly of maximum difference' (511). Bigness realizes that there are spaces in the city beyond any monolithic sense of 'architecture'. 'Although Bigness is a blueprint for perpetual intensity, it also offers degrees of serenity and even blandness', explains Koolhaas, 'it is simply impossible to animate its entire mass without intention. Its vastness exhausts architecture's compulsive need to decide and determine' (S,M,L,XL 513). Bigness harnesses the contradictory terms of these dissonant conurbations. Its discordant embrace, paves the way to what the architect calls the 'post heroic' city. This is an urbanism that proclaims its own neutrality whilst destroying the ego. This is a city that finally attempts to creatively renege on the planner's mandate of 'control'.

To Koolhaas the city is defined primarily by its clashes and contrasts. The old urban fabric dotted with the vestiges of modernisms and classicisms, rubs up against a vast sprawling topography that defies both accurate description and the imprint of the planner. There are no exclusive and authentic social spaces, if there were they would be lost in the chaos of the multi-

layered streets. 'The street has become residue', writes Koolhaas of this situation, 'organizational device, mere segment of the continuous metropolitan plane where the remnants of the past face the equipment of the new in an uneasy standoff' (*S,M,L,XL* 514). Language that inhabits this space necessarily finds itself dissonantly reflecting the terms of this conflict. As Calvino writes of one of his imaginary spaces, the city today is best conceived as a dialect emerging from underneath the attempts at dominance of social space by the narratives of the state:

...to be sure, words were more useful than objects and gestures in listing the most important things of every province and city – monuments, markets, costumes, fauna and flora – and yet when Polo began to talk about how life must be in those places, day after day, evening after evening, words failed him, and little by little, he went back to relying on gestures, grimaces, glances (42).

Calvino's text suggests that state-historical versions of urban space are resistant to the language and experience of citizens themselves. What is needed, instead, is both a conceptual and physical space less in sway to these attempts at closure. Koolhaas' framework premised on Bigness is the kind of thinking that, as he puts it, turns socio-political 'certainties' into 'mysteries' more able to harness effective modes of fragmentation and difference. 'Where architecture reveals, Bigness perplexes', writes Koolhaas, 'Bigness transforms the city from a summation of certainties into an accumulation of mysteries. What you see is no longer what you get' (501). Rather than being the seeming site of a collective 'belonging' – the city privileges the unknown. The metropolis for the first time in history positions itself as an opening consisting of a huge amount of contrasting and conflicting parts.

Poetry, Polis and Necropolis

'The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyōto-Ōsaka, without shape' (Calvino 139)

The Generic City is the city liberated from the captivity of center, from the straightjacket of identity. The Generic City breaks with this destructive cycle of dependency: it is nothing but a reflection of present need and present ability. It is the city without history. It is big enough for everybody. It is easy. It does not need maintenance. If it gets too small it just expands. If it gets old it just self-destructs and renews. It is equally exciting – or unexciting – everywhere. It is “superficial” – like a Hollywood studio lot, it can produce a new identity every Monday morning (Koolhaas “The Generic City” 1250)

For all of its singular mastery and powerful voicing, the poem ends in a self-abnegating paradox, presenting an ideal of social being achievable only through the shrouding of heroic individuality and the silencing of the human voice (Izenberg 78).

Poetry, Polis and Necropolis

“To be in the city is also to be in the ancient habitus of refusal and resistance. Bodies assert their incalculable drives. Noise is made. It is the present” (Robertson Nilling 69)

The problem of the city speaks to us most urgently as a dilemma of representation. If poetry is an affirmation of who “we” are in the strictly Izenbergian sense, then it cannot remain dismissive of the most necessary site of association. Such writing would be no more than an adjunct of linguistic closure, whereby the means of poetic depiction are premised on limiting formal strategies and their uninspiring accomplishments. Urbicide is this time enacted linguistically, in other words, as a retreat from plurality. Rather than a means to explore urban subject matter proper, the poem obediently regurgitates the logic of the state. This is an inescapable function of language, as long as it is premised upon semantic closure. In order to explode these restrictions poetry must work implicitly outside of the closure that the state claims for itself as ‘community’. This means abandoning not only the various pastoralist affectations that will be shown to saturate poetics since the romantics, but what Allen Fisher calls during *Confidence in Lack* the ‘retro-harnessing of modernism and its huge variety of materialist and fascist engines’ (7). Poetry must not aspire to Wordsworth’s Grasmere, or even the enclosed poetic communities of Pound’s ‘vortex’, but instead have the confidence, indeed the temerity, to strive against *polis* entirely and celebrate what Fisher calls ‘its lack of completeness or holistic conception’ (7). The battle, therefore, is not so much to define a space for writing, but to work against the very idea of enclosure itself. This is a ‘problem’ with apperceptions of ‘the social’, but also a problem encapsulated within the very means of communication. As Hilary Lawson has made clear the ability of language to shut down possibilities has been a symptom of its logic making processes from the very beginning.

‘Language’, he writes, ‘is the outcome of closure’ (Lawson 9). Like it or not, words when either spoken or written are the ossified remnants of a consensus as to what meaning ‘is’, or the ‘common substance’ that Aristotle desired behind the walls of his *polis*. Words represent not only a once variegated world hardened into linguistic ‘fact’, but the closing down of possibilities that exist outside of language itself. One defining characteristic of the writers chosen for this study is that they all struggle with the imposition of a language of exclusion in the city. Refusing to see urban social being as a ‘problem’ these are poetics defined by the interstices of the *cosmopolis* as it expands and contracts under the conflicting weight of unstable and competing perceptions of exactly what ‘urbanity’ is.

At the central spine of this thesis is the suggestion that poetry is antagonistic to the *polis*. Indeed, what concerns the following chapters is the identification of writing that aims to counter the imbalance at the heart of the political. Since its classical conception poetry has always been positioned as something opposed to the desire for ‘closure’. ‘The gravest charge against poetry’, Plato famously wrote, ‘[is that] it has a terrible power to corrupt’ (Plato 605). Indeed, in Plato’s ideal *polis* poetry was banished completely. As a slippery form of writing that bore no inherent relation to ‘truth’, it remained the poorer relation to philosophy where ‘logic’ and precise calculations held sway. In Fisher’s recent redraft of his essay *Confidence in Lack*, for instance, he similarly quotes Plato’s *Republic* to make the point that this literary genre has always been interpreted in terms of its wanton excess. The ‘problem’ with poetry, according to

Fisher's version of Plato's text has been its refusal to lay its cards on the table and present a rational *mimesis* to the world:

[All] poetry from Homer onwards consists in representing a semblance of its subject, whatever it may be, including any kind of human excellence, with no grasp of reality. We were speaking just now of the painter who can produce what looks like a shoemaker to the spectator who, being ignorant of shoemaking as he is himself, judges only by form and colour. In the same way the poet, knowing nothing more than how to represent appearances, can paint in words his picture of any craftsman so as to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only the form of expression; the inherent charm of the metre, rhythm, and musical setting is enough to make them think he has discoursed admirably about generalship or shoemaking or any other technical subject. Strip what the poet has to say of its poetical colouring and I think you must have seen what it comes to in plain prose (Fisher "Complexity Manifold 2" 250).

There is no point to poetry, when the subject matter covered could be equally expressed in a few lines of prose. The intentions of the poet are suspect because there is seemingly no need for this obfuscation. 'In short poetry is a species of mental poison', writes Fisher, 'and it is the enemy of truth' (251). The carefully crafted discourse of the poet is symptomatic of the desire to pull the wool over the eyes of people who come to literature purely as a means to disclose essential facts about the world. 'What poetry is capable of through deliberate and detailed poetic investigation of poetic form' writes Fisher, 'often leaves the best poetry incapable of matching the public demand for continuous and linear prose' (251).

The *polis*, in this understanding, has no time for poets that seek to do justice to its sense of bigness and *melee*. Rather than composing odes to its greatness, the poet's time would be better spent describing the precise boundaries of its enclosure. The poet and critic Louis Armand has described the *polis* in the western tradition as more like a '*necropolis*' in this regard ("Nomad is This" 100). 'The abstract *polis* as construed in Plato's *Republic* is a linguistically

closed space', writes Armand, 'a type of juridical technocracy from which *poiesis* has been exiled' (101). This dead city, confined as it is within its imaginary walls, is a metropolitan area devoid of language in any genuine sense of that word. But this thesis seeks to point to writing on the city that is resistant to such accepted perspectives. *Polis* – as interpreted through the analysis that follows – is wholly opposed to the machinations of the state, and instead the necessary site of a language founded on conflict and *melee*. As Armand continues, this is the *polis* envisaged as a different entity entirely:

[T]he *polis* not [in the sense of] the Greek city-state as zone of tribal, taxonomic exclusion; of sedentary fixity; of counter-itinerancy – but rather the *polis* as internally traversed, as... that psychogeographical terrain whose fantasy of the 'one', refracted through the language-mirror, seethes with indeterminacies, paradoxes, contradictions. *Polis* as metropolis and cosmopolis (105).

Poetry on the city should revel in the paradoxes that inhabiting such a structure of 'networks and flows' inevitably entails. The *polis* needn't be a *necropolis*, but a place overflowing with possibilities instead. Opposed to conceptualizations of community in aspic – community as 'stasis' – the city becomes the very antithesis of a 'dead' or 'inactive' place. Lisa Robertson's recent critical work *Nilling* (2012) seems best able to contextualize the parameters of a space for writing able to resist this state of affairs. To Robertson, there is little point in writing of the city unless it is seen as a 'habitual' site of conflict or *melee*. 'The city never becomes a static image of its own nostalgia', writes Robertson, 'because some movement will always be indeterminate. Centrally defined limits and products are misused and, transgressed, border practices take on a deeply layered and concentrated history of related counter activity' (*Nilling*, 69).

Closely analyzing the all-pervasive influence of this singular ideal of urban space will be the focal point of what follows. Seeking out representations of the city that are most resistant to these aesthetic circumstances this chapter will begin to sketch out the means by which poets may eventually approach an 'opening' in their apperceptions of the city. With an awareness of to what extent the lure of the *necropolis* permeates the foundations of urban writing, I will present George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968) as an initial example of someone working both inside and outside the logic of the state. After briefly defining the terms of the problem of the city in both its romantic and modernist incarnations, Oppen's text will be encountered as an initial example of the kind of late modernist reaction to the city that emerges in Olson and his later progeny. This is writing, then, beginning to become aware of urban publics that can no longer be satisfactorily adumbrated within the conceptual bounds of the *polis*. Rather than resembling a place of fixity the city today necessarily finds itself on the kind of anti-planning, articulated by Italo Calvino. If poetry is to go beyond these circumstances, it must put itself in a situation where all of the certainties of the past melt away. As Calvino writes:

[A]t that moment all spaces change, all height, distances; the city is transfigured, becomes crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly. But everything must happen as if by chance, without attaching too much importance to it, without insisting that you are performing a decisive operation, remembering clearly that any moment the old [city] will return and solder is ceiling of stone, cobwebs, and mold over all our heads (154).

Any serious engagement with the city must look around the corner – or behind the facade of what is immediately presented – in order to encounter a peripheral urban zone at the margins of *necropolitical* impulses towards enclosure. To writers in this thesis, this nearly always manifests itself in terms of what Calvino calls the 'hidden city' or variations thereof. There is no single narrative undergirding the city, and 'invisible threads' more often than not gesture

towards a social life unrecognized by the *polis* itself. '[In the] city of sadness, there runs an invisible thread that binds one living being to another for a moment', writes Calvino, 'then unravels, then is stretched again between moving points as it draws new and rapid patterns so that at every second the unhappy city contains a happy city unaware of its own existence' (154).

Cities of Prose: Romantic and Modernist Cities

It is little wonder, then, that when poets have turned to the city in the last two hundred years Plato's city of prose does indeed seem to predominate. This is what lies behind Peter Barry's assertion in his text *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (2000), that there has been an outright 'occlusion' of urban poetry since the romantics. Speaking purely of British poetry, Barry goes as far to isolate a semantic opposition that has developed between 'urban' and 'rural' subject matter. Moreover, when it is covered in any definite sense the city becomes a simple conduit for the kind of 'nostalgia' that Robertson describes:

The poetic avoidance of the subject of the city is very marked, then, in the major nineteenth century canonical poets: a 'bald street' will glimmer in Tennyson as a correlative of grief (*In Memoriam*, poem 7), but generally the city is absent from his work, and the preferred locations are classical or medieval: Browning, likewise, wrote elaborate poetic costume mono-dramas set in Renaissance Italy, and Arnold, whose life and work, as a schools inspector revolved around the most mundane British towns and cities, similarly avoided that reality in his poetry (Barry 5).

For this Barry blames the romantics, who he charges with suffusing the literary world with a kind of fluffy 'linguistic pastoralism' (6). This isn't just something affecting the world of 'literature' *per se* but a phenomenon that has encroached into the figurative and idiomatic expressions with which we encounter the world on a daily basis. 'When difficulties [are] encountered we [are] urged to "grasp the nettle"' 'or "take the bull by horns"' explains Barry

(7). Such phrases cannot simply be put down to a merely coincidental parroting of rural terminology in an urban setting, but the very deliberate, or 'shadowy', consequences of insidious attitudes in the 'urban milieu' (6). '[O]ur preference for metaphors with a rural flavour', he explains, '[seem] to highlight a more general and widespread desire to occlude the city'(7). As the following analysis will make clear, this is an attitudinal shift that begins with changing conceptualizations of urban space from the romantic period onwards.

Romantic aesthetics in themselves, however, cannot be blamed for the destruction of urban poetry in any kind of conspiratorial sense. Indeed, romantic poets were initially quite happy to work within the confines of the city, even if at the same time it was encountered as what Larry H Peer in his introduction to the text *Romanticism and the City (2011)* calls a 'philosophical problem'(22). Taking a confirmed 'ruralist' like Wordsworth, for example, there is an inescapable paradox encapsulated in writing poetry consumed by a thoroughly 'urban' audience. 'The confirmed ruralist is also an avid metropolitan', writes Eugene Stelzig on book seven of the *Prelude*, 'making regular sorties to London throughout his life, visiting it for the last time in 1847, three years before his death' ("Wordsworth"181). Moreover, the Romantic period actually began with intense feelings of excitement over the city rarely mentioned until quite recently in criticism on the period¹. Blake's city of Golgonooza, for example, was a poetic

¹ I refer here to a burgeoning field of criticism on romanticism and urban life that begins with James Chandler and Kevin Gilmartin's text *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780- 1840* (2005) and is taken further with Larry Peer's more recent collection of essays *Romanticism and the City (Nineteenth Century Major Lives and Letters)* (2011). These texts take criticism on romanticism and cities much further than those that informed Barry's reading in order to reposition urban life as foundational to the premise of romanticism itself. Another key resource, in this regard, is a special issue of the Journal *Romanticism* devoted to the influence of the metropolis on literature at this time (14.2 [2008]).

refiguring of London firmly entrenched in the belief that the new millennium would usher in a period of universal love where the Babylon associated with London would finally be destroyed. But for the most part the city was nothing but an obstruction to such hopes and ambitions. The central terms that would come to dominate the relationship between poetry and the city were set out by writers like Thomas DeQuincey who – as Tim Fulford makes clear in his essay “Babylon and Jerusalem on the Old Kent Road” specifically in terms of the influence of Wordsworthian ideas on his aesthetics – conceived of a firm ‘division between country and city and poetry and prose’ (Fulford 241). ‘Though London may not be the place in which we may study the poetry of one species’, wrote DeQuincey as if to gesture towards the culmination of Plato’s thinking, ‘it is one in which to study the prose’ (*Confessions* 304). Drawing on recent thinking by poets like Wordsworth, such a mindset abandoned the city to the ‘urban satire’ of the novel. Almost as if it was held beneath contempt the metropolis became something to poke fun at rather than to be taken seriously. ‘Urban dwellers were prosaic’, writes Fulford, ‘they were bombarded with new experiences, but lacked deeper relationships’ (256). ‘Jerusalem’, he continues, ‘would no longer be seen in Paddington or St Pancras and along the Old Kent Road’ (256).

DeQuincey’s ‘retreat’ towards pastoral certainties emerged from an anxiety over a rapidly expanding conurbation that was beginning to encapsulate an alien value system to that projected by the imperial centre that London was becoming at that time. The writer’s refusal to contemplate this city is marked as a direct consequence of its rapid expansion, and eventual

growth into what James Chandler and Kelvin Gilmartin have recently described as the kind of 'world city' that began to emerge in parallel with romanticism at this time (*Romantic Metropolis* 7)². These fears are typified in Wordsworth's 'Prelude VII', where the poet seems to object to the sense of anonymity that the city projects:

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain;
Of a too busy world! Before me flow,
Thou endless stream of men and moving things!
Thy every day appearance, as it strikes - -
With wonder heightened, or sublimed by awe - -
On strangers, of all ages; the quick dance
Of colours, lights, and forms; the deafening din;
The comers and the goers face to face,
Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,
Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
And all the tradesmen's honours overhead:
Here, fronts of houses, like a title-page,
With letters huge inscribed from top to toe (*Collected* 209) .

The city worries Wordsworth because in it the 'comers and goers' are involved in lives that in no way connected with each other. The 'every day appearance' of this place is not a community of people sharing some kind of common bond, but an overwhelming phalanx of human beings engaged in a 'deafening din' recognizable only as 'colours, lights, and forms'. It is this indistinctness that perturbs Wordsworth over anything else. 'The Tartar, and Chinese', intones Wordsworth in recognition of the multicultural space that London was becoming at this time, 'Negro ladies in white muslin gowns'. 'The face of every one', continues the poet, 'that passes by me is a mystery' (211).

² 'London looms as large in most of these essays as it did in the world they attend to', write Chandler and Gilmartin in explanation of the concept of London as a 'world city' in their introduction to *Romantic Metropolis* (2005), 'with nearly a million inhabitants, no European capital surpassed London's size, and in the wider world (according to best estimates) only Edo (Tokyo) and Peking were larger. London's longtime cultural rival, Paris, had a population only half as large. And where London's population represented more than 10 percent of the population of England and Wales... the population of Paris represented less than 2 percent of the total population of France' (Chandler and Gilmartin 2).

For an initial analysis of the problem of the city, then, Wordsworth is an obvious starting point simply because his writings on poetry and poetics were the most cogent attempt to 'occlude' metropolitan forms of experience. Moreover, this aesthetic viewpoint would both harden into the dogmatic rejection of the city, whilst at the same time becoming the accepted aesthetic standard. To Wordsworth the urban realm produced a rootless literature focused on exciting the senses rather than a sincere account of the experiencing individual and its 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' (*Ballads* 17). Wordsworth is not the only poet to have explored these tensions at this time, but his description of the 'savage torpor' of the city in the *Preface* epitomizes the base logic undergirding this perspective. In his manifesto-like text founded upon the use of 'peasant' diction, nothing was more important than divining an originary relationship between language, people and place. The *Lyrical Ballads* proposed a new poetry or 'experiment' written in a common dialect, and their originality came in how they separated themselves from the artificial language and conventions typical of urban living. Moreover, this was a reaction to an overtly 'poetic' diction in the cities themselves, and an attempt to pare language back to its base elements. 'There will be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction', Wordsworth explains in the preface, 'I have taken as much pains as to avoid it as others ordinarily take to produce it; thus I have done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language nearer to the language of men' (15). Conforming to Plato's maxim, this is poetry that rather curiously attempts to distance itself from poetic diction itself. In his landmark text *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* (1964), for example, David Perkins sees this moment in aesthetics as a complete break away from the urban perspectives of Pope *et al* typical of the

Eighteenth century³. This poetry of 'sincerity' was to render the materials of the poem free from the 'mental poison' of the inflated and dishonest vocabulary of urban satirists like Pope and Swift. What was called for this time was a poetics that reassessed the formal ambitions of writing, in the context of a rejection of modernity and its crowds. Such a manifesto is significant to this thesis only in so far as it effectively cancels itself out. 'Sincerity' becomes a major poetic value necessarily implicated in the poem as an *a priori* site of a common language and identity. This is completely removed from the urban diction admonished in the *Prelude*, and an attempt to centre poetry on communitarian imperatives utterly separate from the allegedly debased culture of London.

For Wordsworth, then, sincerity is a strategy both aesthetic and political. If I take these aesthetic considerations, firstly, what Wordsworth is stating in his *Preface* stems from the observations made by Immanuel Kant in his *Third Critique*. To Kant 'taste', and therefore the human perception of what is 'beautiful', can no longer be assessed upon 'universally valid' principles. The rise of the individual, in other words, means that it is no longer possible to universally appreciate 'nature' in the same way that it was previously. 'For it is not to be assumed that even the quality of sensations agrees in all subjects', writes Kant, 'and we can hardly take it for granted that the agreeableness of a colour, or of the tone of a musical instrument... is given a like preference in the climate of everyone' (Kant 100). Wordsworth's

³ In the transformation of Poetry throughout the Eighteenth century', writes Perkins, 'nothing is more remarkable than the emergence of sincerity as a major poetic value, and, indeed, as something required of all artists' (Perkins 1).

focus on the 'pastoral', therefore, can be seen as an attempt to reach a situation where the judgment of taste resembles something more universally valid. The 'violent stimulants' of the city, in this sense, are 'violent' precisely because they represent a cacophony of different takes on aesthetics (most of them no doubt considered by Wordsworth as judgments made on the basis of 'fashion' or the prevailing 'common sense'). In the rustic world of the shepherd, however, nature is the only common principle. The city might destroy any 'unity' of judgment, but if the poet makes a world of simplicity his subject again it will be possible to experience beauty once more as a homogeneous phenomenon. 'For this reason', Kant explains almost in reference to Wordsworth's own position, 'all simple colours are regarded as beautiful so far as pure. Composite colours have not this advantage because, not being simple, there is no standard for estimating whether they should be called pure or impure' (98). Wordsworth's poetics, therefore, insist upon an 'occlusion' of the city because without it there is simply no 'standard' of judgment. His world is not so much monochrome as one of primary colours and elements. There is no contestation as to these principles away from the city, because there is no longer the dumbing down, or 'blunting', of the imagination. Cognition is subtler, more unified, and poetry stands out as an expression of this fundamental aesthetic position. 'To treat the subject with clearness and coherence', writes Wordsworth in the *Preface*, 'I have therefore altogether declined to enter regularly upon this defence' (*Ballads* 14).

But an attitude like this focussed as it is on 'purity' is bound to take on a political dimension as well. These are the same tensions that Jean Jacques Rousseau – who it has been moot to call

the first 'Romantic' – tried to negotiate when he focussed on his own problem of the city just before the French Revolution⁴. To such a political philosopher, the rise of the individual and the city symbolised only an intense 'rupture' in the unity of the natural world. This is the essential dilemma that runs throughout Rousseauian thinking; in as far as 'the social' somehow replaces a state of nature that the rise of the individual and the city covered over in any meaningful sense. This is the philosopher, for instance, who famously blamed the death toll from an earthquake in Portugal on man's propensity to live in such densely populated areas in the first place⁵. If it were not for cities, he assumed, then deaths from such natural disasters would rarely be so catastrophic. Indeed, his description of an ideal 'state of nature' reflects precisely such a vision of 'harmony':

So long as men were content with their rustic huts, so long as they confined themselves to sewing their clothes of skins with thorns or fish bones, to adorning themselves with feathers and shells, to painting their bodies different colours, to perfecting and embellishing their bows and arrows, to carving a few fishing canoes or a few crude musical instruments with sharp stones, in a word, so long as they applied themselves only to tasks a single individual can perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good and, happy as far as they could by their nature be, and continued to enjoy the gentleness of independent dealings with one another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling fields, that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests (Rousseau 167).

From this outlook civic space is something that takes humanity ever further away from the balanced state where the individual subsisted in proportionate and harmonious relations with

⁴ For further reading on Rousseau's relationship to romanticism see William Gardiner's essay "Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic Roots of Modernity" (1999).

⁵ In "Notes from Underground: Lisbon after the Earthquake (2011)" Richard Hamblyn writes: 'The earthquake gave expression to all the unearthly and subearthly terrors that had come to define the city. As the philosopher Walter Hamacher has commented, the figure of the earthquake has grown to exemplify the irrational, the uncontrollable, and the unsurpassable. Ever since the Lisbon disaster, which touched the European mind in one of its more sensitive epochs, the metaphors of ground and tremor completely lost their apparent innocence: they were no longer merely figures of speech (116).

its fellow man. Indeed, it was in attempting to solve this monumental problem that Rousseau would write his rather lack lustre *magnum opus* *The Social Contract* where he would proffer a scientific understanding of society premised on what he obliquely called a 'general will'. 'As nature gives every man an absolute power over all of his limbs', he wrote, 'the social pact gives the body politic an absolute power over all its members; and it is this same power which, when directed by the general will, bears, as I said, the name of sovereignty' (54). Instead of communitarian themes implicit in some mythical primal scene, the city is held together only by the mechanical unity of a 'contract' and its totalitarian-sounding *general will*.

The major impetus of Wordsworth's poetics, therefore, is to bring poetry back once more to this ideal state of nature. The major push is away from the 'atomization' of these new cities, and towards a more organic understanding of society before it was wrenched from the natural world. In the *Preface* – and by focusing on 'common speech' – he aims to negotiate this rupture and present humanity as a coherent body again. Along with this focus on 'sincerity' this involves an emphasis on the importance of the pastoral as a form. In a poem like 'Michael: A Pastoral Poem' (1800) in *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, Wordsworth recounts the corrupting influence of the city on the rural landscape he recognized from his youth. It is a poem that straddles the 'social rupture' I have been describing as mass migration to industrial cities at this time had changed the 'common air' of communities into something completely unrecognizable:

The Cottage which was named the EVENING STAR
Is gone – the Ploughshare has been through the ground
On which it stood; great changes have been wrought
In all the neighbourhood: - yet the oak is left

That grew beside their door; and the remains
Of the unfinished Sheep-fold may be seen
Beside the boisterous brook of Greenhead Ghyll. (87)

In the scene Wordsworth describes the eponymous shepherd of the poem is dead, and his son 'Luke' is not able to continue the family legacy because he has long since escaped to the 'dissolute city' where he 'gave himself' to 'evil courses/ ignominy and shame' (160). The social vanity of the urban realm dissipates any effective understanding of community, and Michael becomes the last inheritor of the kind of state of nature Rousseau describes.

The city is mentioned in the poem only as a corrupting influence. This ideal pastoral image of dwelling is meant to reflect a simplicity and honesty that is completely absent from the city. In the *Preface* these are described as the only conditions from which a 'common language' will ever emerge:

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity; and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended, and are more durable, and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature (*Lyrical Ballads* 19).

Rather than place this narrative in the slums of Manchester, the rural setting works as a template from within which poetic truth and clarity can germinate free from vanity and pretence. The 'fickle tastes' and 'fickle appetites' of the cities at this time are formed by 'arbitrary' and 'capricious habits of expression' and as a result substitute the purity of 'common

speech' for the mindless chatter of the city. In rural spaces there is 'beauty' in the Kantian sense and this is enshrined in the 'permanent' values afforded by nature itself.

Much like in the original *polis*, Wordsworth's idea of 'community' is presaged on 'common speech' and an 'organic' relationship to territory and place. This is what Jonathan Bate – in his text *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1990) – calls an 'ecolect', or 'the distinctive language of a small, unified group' (91). To Bate, this is something extremely radical, in the etymological sense of the word: i.e. pertaining to 'roots'. Looking at a text such as Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* (1906), for example, there is an almost obsessive focus on the self-sufficient constitution of these Lake District communities:

The dwelling-houses and contiguous outhouses, are, in many instances, of the colour of the native rock out of which they have been built... As these houses have been, from father to son, inhabited by persons engaged in the same occupations, yet necessarily without changes in their circumstances, they have received without incongruity additions and accommodations adapted to the need of each successive occupant, who, being for the most part proprietor, was at liberty to follow his own fancy: so that these humble dwellings remind the contemplative spectator of a production of Nature, and may (using a strong expression) rather be said to have grown than to have been erected; - to have risen by an instinct of their own, out of the native rock – so little is there in them of formality, such is their wildness and beauty (70).

Wordsworth's perspective, however, isn't as 'unique' as it might initially seem. His 'ecolect' is a dead language, self-referential, and inextricably bound up in the problem of the city in the first place. That idea of a 'humble dwelling' as a 'production of nature', is actually a desire for a common identity rooted in the landscape both physically and in terms of language. What he observes in these 'dwelling-houses' is a focus on the self-generative capacities of an uninterrupted community. The 'native rock' in the Lake District is not really a reference to a radically new form of dwelling but an attempt to anchor his vision in precisely these conditions.

This organic form of social organization both precedes the 'rupture' put in place by the individual, and provides a point of justification, or origin, for the community at large.

Wordsworth's *necropolis* is the problem of the city incarnate; it carries within its unobtrusive structure a logic that is a negation of the city in poetic terms.

This anxiety over origins becomes even more pronounced by the advent of the modernist city.

Barry marks the modernist period as one in which the city had somewhat of a renaissance in terms of poetry. Using Eliot's *The Wasteland* as his primary evidence for this, he remarks that it would be 'impossible to be a modernist while so completely occluding the city' (5).

'[M]odernism brought it briefly back to the fore', writes Barry, 'with its epicentre in Eliot' (5).

But even if the city was suddenly acceptable subject matter for poetry again, Eliot's reactionary aesthetic position necessarily portrayed a dystopia. Moreover, the fundamental attitude towards language in this period still emphasized a purity of dialect much the same as it had in Wordsworth previously. This thesis, moreover, is an attempt to ascertain how far writing on the city attempts to free itself from such impulses in the wake of Eliot and Pound. As much as he rejected romantic aesthetics, for example, Pound was engaged in that same search for purity.

There is a fundamental 'aloofness' about the ideal poetic 'vortex', that represents the same attitudinal shifts towards enclosure. As Antony Mellors puts it, the modernism of Eliot and Pound still looked to art as the foundation of a more coherent and totalistic political reality that maintained a 'separateness' aiming to fuse an idea of culture with nature:

Art remains the alternative order to rationalizing and inevitably compromised political systems. But precisely by being posited as alternative to the political, art becomes the political alternative albeit in the disguise of 'culture'. Upholding culture, the province of the organic community,

over the institutionalized collectivity, ... modernism misrecognises its own temporal investment in the political... its aesthetic equation ideology is the equation of culture with nature (Mellors 65).

This is especially evident in Pound's writing's on aesthetics where nature and culture combine to inform the fundamentals of a 'mythical system'. As Pound wrote in his essay on Fenollosa if language was to be truly effective it should carry with it a naturalness that would always be unavailable in the city. 'The sentence form was forced upon primitive men by nature itself', wrote Fenollosa in his classic text *The Chinese Character as the Medium for Poetry* that had such an effect in imagist poetics, 'It was not we who made it; it was a reflection of the temporal order in causation'. 'All truth has to be expressed in sentences', he writes, 'because all truth is the transference of power' (Fenollosa 76). Language was the very means by which a natural order could be once more transposed onto the recalcitrant materials of society. Without this essential distinction the 'institutionalized collectivity' would simply perish. This is always undergirded with the desire for an entrenched social order, or the 'permanent' values of nature ascribed to the linguistic mark itself. "The attainment of social order and harmony depends upon humanity's realization of its moral nature", wrote Pound on the confluence of nature and culture via Confucian precepts in his work, "if you neglect the root of the Doctrine...the rest will wither" (*Impact* 20).

To a critic like Barry Pound's obsession with 'breaking the pentameter' unfortunately came secondary to a 'rethinking' of subject matter in order to encompass more urban experience⁶.

⁶ 'In the progress of modernism... the first heave was to break the [hold of] the pentameter' – writes Barry – '[t]he second was to challenge the dominance of Georgian subject matter, especially its anachronistic ruralism, and in this area the outcome of the modernist struggle has been less clear cut' (4)

'Modernism may be associated with the city', writes Peter Brooker on Pound in his text *Modernity and Metropolis* (2001), 'but the bulk of Pound's major modernist work... was composed... at a considerable distance from metropolitan community' (33). London was the raw material not for the imagining of some civic ideal, but rather something that Pound would try and separate himself from instead. The London that he inhabited provided a form of life antithetical to the cultural situation he preferred. The vitriol in a sequence such as the 'Hell Cantos', for example, was formed entirely from a narrative of corruption he perceived in the conditions around him. In Eliot, likewise, London was the very opposite of *polis*. As Brooker explains:

The London of the war years and twenties was a dystopian place, a hell of burning frustration, perhaps, but more a purgatory of pervasive emptiness and lack of connection. And crucially, Eliot saw this in others and in himself; indeed he experienced it first in himself. *The Waste Land* projected an inner world of frayed nerves and breakdown and spoke to a cultural condition of the kind commentators associated especially with the modern metropolis (Brooker 45-46).

The urban condition to such poets was never a part of the solution but a clear expression of society *in extremis*, or the symptom of a culture that was fast approaching some kind of apocalyptic end. These were both poetic projects in which the individual took on a fundamental aloofness opposed to the city. '[These poems were] more than a report', continues Brooker, '[they were] place[s] of struggle, in which a life of personal torment, petty, unrelieved fretfulness battled with the need for stability and order' (46).

Pound's writing, in particular, privileged urban experience only when it conformed to the terms of an overriding plan. 'His places were aesthetic and textual', writes Brooker, 'the Provence of

the warrior-troubadour Bertran de Born, the China of the poet Li Po, mediated through the writings of the American Sinologist Ernest Fenellosa' (49). In a paper for a research seminar at Yale, for example, Edgar Garcia draws on Pound's personal papers and documents in the Beinecke library to criticize what he calls the 'dream city' in the poet's work. In Pound's travel writing – such as "Burgos: A Dream City of Old Castile", Garcia shows how the poet's mythical system sometimes came into collision with his representations of urban reality. 'Pound's travel essay represents place as an imaginary cultural map', writes Garcia, 'but it is in an unsteady relationship to the restless, often catastrophic material of the real world' ("Dream City" 12). When Pound travels, some Spanish children begging are viewed not as an integral part of the experience of Spanish cities, but an obstruction to romantic notions of El Cid that the poet harboured at that time. 'As events continue to rupture the ideality of Pound's geography', writes Garcia, 'he reveals that his cognitive reflex to these environmental disruptions is flight to ever more elaborate dream spaces' (12). Indeed, as the introduction to the essay on Burgos maintains, it is only really the 'dream Spain' that interests Pound from the outset:

After a period of unsatisfactory search and wandering through that inexplicable mixture of hell and paradise which no outlander can understand, but which for convenience we call "Spain of to-day", it is a pleasant thing to find that there is a dream Spain, just as real as Spain's old song-glory, and no more tainted with the appearance of modernity than a time-stained parchment psalter leaf (*Impact* 91-94).

The problem with Pound's 'dream city' – unlike in the visions during Calvino's *Invisible Cities* for example – is that there is a clear collision between the imagined place and that materially laid out in front of him. Like Eliot's depiction of London in *The Wasteland*, Pound reacts unhappily to the materials of the city when they become something other than the vision he would like them to be. 'The poet tightens the referential field', writes Garcia, 'compressing his metaphors

and dream vision, as if to streamline an advance in a battle against the modern world' (13).

Although the city does not remain absent from his vision, poetry becomes the very means by which Pound could make reality 'conform' to his aesthetic position. This brief bit of writing on the city stands out, to Garcia, because it is an attempt to 'subsume place into aesthetics' (1).

Pound's subjugation of place to aesthetics is a formulaic response atypical of the occlusion of urbanity in poetry over the last two hundred years. The impulse is always to make the recalcitrant materials of the city conform to an aesthetic prefigured in the poetics of the author. This is a natural consequence if poetry is seen as the expression of culture and nature in combination. George Oppen, however, differs somewhat in far as he both conforms to and contests these 'modern' exigencies towards enclosure. During the poet's epic poem *Of Being Numerous* (1968), for example, the problem of the city is once again crystallized in his rejection of the urban masses in New York:

... unable to begin
At the beginning, the fortunate
Find everything already here. They are shoppers
Choosers and judges...

And here the brutal
Is without issue, a dead end.

They develop
Argument in order to speak, they become
Unreal, unreal, life loses solidity, loses extent...

They are ghosts that endanger

one's soul. There is a change
In an air
That smells stale, they will come to the end

Of an era
First of all peoples
And one may honorably keep
His distance
If he can (*Collected* 170 – 71).

‘Baseball’s their game’, writes the poet in that same section, ‘because baseball is not a game/ but an argument and difference of opinion’ (171). Baseball isn’t a ‘sport’ as much as a dangerous symbol that belies the paucity of the public sphere. Baseball keeps the social cogs in motion – or as Oppen has it ‘makes the horse races’ – purely as a replacement for a public world of meaningful discourse and conversation. Oppen – like countless poets before him – finds the city a foreboding place rather than a site of *communitas*. Turning away from the city in his writing Oppen engages with a literary trope that has become particularly urgent in the urbanized bounds of the present. His harsh questioning of notions of urbanity, however, also leads him to fundamentally reassess the notion of the city in the first place. ‘What have I got to do with 6th ave’, scrawls Oppen during a note in one of his Daybooks, ‘what has anyone got to do with it’ (*Daybooks* 62).

Such a reaction to the city is hardly surprising in Oppen’s poetry as whilst it was formed from a rejection of romantic aesthetics its origins loosely coalesced around the imagist precepts of Pound. To Oppen, Pound and Eliot – and even more specifically William Carlos Williams in terms of an alternate ‘objectivist’ tradition in America – were responsible for creating ‘a new form and prosody’ that he still held in high regard⁷. ‘[R]ejecting the romanticism, the mere

⁷ ‘But it is Williams that the young poets of this school acknowledge the greatest debt’, writes Oppen during “The Mind’s Own Place”, ‘and if the word *populism* applied to Williams may not be entirely justifiable, it is at any rate

sentimental', writes Oppen in his only prose essay *The Mind's Own Place* (1963), their poetic innovations were important because they delivered what Oppen describes as a fundamental 'test of truth':

That data was and is the core of what "modernism" restored to poetry, the sense of the poet's self among things. So much depends on the red wheel barrow. The distinction between a poem that confidence in itself and its materials, and on the other hand a performance, a speech by the poet, is the distinction between poetry and histrionics. It is part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth. It is possible to say anything in abstract prose, but a great many things one believes or would like to believe or thinks he believes will not substantiate themselves in the concrete materials of the poem ("The Mind's Own Place" 32).

Without the innovations of Pound and Williams, then, there would never have been the inclination towards stepping outside of romanticism. Having said this Oppen's later work saw him adopt a much more critical stance to this particular socio-historical period. To Peter Nicholls, for example, this comes from a specifically objectivist focus on cognition. 'In contrast to Poundian "solipsism" [Oppen's] poetic language allows [him] not to grasp truth as concept', writes Nicholls, "but, quite the opposite, to accept limits to our cognitive ambitions by creating a language which recognizes what he calls the "impenetrability" of the world' ("Modernising Modernism" 42). Rather than the search for purity Oppen's poetics are distinctive because they recognize social space as partial. Pound's sightseeing in Spain is representative of an ultimately limited approach to encountering urban social being that has been replicated thousands of times before. 'What is it you 'loved'/ twisting your voice', writes Oppen of his 'old friend'

true that Williams is the most American of the American poets of his generation, and these young poets have been markedly and a matter of course American' (33). As part of his essay that juxtaposes Pound's elitism with Williams' populism it is clear that Oppen sees Williams as more influential to any sense of an 'American' poetics. The following chapter aims to build on this notion of Williams as fundamental to the American poem, specifically in relation to Whitman and the tradition that grew into Olson's founding of a *polis* at Gloucester. For more information on the central tenets of 'objectivism' please see chapter three.

Pound in a later poem entitled 'Of Hours', '[h]e walks twig-strewn streets/ of the rain/ walks homeward// unteachable' (219).

Initially, then, section 13 of 'Being Numerous' seems to continue in this cognitive tradition.

'Contrasting us to man in his primitive state', writes Izenberg, 'Oppen finds that we are hopelessly blinkered by the good fortune of our civilization' (Izenberg 23). Forced to account for New York within the purview of values entirely disruptive of what is deemed to be 'poetic', the temptation is to take the 'soul' somewhere it will no longer be 'endangered' by conditions.

Fundamentally, however, this is just the hope for the redemptive powers of art to open a space for writing outside of the city similar to that in Pound and Wordsworth. Oppen felt the lure of the 'problem of the city', but at the same time he didn't want to remain 'unteachable', caught repeating the problems of a swaggering ego like Pound. Indeed, his focus on an endurance of vision means that he refuses to submit to these naïve romantic premises and fundamentally questions this ubiquitous reaction instead. As early as section 12 he doubts this western stalemate in the most fundamental sense:

This will never return, never
Unless having reached their limits

They will begin over, that is
Over and over (170)

There can be no going back to such a 'state of nature' because this desire has shown itself to be hopelessly utopian. Moreover, to erase the accumulation of human knowledge and development in one movement like that would be to 'start over' each morning or to wipe the

slate clean at the beginning of each day. Such an outlook would subsume place into the desires for an aesthetic or mythical system such as Pound's. There is violence implicit in this perpetual Groundhog Day as if the natural outcome of a return to nature is almost always a blind search for purity the repetitious logic of which still echoes throughout history.

It is this logic that leads to the seeming rejection – or at least 'questioning' – that eventually comes across in the juxtaposition of section 14. During this section Oppen suddenly recalls his wartime experiences and the human solidarities that emerged in the midst of conflict:

I cannot even now
Altogether disengage myself
From those men

With whom I stood in emplacements, in mess tents,
In hospitals and sheds and hid in the gullies
Of blasted roads in a ruined country...

How forget that? How talk
Distantly of 'The People'
Who are that force
Within the walls
Of cities

Wherein their cars

Echo like history
Down walled avenues
In which one cannot speak (171)

This sudden change of tone is symptomatic of the harsh questioning that is so characteristic of the poet's work. By contrasting the experience of war with everyday life in the city, he presents his former position as arrogant and elitist. The average citizens of New York could be the same army veterans Oppen lived with in a time of crisis: they could be the same people who fought

and died with him when, as Mary Oppen writes in her autobiography, ‘an 8mm shell exploded in a hole where he and two others took refuge’ (M. Oppen 178). The fact that these ‘others’ actually died, gives Oppen reason to see the average person of his generation as much more than ‘ghosts’. Seen in this context – of social being tested against experience – removing himself from the ‘unreal’ life in the city seems like an indulgent affectation.

From Oppen’s earliest text - *Discrete Series* (1932) – this impulse towards an opening is always present. It is as if the poet is trying to recollect ‘actual events’ or the ever-contingent appreciation of ‘real lives’. What matters isn’t that these people share an identity, but the recognition that they inhabit a world where the everyday is the complicated clash and blur of different actions and voices. ‘Who comes is occupied/ Toward the chest’, writes Oppen in an untitled poem from that first volume in an attempt to describe a crowd (Collected 14). This account of urban proximities substitutes any sense of ‘belonging’ and identity for an experience that most people would recognise. This ‘experience’ is one of closeness in the claustrophobic sense, and it is a positive phenomenology of the city that takes technology wholly into account. Whereas Whitman had described a dual sense of panic and fascination in New York, Oppen suspends subjective feeling to give an account of a tram ride:

The asphalt edge
Loose on the plateau,
Horse’s classic height cartless
See electric flash of streetcar,
The fall is falling from electric burst (Collected 14).

In amongst these mundane occurrences in the city arises a parallel sense of entirely new aesthetic experiences. 'The fall' of this streetcar's electricity bursting on the asphalt is something truly astonishing to anyone that takes the time to observe it. Taking that time – especially the time to 'read' – becomes the only real revolutionary activity. The city has not always been this way, but is instead subject to the constant morphing of perspectives as a result of the new possibilities that arise from technology. *Polis* is interrupted, in other words, by the intervention of alien forces on the body politic at large.

In an interview with L S Dembo in 1968, for example, Oppen makes reference to the following poem and how it hopes to do something qualitatively different in terms of urban writing:

Town, a town,
But location
Over which the sun as it comes to it;
Which cools, houses and lamp-posts,
 during the night, with the roads—
Inhabited partly by those
Who have been born here,
Houses built—. From a train one sees
 him in the morning, his morning;
Him in the afternoon, straightening—
People everywhere, time and the work
 pauseless:
One moves between reading and re-reading,
The shape is a moment (*Collected* 25)

Those words 'reading and rereading' are vital here, because they suggest a crowd constantly morphing and changing. This is site-specific writing that focuses not on what Oppen would like this crowd to look like, but the reality of this scene as it immediately presents itself. The poet hoped to represent what he calls in that interview '[h]is place, therefore his moving, a place

that he is familiar with... [but] one moves, one always moves, one's always the guy on the train' (Dembo 204). The crowd that Oppen's 'guy' views from the train is not something that he mythologizes or imbues with some kind of transcendent potential, but remains a fleeting glimpse of 'people everywhere' with no specific unifying attributes. It might be interesting to compare this crowd to the faces Pound famously recounted at the Metro, but without that analogical juxtaposition with the natural world (petals, bough[s]).

This is because Oppen wasn't simply a passive observer of this particular urban site, but uniformly active in the social struggles that predominated at the time. The dislocation the poet may have felt in the Fifties and Sixties, was only 'dislocating' in the first place because of the tightly knit sense of community he experienced in the tenements of the Bronx. George and his wife Mary were both somewhat reluctant members of the Communist Party of America, George himself abandoning poetry for his role as an 'organiser'. Their attachment to politics wasn't the basis of an ideological commitment, but the recognition that something had to be done about people literally starving in the streets themselves. 'The unemployed were the victims who had no desire for revolution', writes Mary, 'what they wanted and were willing to fight for if necessary were jobs, food, and rent money' (M. Oppen 146 – 47). In *Return* Oppen writes of those times with more than a little fondness. Juxtaposed to the time in which he was writing, the political solidarity displayed by these people had a naturalness to it entirely absent from the post war city:

Among old streets
And the old boroughs, ourselves

Among these streets where, Petra beat
A washpan out of her window gathering
A crowd like a rescue. Relief
As they said it, The Relief. Petra
Decisive suddenly among her children
In those crumbling bedrooms (*Collected* 48 – 49)

‘These were our times’, writes Oppen in the poem, and the repetition of ‘a’ sounds and the pronoun itself suggests a New York where things were truly happening and taking place. But it would be wrong to posit this section as simply bleary-eyed nostalgia. In this scene there is no time for a community founded on a distinct and autonomous identity. This is a ‘community’ formed from political struggle, from conflict, and as such it defies the logic of the *polis*. ‘The Relief’, as Oppen writes of it is recalled by Mary in *Meaning a Life* as the rescuing of tenement blocks from eviction during the Rent Strikes. ‘Petra Roja’, as Mary recalls it, ‘called a crowd together by leaning out of her tenement window and beating on her dishpan’ (153). This is ‘community’, therefore, as the precise opposite of closure. This community might be better described as coming from a reoccurring experience of ‘emergency’. ‘This was one of the frequent emergencies for which Petra beat her dish pan’, continues Mary, ‘she came down the stairs to march at the head of her little army, to the apartment of the family that was threatened with eviction’ (153). This wasn’t an idealised social scene, but what Mary calls a ‘war for food and shelter’ (154). Regardless of background, of heritage and ideology, this tentative community was ever aware of its finite constitution. Petra ‘ganged up’ with her children because she *had to*; her actions reflected the only possible ethical decision in those trying circumstances.

This is what makes 'The Relief' such pressing subject matter in Oppen's own work. Roja's 'gathering' happened autonomously at the behest of spontaneous events, it certainly had nothing to do the movement of proletarian forces in the Marxist sense. 'Oppen's poetry [isn't] that of the existential intellectual', writes Eric Mottram, 'but a more intellectually committed, socially responsible work which considers the issue of a human future with a precise and ecological sense of men and women among the facts and objectives of the world' ("Political Responsibilities" 156). The urban scene presented by the poet, then, owes much to the qualities admired by Zukofsky in his essay on Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*:

People fill a subway entrance and crowd the scene; a street; and the inside of a factory in which they work at a conveyor belt appears. The rest is the active sentence of continuity which includes a simple but strong plot, so effective it can be seen again and need not be told since as story it is like everyday's newspaper. Useful as a frame of reference it includes a multitude of things, material as well as fantastic things made possible; the screen action holding together in the timing, the sound devices, and the light. The elements of opposition in these cinematic effects and their emotional absorption into relations of the story further the historical validity of the screen by inventing out of the actual world of the spectator' (*Prepositions* 55).

The poem is recognisable to 'the spectator'; it is an integral part of their world. This becomes, therefore, its most socially progressive feature. 'Art does not arise out of thin air', reiterates Zukofsky in that same essay, 'certain conditions existing, the thought (e.g. The Art) which reflects them in the topographic air will make it alive with relation of method embodying them' (51). Writing must take account of exact topographical conditions or it becomes part of the problem. Chaplin's *Modern Times* – perhaps his own most immediately 'urban' work – interests the Objectivist mentality because it documents an 'opening' entirely absent of totalitarian poetics. The film is a sincere account of lives in industrial heartlands separated from any totalizing perspective. 'In Chaplin's film', writes Zukofsky, 'it is usually not even a question of a

strata of society... [b]ut of people in the masks they portray among the actual events determining them' (55).

In Oppen's later work, then, the city becomes an active entity that works in a constant sense of juxtaposition. There is no cohesive or binding quality to this 'multitude of things' – to use Zukofsky's previous definition – but this world exists nevertheless amongst 'the actual'. In *Return* he describes '[a] Sunday paradise/ of Parkway' as if it were a utopia:

Trees flow into trees and the grass
Like water by the very asphalt crown
And summit of things
In the flow of the traffic
The family cars, in the dim
Sound of living
The noise of increase to which we owe
What we possess. We cannot reconcile ourselves.
No one is reconciled, tho we spring
From the ground together (*Collected* 47).

These roots Oppen alludes to, however, are not the roots of nature or the tubers of the kind of autochthony venerated in the romantic tradition. The next section, in fact, describes the growth of the 'Sequoia seed' in comparison, as observed by himself, Mary and his daughter Linda on a trip to the museum. 'How much of the earth's/ crust has lived/ the seed's violence', Oppen exclaims in astonishment, 'The shock is metaphysical!' (47). It is not only city dwellers that must reconcile themselves with the natural world but every living thing on the earth. The seed is representative of a world that cannot in all honesty be kept in a singular state. 'This is not our time', Oppen explains, 'it is time/ Passing' (47 – 48). The world inhabited by Oppen and his family is something much too complicated to claim as *our* own. This 'our' is vital because it

suggests a shared space, a shared experience, belonging to no one in particular. The Parkway is perhaps the ultimate expression of this new conception of social space. It represents a time in American culture when the distinctions between nature and the city were becoming ever more indistinct⁸. Although this ‘rubble of our roots’ is the worst kind of post war consumerism, this ‘asphalt crown’ is nevertheless all there is. What Oppen’s poem calls for – and, indeed, welcomes – is new configurations of ‘city’ in which it can somewhat precariously reside.

Oppen submerges himself within the materials of the city no matter how ugly, no matter how separate to the individual’s projection of what ‘community’ actually *should* be. ‘What is the center is the center, not a God’, writes Oppen in ‘Daybook V’, ‘The god if he is placed there obliterates the center and demands, instead, a frame c – ‘ (*Daybooks* 211). Like much of his workings out in the Daybooks, Oppen leaves this sentence hanging. Its fragmented ending, however, doesn’t take away from the importance of this throw-away remark. Indeed, what is this ‘frame’ around the ‘God’; but a protective marker of limits that both beatifies the God at the centre of the picture, and imposes order? There is an apt metaphor for planning here as well in that any creation of a ‘centre’ invariably destroys the original situation at this illusory metaphorical place. This is not to say that there is an origin or ‘coherence’ that can be

⁸ As Matthew Gandy comments in his text *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (2003):

The urban parkway represented a new spatial configuration of society technology and nature... Yet these new means of mobility would soon transcend their earlier association with leisure and become an integral component of the new urban landscape. Nature became simultaneously more distinct (framed by the window of a moving car), more accessible (through greater public contact with remote areas), and at the same time more individualised as an aesthetic experience’ (123).

‘recovered’ if that God is swept away as such, but that there is a lesson to be learned from placing that God there in the first place. An urban perspective at present, then, should work within this fragmentation in order to let what is already there, and what will appear in the future, *be*. Tim Edensor, for example, has called this the ‘value of disruption’ (Edensor 98). ‘To counter this tendency’, he writes, ‘we should celebrate and foster spaces which contain confusion and energy created by contrasts and clashes. The value of disruption – that which ordering processes try to expunge – lies in its potential to dramatize and reveal the complexities of coexistence, difference and friction that permeate the city’ (136). No *God* but many *gods*, each of them fizzing with their potential singularity: each of them ‘together’ and ‘separate’ at the same time.

In that same *Daybook* Oppen has a draft of a poem that alludes to what he calls ‘hidden places’ a theme that will become familiar to all of the poets chosen for this thesis. The poem, retained here with corrections, reads:

“hidden places” in the town hidden blocks –
in the raw land they were hollows ~~in the~~
In the hills or among the dunes
One finds himself afoot in these blocks
Among the neighborhood stores (*Daybooks* 211).

These ‘hidden places’ represent the sections of New York behind Times Square where a much simpler life goes on in abeyance of what the city is deemed to be by planners and architects of the state. In Oppen’s notes this section is juxtaposed directly with the ‘God’ section below it. My aim isn’t to suggest a poetic technique in this juxtaposition, but that it is an obvious

‘working out’ of a similar process or ‘logic’ to do with his poetry and the city. Indeed, in a poem such as ‘The Source’ in *The Materials* Oppen takes this technique further:

If the city has roots, they are in filth.
It is a slum. Even the sidewalk
Rasps under the feet.

—In some black brick
Tenement, a woman’s body

Glow. The gleam; the unimaginable
Thin feet taper down
The instep naked to the wooden floor!

Hidden and disguised
—and shy?

The city’s
Secret warmth (Collected 76).

The focus in this particular poem falls on the seeming vulnerability of those tenement dwellers feet, as she places her instep towards the floor. Indeed, the ‘warmth’ in the city, to Oppen, can come from no other place. Of course the city’s pavements are caked in a filth, but if there is a ‘source’ or ‘root’ to the city then the poet hopes to find it beyond the din of the boulevards and in the ‘hidden places’ that invariably make up New York’s complicated web of energies. ‘As the unpleasant urban images fall away to reveal the singular luminosity of the woman’s feet’, writes Lyn Graham Barzilai of this poem, ‘the scene takes on a generic quality similar to the biblical story of creation, the light beginning in the dark and generating warmth. This is, therefore, ultimately an affirmative poem, even when clad, as always, in the characteristically unsentimental, stark, and compromising language that is the hallmark of Oppen’s work’ (Barzilai 49). More importantly, however, the move from chaos to cosmos doesn’t take place in some ‘bower’ or ‘retreat’, but directly in the environs of Manhattan itself. To Oppen the

primordial dark has never left Manhattan Island, and small moments of creation can happen each and every day. To observe simply the swarming boulevards, or to damn yourself up away from the city itself, is simply to deny the multiple moments of singularity as they take place. To divest the social, in other words, of what is ultimately constitutive of the social itself.

These moments, however, are fleeting. In 'Tourist Eye' Oppen gives a sense of the city dweller as a perpetual 'tourist' searching in astonishment for some sense of home in the confusion of the city. Like the tree that grows amidst the buildings, urban space is a strange amalgamation of 'the mineral' and 'the living'. The poet attests to how hard it truly is grasping on to moments of fixity in a contingent environment that always 'puts into play' feelings of solidarity and community:

One might look everywhere
As tourists do, the halls and stairways
For something bequeathed

From time, some mark
In those most worn places

Where chance moves among the crowd
Unearned and separate

Among the crowd, the living, that other
Marvel among the mineral (*Collected* 64 – 65)

Oppen's city comes across as a strange 'mixing' of subject and object. The people in New York are funneled down the street with no serious consideration of origins. The city is not best represented by its buildings – or 'a thousand lives... within... glass' as Oppen puts it earlier on in the poem – but by the people themselves. These people take this space for granted; this

experience is 'unearned', yet they carry on regardless perfectly content. They are nevertheless 'that other/ Marvel among the mineral'. Much as a snowstorm may bring Times Square to a halt without warning, the illusory "people" of Manhattan constitute a political body only by 'chance'. This is certainly what Oppen experienced in the depression, and the streets still hold that 'power of menace' as if these palpable moments of being together could happen again. But, like the 'gleam' from the tenement woman's instep, these moments are soon forgotten forever. At the very end of *Return* Oppen plays on the nostalgic presuppositions of Yeats' mythical 'ceremony of innocence' in 'The Second Coming' to suggest the sheer pointlessness of mourning humanity in its natural state:

....The medieval sense seems
Innocent, the very
Ceremony of innocence that was drowned.
It was not. But how imagine it
Of streets boarded and vacant where no time will hatch
Now chairs and walls,
Floors, roofs, the joists and beams,
The woodwork, window sills
In sun in a great weight of brick (*Collected* 54).

In order to conceive of urban space it will first be necessary to understand that whatever 'is' isn't likely to stay the same way forever. Oppen presents New York as what the poet and critic Thom Donavon calls 'Historical being "in process"' or the city as a site of constant 'becoming' ("Review").

All of the writers that follow, then, tackle the problem of the city from within the same double-bind as Oppen. The choice to either reaffirm the necropolis in writing, or merely 'occlude' it

altogether is negotiated by various linguistic strategies dependent upon the weight of the individual poet's formal resistance. It is only by envisaging a form of writing that refuses to subsume place under the terms of aesthetic judgment that the city can ever be approached from within the architecture of an 'opening' such as this. As Louis Armand has written a future poetics that is 'open' in this way must foreground the materials of the poem beyond the overwhelming personality of the poet him or herself:

... the poet must stake everything against the world in order to be *for* the world – that poetry must assume the form, as Blake says, of an *excess* that constantly opens language to the experience of the possible, and whose ethics is not vested in the poet's judgment but in the conditions of poetry. It may be that poetry makes nothing happen, if only for the reason that poetry *is* what happens – it is the language by which the world speaks to what it may become, to its possibility, to its invention (*Solicitations* 67).

Poetry both revels in, and rages against, its status as the anti-matter of the *polis* at one and the same time. 'Poetry is the opposite', writes Pierre Joris in order to affirm this oppositional status, 'a desire to feel everywhere estranged, out of touch/ in reach with the other' (*Nomad Poetics* 140). The poem is marked, therefore, as the ground of precisely such an 'excess'. In the city, to steal Armand's distinction, 'poetry *is* what happens' (68). Aesthetic strategies no longer focus on enclosure, but are manifest in linguistic properties aimed at 'open[ing] language to the experience of the possible'. All the writers that feature in what follows are explicitly engaged in the adoption of precisely such strategies. Divergent from modernist precepts and reactive against their fusty romantic forebears, in each case this is writing that seeks to do something qualitatively different when it comes to the city. Charles Olson is the next point of departure because it is largely within his *Maximus Poems* - and his designation of a 'root city' in his home town of Gloucester, Massachusetts – that the terms of this new relationship are first articulated.

It is through the purview of an explicitly American take on poetics, moreover, that an 'opening' like Oppen's first became possible.

Root City:
Charles Olson's
Polis

'Now the onely way to avoyde shipwracke and to provide for prosperity is to followe the council of micah, to doe justly, to walke humbly with our God, for this end, wee must be knit together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly affection, wee must be willing to abridge ourselves of all superfluities, for the supply of other necessities, we must delight in eache other, make other condicions our own rejoices together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes have before our eies our commission and community in the worke, our community as members of the same body, soe shall we keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace' (Winthrop 19).

'Doom! Doom! Doom! Something seems to whisper it in the very dark trees of America. Doom'! (D.H.Lawrence 168)

'Because of the agora America is, was, from the start, the moral struggle' (Maximus 62)

Root City: Charles Olson's Polis

'Root Person in a Root Place' (Maximus 75)

Charles Olson's 'root city' is initially redolent of Wordsworth's desire for an 'ecolect' at Grasmere, in as far as it communicates nothing particularly dynamic to the uninitiated reader. Indeed, at a purely superficial level there is barely anything that seems to distinguish Olson's *polis* from other spaces of enclosure. But this was certainly not Olson's intention. The 'root city' he envisaged was actually conceived as a bulwark against the state particularly as it had become known in the United States in its immediate post war manifestations. His vision of Gloucester, Massachusetts, was a societal microcosm intentionally opened out for the world. 'Isolated person in Gloucester', Olson consciously addresses the reader at the beginning of the poem, 'I, Maximus, address you/ you islands/ of men and girls' (*Maximus* 16). Olson's *polis* was not Plato's prosaic *necropolis* at the root of the problem of the city, but an all-inclusive social structure inhabited by 'Nova Scotians/ Newfoundlanders/ Sicilianos' amongst many others (16). Moreover, reading works on Olson's poem such as Jeff Wild's "Charles Olson's Maximus: A Polis of Attention and Dialogue (2003)", it becomes clear that this poem is vitally important to this study in its attempts to reconfigure the classical inheritance that had banished poets from the *polis* in the first place. Olson's insistence in paying attention to Plato's arch philosophical enemies the Sophists – a group of philosophers Plato accused of 'specious' or 'deceptive' reasoning – makes his project an incredible topical one. Or, as Wild puts it:

[I]f one sketches this debate that started with Plato as a debate between representational objective truth versus poetic, interpreted truth, one can easily see on what side of the debate Olson places himself. His attempt to define a poetic that creates an open stance to reality is his

response to the debate. In the essay “Human Universe” Olson writes with urgency about Plato and the danger of his version of Truth (15)

‘[Platos’s] world of ideas, of forms as extricable from content, is as much and as dangerous an issue as are logic and classification”, wrote Olson in that essay, “and they need to be seen as such if we are to have some alternative to the whole Greek system” (*Collected Prose* 156). The problem with Greek reasoning like Plato’s has always been the ‘absolute’ sense in which it conceived of language, ‘intermit[s] our participation in experience, and so prevents discovery’ (156). Olson’s writing, in opposition to this premise, is a genuine attempt to reconfigure the insistence on closure responsible for all forms of ‘occlusion’ and exclusion in western poetics. In his attempts to revive a *polis* in his own *locale* of Gloucester, he aimed to represent not only an inversion of the values pronounced by the state but a fusion of, and reengagement with, the flawed romantic and modernist methods of his predecessors.

Charles Olson’s *Maximus Poems* serve as the crux of this chapter because within them he embodies all of the hopes and anxieties that have defined this study so far. To Olson a true city must be ‘rooted’ – part of a complex social ecology and ensconced within a definite sense of origins – and it was only by restoring language through the communicative powers of poetry that this could ever be realized⁹. But the crucial aspect of Olson’s poetics in terms of this thesis

⁹ This ‘social ecology’ in Gloucester is still something that generates an intense sense of pride. In his latest book – *The Decline of Fishes* (2010) – Peter Anastas details the semi-fictional plans to preserve Gloucester’s harbor from the incursions of a shopping mall that was going to be built in the early nineties. On his blog he has the following to say about the original constitution of community in Gloucester and its threatened nature:

But the immediate world around us, or the sense of community we derive from simply being here – from our comfortableness with the ever-recurring patterns of life that are as precious to

is the uncertainty with which he apperceived his *polis*. On the one hand Olson's dream in his epic poem was for an original engagement with this ancient concept in his home town of Gloucester, but on the other he found himself lapsing indefinitely into a solipsism where the only option was to 'sail away' from the 'Hell [of] life [in] America' altogether (*Maximus* 499). As he famously puts it in *Maximus Three*, his role was to protect Gloucester from the encroachments of a technocratic nation state that was rapidly swallowing it up under the socio-economic values propounded by the state. Olson stood back from this dystopian scene in order to realize his *polis* directly in writing:

having descried the nation
to write a Republic
in gloom on Watch-House Point (377)

Olson hoped to summon an effective model of bottom-up socio-political organization for Gloucester through a versification that was distinctly separate from the moribund politics promoted by the state. His aim was to establish his 'root city' in defiance of the paradigms of 'mercantilism' and 'statism' that dominated social space. '[R]oot city', Olson declares in *Maximus One*, 'let them not make you/ as the nation is' (15). 'Polis is/ eyes', the poet insists (30). *Polis* consists not only of the dictates of control handed down from those in power, but a space where everybody bears full responsibility for that which may harm the temperamental

us as the blood flowing in our veins – doesn't exist undisturbed or unchangeable forever. Community must be nurtured. It must be stabilized by good planning, enhanced by proper growth. It cannot be allowed to languish or deteriorate like an abandoned house. By the same token, it cannot sustain radical social, physical or economic change without suffering in ways both obvious and subtle. For when you destroy neighbourhoods by driving long-time residents out; when you undermine deep-seated cultural traditions, like those which have accompanied maritime life; when you destabilize long-existing local businesses, you destroy a sense of community. You dismantle it piece by piece ("*Gloucester on the Brink*").

societal balance that makes Gloucester such an ideal place. As Olson added to his text later on in *Maximus Three*, to write a 'Republic' must be seen as to write:

An actual earth of value
to construct one, from rhythm to
image, and image is knowing, and
knowing, Confucius says, brings one,
to the goal: nothing is possible without
doing it. It is where the test lies, *malgre*
all the thought and all the pell-mell of
proposing it. Or thinking it out or living it
ahead of time (584)

Olson 'constructs' his *polis* in the hope that everybody else will follow him in 'doing it'. 'The republic as resonant body, whose emptiness enables its writing', writes Nick Lawrence, 'not as fulfillment, but as a concretizing of the invisible within it' ("*Olson's Republic*"). In an ideal world Olson's *polis* seems perfectly vocalized because it is concerned about a conception of 'community' finally – and autonomously – coming into fruition at the behest of the citizens themselves. 'There are no hierarchies, no infinite, no such thing as mass', writes Olson, 'there are only/ eyes in all heads/ to be looked out of' (*Maximus* 33).

But even if well-intentioned Olson's vision of community certainly didn't exempt itself from the problems outlined so far in this thesis. '*Polis*', however 'heterogeneous' is an outmoded concept, an impossibility, which should be abandoned as the poisoned chalice it truly represents. In Henry Ferrini's film *Polis is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place* (2007), for example, Olson is shown to have done exactly that when he decries his own ambitions as unrealizable in the longer term. 'Moan the loss', wrote Olson in a letter to the Gloucester Times in the mid sixties, 'city of mediocrity and cheap ambition.... I'm sick of caring' (*Maximus*

to *Gloucester* 45). In a review essay of the film, for example, Peter Barse of the Charles Olson Society states how ultimately the poet's vision for Gloucester 'fell far short of the Olsonian dream'. Indeed, and as Barse writes in his review, Olson eventually 'denied' his 'root city' entirely claiming that 'he had no roots in that city' at all:

For the Greek vision is basically tragic, having nothing whatsoever to do with the more or less emotive or transcendent images that crop up here and there in the film. Peter Anastas remarks sadly on how Gloucester changed (irreversibly) for the worse, from being an 'unspoiled' community... the film has a tragic quality as it moves spasmodically, to document the tensions between the ideal 'city on a hill' and the evolving reality of Gloucester. The politics of the real Gloucester *polis* has little in common with that 'city on a hill' of the Athenian *agora*. The poet's projection of his vision is bound to be disappointed. He is bound to deny his roots at the end. His vision of community was never understood as a source of change; so it was subverted and effectively denied ("Polis is This").

Indeed, Barse refers to a 'deep-rooted' paradox in Olson's work. 'On the one hand, he observes a working landscape and honours 'those who have *polis* in their eyes', writes the reviewer, 'on the other, his is a distinctly elitist view, as in 'it's not the many but the few who care'. Just after Olson has described Gloucester as a 'heterogeneous' place, for example, he seems intent on shutting down the possibilities that it was the original intention of his poem to open. His *polis* initially conceived, quite rightly, as an inclusive structure suddenly collapses into the 'coherence' associated with its main historical precedent. There is even a hint of Wordsworth or Rousseau, here, as the poet rages against the inauthentic world attempting to penetrate Gloucester. 'Polis now/ is a few, is a coherence', Olson affirms, 'who can know who are citizens'? (*Maximus* 45)

Olson's *polis*, then, was also deeply problematic. It was a vision that still mourned that alienating situation where 'Man' has been removed from his original place amongst the things

of the natural world. The very foundations of Olson's writing are permeated with the juxtaposition between his ideal space and that of the 'USA' in general. Gloucester is an old fishing town, and throughout the *Maximus* sequence nothing is more important to Olson than that feeling of 'estrangement' from the local conditions that had allowed it to emerge as a dwelling place in the first instance. His alienation from the vital processes that brought it into existence:

.....I stood estranged
from that which was most familiar. Was delayed,
and not content with the man's argument
that such postponement
is now the nature of
obedience,

that we are all late
in a slow time,
that we grow up many
And the single
is not easily
known (408)

Olson's poetry aims for what he calls in "Human Universe" a 'restoration of the human house' (*Selected* 85). This entails, most fundamentally, an engagement with all of the thematic considerations that inflected the poetry of Wordsworth but this time seen through the prism of a late modernist obsession with objective formal criteria. It is my intention, therefore, to open Olson's poetics out in order to examine the aesthetic considerations that led to this insurmountable paradox in his thinking and writing. His 'open' poetics will be positioned as host to a creeping conservatism manifest most profoundly when he turns to considerations of the political. Putting the blame for this occurrence squarely on the traces of tensions in the romantic poetics of Walt Whitman, and the later 'auratic' tendencies for 'social order' that defined the poetics of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* sequence, Olson will be portrayed as

someone who simply entered into a dialogue with a root city that has been a reoccurring historical obsession for those documenting urban space in America.

'Democratic' Vista(s)?: Howe, Whitman and Williams

For the urban poet in America the poem necessarily finds itself on encountering the fantasy of 'roots'. For Olson this may be in Gloucester, but for writers of a more avowedly 'romantic' vein in the history of American poetics the *locus* of value was always in the pastoral. Early American poetics took time out from the insidious buzz of the city and aimed to commune with what it meant to be an 'American' in the purest sense. This becomes evident, for instance, as early as Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "The Poet" (1844). 'We have yet no genius in America', Emerson complained, 'yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters' ("Essays" 80). Indeed, as Emerson continues trying to conceive of a distinctly American poetics:

For, though the origin of most our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment it symbolized the world to the speaker and hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest words to have once been a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of shells and amalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin. But the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other... the melodies of the poet ascend, and leap, and pierce into the depths of infinite time... ascension... the passage of the soul into higher forms (90).

The theme of 'nature' that had so obsessed Wordsworth is no longer absent from this picture either. To Emerson poetry in itself was a constant battle to wipe the 'fossils' of language clean of the ossifications they had accrued over time. In his essay "Nature", for example, he noted

that words are 'natural facts' which are intrinsically linked to a divine presence. If true communication was to be sourced by a poet then it must be in a diction soiled with the dangling roots of America. It must be a language not only smeared in the authentic loam of origin, but also shining with the 'newness' of an embryonic power. Poets must shun the city when language is not seen in these terms, because it is impossible to see with clarity the value of an idiom that expresses its authenticity. In the United States the poet becomes the very glue that holds this newly emergent nation together.

But in later poets like Williams and Olson American anxieties over the city morph away from such romantic or transcendentalist prejudices. As has been mentioned briefly earlier modernist theories of language respond especially violently to this 'divorce' between the natural world and the city and at times seem to resemble a continuation of this practice. In Pound the call was always for 'order' in direct contrivance to this aesthetic rupture, an inclination that may have been exacerbated by his American heritage¹⁰. Carla Billitteri, in her text *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson and Charles Olson* (2009), links this poetic sensibility directly to the desire for 'Cratylysm' in American poetry that began with writers like Emerson. 'Derived from Plato's *Cratylus*, a dialogue concerned with the correctness of names', writes Billitteri, 'the term "Cratylic" indicates an archaic understanding of language as a natural phenomenon, or words as emanating from or belonging to things so as universal in

¹⁰ 'A national or racial culture exists when the works (art, letters) of that nation do not and do not need to ask for favors because they have been produced by a member of that particular nation or race', wrote Pound in his essay "National Culture: A Manifesto" (1938) for example, '[a] national culture can only exist as long as it *chooses* between other cultures. It obviously descends to the swamps when it degenerates into a snobbism, when it accepts from abroad instead of selecting' ("National Culture" 131).

their reference' (4). The aim of poetry such as this is to transcend the rift between the subject and object in the western tradition, in order to create a language of communication with the ability to name things directly. Such a sensibility is linked directly to the national imaginary. As Billitteri writes:

Romanticism also provided the basis for a Cratylid description of *the nation*, an organic whole in which, potentially, all aspects of society could become the expression of a linguistic ideal. Cratylism, then, began to circulate in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of a celebration of the internal dynamism of a nation, the "genius" of a people expressed in its culture and customs as well as in the life of its language, a natural language because the nation that had produced it is itself a natural phenomenon. This development of Cratylism within the organicist framework was particularly influential for the American Renaissance and is prominent in the writings of Emerson and Whitman, and traces of it persist in modern American poets influenced by those forebears, including Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, and Ezra Pound (6).

This is a nostalgic, but also incredibly utopian, project that finds its most obvious expression in organic theories of language production. But in the early stages of history in America it was the very means by which the disparate strands forming the United States were 'glued' together. Language becomes not only a means of 'communication', but the very instrument that confirms those who communicate share a common identity. The means by which this identity is distributed amongst the 'the people' is codified and sacralized by the figure of the poet *himself*. The root city, to use Olson's later term, is a natural extension of this singular relationship to the language and soil of a nation.

Billitteri portrays Cratylism as a problem that has confounded American poetry ever since it sought to capitalize itself as a distinct genre. Indeed, the deeper the poet progresses into modernity the more urgent this desire seems to become. Further to Barry's positioning of

'double visioning' (or 'digging') as vital to the city poem, the United States has found itself suffering from an even more pronounced version of this phenomenon¹¹. This is what Stephen Fredman, in his text *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the American Tradition* (1993), characterizes as a problematic relationship to collective identity or 'grounding'. To Fredman, in their early contact with the black hole of the individual, American poets are subject to an exposure to the 'rupture' of the modern before anyone else (vii). Indeed, in poets such as Olson the most burning desire is to create a poetry that turns its back on the 'old world' completely. Pound and Eliot looked to Europe as a possible way out of this, but it is only really in the postwar generation that it has been tackled head on. Unlike in the European tradition, furthermore, Fredman notes that there has never really been an 'American' poetics with a distinct ground of its own. Poets like Williams and Olson, then, find themselves ever searching for some kind of context within which to 'root' their poetics. 'Grounding', writes Fredman, seeks to reinvent context, to dig down into the site of rupture in the hope of finding, not the old tradition or a new tradition, but the basis of tradition. Lacking the authority a long-standing tradition confers, American poets have had to invent alternative, provisional ways of grounding their poetry, thus assuming the work of tradition in the absence of a unified context' (xi). The alternative – as D.H.Lawrence cogently noted – is the 'doom' of the abyss, or the recognition that there may be no founding principle at all. American poets, then, fear the possibility for this unsettling more than anything else. Heavily invested in the mytho-poetic narratives of the state, the poem becomes the container for an intense anxiety.

¹¹ 'Double-visioning arises from the tendency of cities to foreground time and change', writes Barry, 'whereas the countryside... primarily connotes timelessness and continuity' (Barry 45). 'Double-visioning is the attainment of a multi-layered chronological perspective' he continues, 'which typically superimposes one historical period upon another so that the viewed entity becomes radically trans-historical' (46). The American past, in other words, makes the attainment of 'trans-historical' knowledge seem like a more genuine possibility.

In order to counter the fragmentation wrought by this anxiety, accepted critical orthodoxy sees American poetics generate from the concept of a 'protectorate' or resistant social space. The 'roots' of Olson's 'root city' grasp the ground firmly in defiance of the modern life that brushes unstoppable over them. Fredman, for example, has done much to point to the equivalences between Olson's experience of dwelling and that of Thoreau's famous sojourn at Walden. 'In the face of the modern experience of groundlessness', explains the critic, 'Thoreau and Olson propose resistant containment as a way of restoring effective power to individuals and to local communities' (*Grounding* 49). John Gatta, for example, links Thoreau to Mircea Eliade and his definitions of 'sacred' and 'profane' space. 'Walden', explains Gatta, 'is clearly Thoreau's place of worship – his church, in the physical sense of finite space' (130). This is not to say that he has abandoned the Puritan altogether, but that his grove resembles the kind of 'Israel' that Cotton Mather envisioned as America began to make inroads to becoming a nation at the end of the seventeenth century. Unlike the scene in the city, then, his time at Walden Pond was a sacred pilgrimage towards a region where he would be able to contemplate his existence. 'What counts above all for Thoreau', states Lawrence Beull in his essay "Ecological Contemplation as Spiritual Practice" (2005), 'is this passage [towards] cultivating a certain sort of contemplative disposition: the suspension of all active striving in order to achieve and sustain a prolonged sense of reverie' (8). The city, in this understanding, represents a commonplace environment of isolation and boredom. At Walden, however, he was able to commune with a world that preceded the merely 'human'. This is an unashamed focus on 'origins' or 'roots' – a vegetable communication with the earth itself. 'I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise to noon, rapt in a

revelry, almost amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs in undisturbed solitude and stillness', writes Thoreau in his famous text, 'until by the sun falling in by my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time' (*Walden* 70). Stripping America to its bare essentials – listening again to the singular sounds that the earth makes – the poet becomes invested with a genuine identity ensconced within the purity of place. 'I grew in those seasons like corn in the night', continues Thoreau on his development of anthropomorphic roots, 'and they were for the better than any work of the hands would be' (70).

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that this sense of both grounding and Cratylism in American poetics has gone unchallenged. In her seminal work *Singularities* (1990), for instance, Susan Howe writes of the tradition represented by Thoreau as atypical of the '[e]legiac western imagination' (55). Works such as these are the artificial renderings of writing obsessed with bringing the idea of a dominant self into the poetic work:

Nature in us as a Nature
the actual one the ideal self

...

I pick my compass to pieces

Dark here in the drifting
in the spaces of drifting

Complicity battling redemption (55)

Writing of her own attempts to commune with the land in the Adirondack Mountains near New York, Howe problematizes the relationship between 'ground' and the poetic work. When she

visits her own sacred place she observes not the secret *omphalos* of America, but '[s]cores of two star motels', 'American flags', and 'laundromats' (40). To Howe there is nothing sacred about this landscape. European explorers 'named' the American continent. Places like Thoreau's hut exist not sempiternally but because of a constant shaping and reshaping of the land's identity by vested interests. 'They brought our story to it', writes Howe of the Puritans, '[p]athfinding believers in God and grammar spelled the lake into *place*'. Peter Nicholls describes Howe's alternative approach to history as an 'unsettling' of the sacred space of America. 'No punctual authentic self waits discovery here', writes Nicholls, 'Howe's wilderness... contains no neatly dialectical 'other' to community but evokes a process which is internal to signification and disruptive of it' (589). Looking at the gaps and traces in the process of writing – looking at the 'unsaid' in the work – Howe's alternative understanding of American history is more open to the founding of a poetics than established orthodoxy would allow. 'Let me drift in the rise and fall of light and snow', continues Howe positioning herself in relation to Thoreau, 're-reading, re-tracing once-upon' (40).

Indeed, Howe's picture of America is one startlingly separate to the usual obsession with place and identity in its poetry and poetics. To Howe 'the land' is not the generative point of an American self, as much as the very *locus* of confusion over origin. '[T]he turn to the primeval does not reveal a clarity of identity', writes Lisa Joyce of Howe's poetry and criticism, 'but it is instead a pathway to the recognition of the multivalence of place and of person' (5). 'In March, 1987, looking for what is looking, I went down to unknown regions of indifferentiation', writes

Howe during *Singularities*, '[t]he Adirondacks *occupied me*' (40). It is not to 'stake a claim' on the Adirondacks that Howe ventures there, or in the process of individuation, but to become physically occupied by the land itself. To look for 'what is looking' suggests that Howe is more concerned with the exterior ideological factors that constantly impinge upon 'vision' in the American poem. This is purely because the 'vision' that had constructed the puritan villages – the great historical 'vision' that aimed to chart and survey the land from the earliest years of its enclosure– was a vision that cared nothing for that place in reality:

The track of desire
Must see and not see
Must not see nothing
Burrow and so burrow
Measuring mastering (45)

Howe portrays early visionaries like Thoreau and Winthrop as people who consciously occlude elements of the American landscape in order to 'map' it as such. Theirs is a 'measuring' that is a systematic 'mastering' at the same time. 'Distant monarchs of Europe', states Howe, 'European grid on the forest' (45). Even Thoreau's land at *Walden*, in this sense, was plotted and sold regardless of Native American 'owners'. 'The space of the land given perspective and division by the act of mapping', explains Joyce, 'has no structure in the absence of orientation' (6).

Orientation is rooted not in some benign cartographic impulse for 'surveying', but the barely hidden impulse to impose order on the land. Poetic language is the tool by which the wilderness is named. It represents the very process by which monological patterns of thinking are rendered into common sense. 'First precarious Eden', continues Howe, 'a scandal of

materialism// my ancestors tore off / the first leaves' (52). To Howe the American poet is involved in a naming of the land that is nothing other than violence. In the 'once upon' – the narrative that the poet gestured to earlier – there is always something that unsettles the true 'explorer'. 'There are traces of blood', she writes, 'in the fairy tale' (44).

When Howe 'looks' for 'what is looking', then, she searches for 'gaps and traces' or important information omitted from these narratives. What matters to her isn't the 'proper name' of the author, but the points at which that identity is blurred beyond recognition. Howe doesn't search for the purity of an origin in American history, but the position whereby the original story is besmirched with the knowledge of what those 'mapping' it left out of the equation. For Howe this is no more in evidence than in the absence of women from this history. When looking for an American identity – when scanning historical documents and literature for the 'grounding' that is so vital in the United States – Howe is struck by the elision of women themselves from the canon in a process that stretches well into the present. To Howe this is a defamiliarizing process that somehow removes her from the process of grounding in the first place. In exclusion from this tradition she remains in an *alterior* position at the margins of acceptability. 'It just seems that I end up with this place that I wish I could belong to and wish I could describe', writes Howe, 'but I am outside looking in' (*The Birthmark* 166). Nowhere is this more visible than in the poet's complicated relationship to some of the seminal works in the 'canon'. Unusually, for Howe, the terms of this relationship sometimes spelt themselves out in real terms. The poet was in close contact with the academic Perry Miller, for example, through

her father's job at Harvard. Speaking of the domestic life of this most revered of academics, her irreverent tone is nothing if not 'iconoclastic':

As to Perry Miller, he was one of my parent's best friends and was always around. But how did I know him? Only as a lecherous character who drank too much. He is supposed to be an inspiring teacher. To us daughters of professors, he was the object of great scorn because we knew that if he was at one of our houses, he would quickly get red-faced and then his hands would start wandering. His wife, Betty, who I believe did half of his research for him, was silent and shadowy. What she must have endured (*The Birthmark* 160).

To Howe, Miller is the 'lecherous' old uncle who dominates American culture. His reputation, furthermore, was a consequence not of his own efforts but the stolid 'endurance' of his wife Betty working behind the scenes on his research whilst utterly ignored. The drunken advances of this 'red-faced' character reveal the machinations of the powerful in the careful construction of a sense of 'grounding' like Thoreau's. In his lustful advances Miller becomes a literal personification of the dominance of fundamentally flawed perspectives at the root of American conceptions of being together.

But, for Howe, it isn't just Miller who stands out as an enforcer of this limited American perspective. American Cratyism – reinforced as it is with an anxiety over 'grounding' – seeps into the poetry and criticism of the United States as an inclination towards conformity and submission. As a liminal figure, as someone emphatically 'outside' of America in the accepted sense, her research is party to an engagement with American history peppered with insightful comments lost to all but the most careful archivist. 'Howe's version of American history thus issues its challenge to the discipline, enjoining an attention not only to those "myriad" other voices', writes Nicholls, 'but also to the hegemonic forms of language in which, customarily, we

invite them to speak' ("Unsettling the Wilderness" 600). Her major effort is 'exploding' the monologic certainties of language systems premised on closure, by exposing the contradictions inherent at their base. Nowhere is this clearer than in Howe's commentary on the famous Whitman scholar F.O. Matthiessen. Matthiessen's homosexuality – emboldened by a critical career researching, and a personal love for, the poetry of Walt Whitman – was a 'scandal' in the waiting that could only end in exclusion from society at large. 'I am exhausted', Howe quotes Matthiessen's suicide note, 'I can no longer believe that I can continue to be of use to my profession and my friends. I hope that my friends will be able to believe that I love them despite this desperate act' (*Birth Mark* 17). Matthiessen's death can here be envisaged as a result of the *necropolis* at the center of poetic thinking in the United States reasserting itself in the most definite terms. A dead language carries within itself not only the various ideological tropes of its base, but the means for an exclusion of all other linguistic alternatives. Cratylism ends in a death, in other words, as the result of a logical progression towards exclusion that has no time for alternate voices. 'There are characteristic North American voices and visions that remain antinomian and separatist', explains Howe, 'in order to hear them I have returned to strange paths to a particular place at a particular time, a threshold at the austere reach of the book' (2).

What this subsection is interested in identifying, then, is two self-avowedly 'renegade' writers who dared challenge the dominance of the *necropolitical* impulses in American writing, but also found themselves exposed to the lure of complicity in the American *polis*. The origins of Olson's

'paradox' are more readily visible in writers like Whitman and Williams, who displayed an engagement with, and later failure to embrace, an open poetics in varying degrees. It will be my intention to posit Olson's uncertainty about Gloucester as the apotheosis of an anxiety that materializes in conjunction with the desire to merge these different attempts at an 'open' poetics of the city. Whitman's poetics have cemented him as the benchmark by which any American poet encounters urban space. In this sense he is the ultimate embodiment of the counter-cultural desire to incorporate the metropolis into the American canon. Attempting to 'break the pentameter' before Pound had even conceived of it, his stylistically 'open' verse is a genuine attempt to give space for a sense of being together that incorporates the body politic at large. Williams' effect on Olson, however, lies in his attempts to adopt Whitman's poetry in the context of modernist precepts whilst at the same time pointing to 'the local' as the *a priori* consideration. Whereas Whitman's political standpoint had been an engagement with urban space as the 'positive' site of liberal democratic achievements or the founding of 'a people', Williams' aesthetic shunned the connections between poetry and politics altogether in order to stress the importance of a poem that was rendered formally bare 'against [whatever] weather' – as he put it in a famous prose essay – predominated at the time (*Selected* 107). This included not only an emphasis on new formal strategies that could truly encompass American ambitions, but an apolitical stance formed in reaction to poets like Whitman attempting to be 'politician[s], not... artist[s]' (219). What mattered to Williams were innovations in the poetic line that equally coincided with a resistance to the 'party line' knowingly trumpeted by Whitman. 'It must be a new way of measuring', explains Williams further, 'what will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living' (283).

Starting with Whitman, then, American 'roots' are most prominent in the city because it is the city that portrays the reality of democratic space. Whitman accepts the city form but only in as far as it conforms towards a distinct horizon, what he calls a 'democratic vista'. He becomes, therefore, an American shaman conducting the native energies of the place. What concerns him is precisely those challenges set by liberal democracy. His poetry searches for a 'newness' that reflects the unified character of an emerging industrial power. What is interesting, especially, in this mindset is how he initially aims for some kind of *communitas* that reaches beyond 'the political':

For not only is it enough that the new blood, new frame of democracy shall be vivified and held together merely by political means, superficial suffrage, legislation & c... but that it is clear to me that unless it goes deeper... gets at least as firm as warm as a hold in men's hearts, emotions and belief, as, in their days, feudalism, or ecclesiasticism, and inaugurates its perennial sources, welling from the centre forever, its strength will be defective, its growth doubtful, and its main charm wanting. I suggest, therefore, the possibility, should some two or three really original American poets (perhaps artists or lecturers), arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, & c, together they would give more compaction and oral identity, (the quality today most needed) to these states, than all its constitutions, legislative and juridical ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike and materialistic experiences (*Selected Prose* 35).

Whitman's quest for an American identity roots his 'urban vision' in the heart of the city itself. It was the first serious attempt at that grounding Fredman identifies, but rather strangely transposed onto a continent of emerging metropolises. Indeed, Pound, who in some sense seemed ambiguous about the legacy of Whitman, was able to classify him as the first poet who actually approached an American sensibility. Whitman had transcended the suffocating bounds of the English pentameter and finally offered a new way into cultural forms free from any European influence at all. 'Entirely free from the Renaissance humanist ideal of the complete

man or from Greek Idealism', wrote Pound in an essay from 1909, 'he is content to be what he is, and he is his time and people. He is a genius because he has a vision of what he is and his function' (*Selected* 194).

This grounding became particularly fraught in the urbanized bounds of a place like Manhattan. It wasn't only New York's unforgiving gridline of streets that harboured problems, but the way in which urban topography in America began to mimic the most unforgiving aspects of European social space¹². In the midst of this, therefore, Whitman sought to construct a poetics modeled on his unique position at the beginnings of the American nation state. A new critical perspective, for example, has always portrayed the poet as simply pushing ahead with that 'Yankee' vision. 'Whitman is the expansion of the ego in the act of creation itself', writes RWB Lewis in his text *American Adam*, 'naming every conceivable object as it comes from the womb' (53)¹³. His poetry was to be an explicitly national form that would both exult the natural world, and the triumph of the individual American spirit. This is a populist poetics, in other words, a poetry that takes as its starting point that autonomous individual of American mythology. 'A call in the midst of the crowd', writes Whitman in 'Song of Myself', 'my own voice, orotund sweeping and final' (*Collected* 72). Being together would always be premised in America from

¹² Manhattan as it stands today, for example, is nothing like the original glacial area out of which the city has been carved over all of these years. More than most European cities there is a rational kind of violence that has noticeably attempted to mould the city from the start. 'The complex topographical surface' that had once been glacial and varied area before the plan, writes Reuben Rose-Redwood in his illuminating paper "Recreating the Historical Topography of Manhattan", '[was obliterated] as the Cartesian grid was carved into the Manhattan landscape' (Rose-Redwood 1).

¹³ 'A century ago', writes Lewis, 'the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary idea was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities poised at the start of a new history' (1)

within the sacred prism of the individual above all else. Indeed, to Whitman, in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, there would be no need for the spiritual guidance of priests anymore. A 'superior breed' of Kantian subjects would arise instead:

There will be no more priests. Their work is done. They may wait a while... perhaps a generation or two... dropping off by degrees. A superior breed shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest. The churches built under their umbrage shall be the churches of men and women of all the events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today, symptoms of the past and future... They shall not deign to defend immortality or God or the perfection of things or liberty or the exquisite beauty and reality of the soul. They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth (*Selected* 18).

'The genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives and legislatures', continued Whitman, 'but always most in the common people' (18). The old world existing in Europe had been abolished in favour of a democratic sphere run, to use parlance still popular in the mouths of statesmen today, 'by the people, for the people'.

Whitman shows himself to be a compromised poet when he takes on this role as the figurehead for an emergent American state. Having said this, however, his urban poetics are permeated with a metropolitan sensibility that sometimes troubles the obsession with grounding in the American tradition. One of Whitman's strengths is that he is a liminal figure who has always skirted the boundaries between 'rebellion' and 'acceptability'. This is poetry that somehow manages to be 'open' and 'closed' at the same time. It contains not only the striving for a national identity, but the observations of a nineteenth century homosexual as he charts the bustling streets of the city. Moreover, the romantic personality in Whitman's urban verse puts forward a vitality and energy that comes through with a truly revolutionary fervor in the first

edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). This is poetry of action, poetry that as many critics have noted is premised on the present participle and a call for *being, doing* and *making*¹⁴. Suffused with a deliberate dialect of America as it stood at that juncture in its historical development, it is poetry very much rooted in the immediacy of everyday life:

There was never more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age as there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge urge
Always the procreant urge of the world [...]
Always a knit of identity... always distinctions... always a breed of life (*Collected* 45).

Whitman differs fundamentally from Emerson and Thoreau, then, in as far as his 'rooted' poetics didn't necessarily perceive of the city as a 'problem'. 'Emerson calls himself a lover. But in... *Nature* his platonic idealism leads him to declare more affection for abstract 'beauty' than for brotherly and sisterly humanity', writes Gatta of their relationship, 'Whitman, though, wants to claim a palpable kinship with every naturalized embodiment of the world-soul including human nature' (*Making Nature Sacred* 115). The desire is for universal love, or brotherhood, a bold ambition in a nation still wedded to Jeffersonian ideals of dwelling. Indeed, the poet even goes as far as to effectively deny the lure of the 'root city' in America. 'I am not an earth, or an adjunct of earth', wrote Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, 'I am a mate and companion of people, all just as important and as fathomless as myself' (*Leaves of Grass* 27). This is an open poetics in inspiration, a manner of writing directed towards an understanding of urban social being in the widest possible sense.

¹⁴ I am writing here specifically of an essay by Ezra Greenspan entitled "Some Remarks on the Poetics of Participle Loving Whitman" (1995), but also – and as Greenspan acknowledges in his essay – an accepted facet of Whitman scholarship since an essay by Randall Jarrell in the 1950s (92).

'Unscrew the locks from the doors', Whitman declares in 'Song of Myself', 'Unscrew the very doors themselves from their jambs' (*Collected* 49). 'Crowds of men and women', he famously writes in 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', 'I see you face to face':

The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and
them,
The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.
Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore
to shore,
Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west
and the heights of Brooklyn to the South and East,
Others will see the islands large and small (*Collected* 78)

'Others look back on me', Whitman states, 'because I look forward to them' (78). There is reciprocity in New York, in other words, that defies any sense of fragmentation. 'Whitman rebuts Wordsworth's notion that the authentic self is prior to experience and is obscured by complex... social interaction', clarifies Dana Brand, '[he] anticipates survival in the consciousness of others, who share his humanity, his city, his river' (*The Spectator and the City* 67). In her analysis of the social composition of Whitman's New York Mona Domosh has put forward a summary of exactly how far this exposure to urban social being actually went. The 'authentic urbanity of democratic possibilities' that exists in Whitman's verse, explains Domosh, 'were actually an idealized understanding of a complicated 'micropolitics' on the streets where 'classes mingled, different "races" fashionably paraded and gender roles could be reversed' (*At Home in the City* 26). The energy that Whitman identified in the city, and that is such a major influence on his verse, is the only possible fount for democracy in this emerging American

republic. Whitman doesn't see the city as a 'problem' to be 'solved', but a site of contrasting identities that never reach a point of resolution as such.

The most striking thing about Whitman's urban poetry, then, is how after displaying this desire for universal love he rejects the exposure to the crowds of modernity in order to parrot the exclusionary rhetoric of the state. As well as being a rebellious poet attempting to apperceive urban publics in their infinite variety, he becomes like Fredrick Law Olmsted in the manner he yearns for 'nature' and the 'city' combined into a utopian third landscape or 'civic realm'. This is very much where Whitman's root city would take place in urban design: in the conjunction between the teeming streets and nature itself. Reflecting the demands of a liberal planning agenda, his poetry is sourced in the biopolitical discourse of the state. The greatest example of this aspect of the liberal planning agenda in the United States is Central Park. This is a structure that Whitman himself petitioned the authorities for when editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and that Mike Davis still uses today as an example of an 'American *polis*' (*City of Quartz* 45). To get a hold on this mindset, there is no better start than Olmsted's essay *Public Parks and the Enlargement of Towns*:

Consider that New York Park and Brooklyn Park are the only places in these associated cities where, in this eighteen hundred and seventieth year after Christ, you will find a body of Christians coming together, and with evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual and intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each. You may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile. I have seen a hundred thousand thus congregated, and I assure you that though there had been not a few that seemed a little dazed, as if they did not quite understand it, and were, perhaps, a little ashamed of it, I have looked studiously and vainly among them for a

single face completely unsympathetic with the prevailing expression of good nature and light-heartedness (Olmsted 75).

This utopian vision, however, is politically compromised when conceived, in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, as a 'knit of identity'. The verb 'knit' doesn't suggest a community of 'freedom', but one woven into a seamless proximity instead. This isn't the kind of vision we should praise Olmsted for, then, when in reality it is mere reflection of state-informed narratives based on coherence. Likewise 'Whitman's poetic catalogues of people and sights attempt to represent more than spectacles for the middle class voyeur', writes William Pannacker, 'they are operatic panorama of simultaneous human action in which apparent differences – the urban and the rural, the past and the future, the observer and observed – are dissolved' (*Revised Lives* 45). It is not so much the active encouragement of difference as much as its elimination or erasure.

It is actually Whitman that gives the first attempt to conceptualize of a root city in verse. This desire for the blending of nature and technology in American urbanism is evident whenever the poet comes into contact with the physical site of the city. What interests Whitman in these sections isn't communing with the crowd in its sheer multiplicity, but rather reasserting the innate principles of order undergirding the streets themselves. In a poem such as *Manhatta*, for example, Whitman paints a picture of New York as something that is naturally occurring. It is not 'artifice' or 'inorganic', but a place that has reached some kind of sacred balance between man and nature:

*Rich, hemm'd thick all round with sailships and steamships, an island,
Sixteen miles long, solid-founded,
Numberless crowded streets, high growths of iron, slender, strong, light,
Splendidly uprising towards clear skies [...]*

*The countless masts, the white-shore steamers, the lighters, the ferry
Boats, the black-sea steamers, well-model'd
The down-town streets, the jobber's houses of business, the houses of busi –
Ness of the ships merchants and the money brokers, the river-streets (Collected 96 [italics in
original]).*

Whitman's 'root city' isn't a determinably 'human' creation, but seems instead to be one that has arisen organically from the ground. The people in this idealized vision are not engaged with but simply identified as a series of 'types' (whether that be a 'jobber' or 'money broker'). The historical sense of this city as a site of struggle or conflict, therefore, is lost beneath a 'newness' confirmed in multiple neologisms and word compounds. Each line of the poem shifts, furthermore, from a 'natural' to 'artificial' aspect of the city, with the enjambment of every line suggesting a direct relationship between the two (or even, perhaps, erasing this difference altogether). This is confirmed, of course, in that final word compound 'river-streets', as if the geometric indifference of Manhattan's grid structure somehow conforms to the natural topography of the native territory itself. It is not just a city of 'commerce', in this respect, but a living, breathing entity of which the human element is simply one amongst many other working parts. Whitman takes the title *Manahatta* from the original Indian name (The Seneca name no less, a tribe that were butchered by Washington's soldiers after the revolutionary war, and given small reservations near Niagara Falls), to suggest that this thriving city has a chthonic presence on the landscape of America. It is as if this etymological root gives sanction to this new democracy; or, as Whitman himself once claimed, he used 'aboriginal words' because 'they are honest words – they give the true length, breadth, depth – they all fit' (*Collected Prose* 109).

This vocabulary is important because, at heart, Whitman's problem of the city is a linguistic one. This poem is particularly revealing, because in it Whitman situates the roots of his language in the streets of New York themselves. Formulating a new urban diction the poet's vernacular tongue exists alongside the buildings and paraphernalia of the city. 'In Whitman's hands', writes Billetteri, 'Transcendentalist philosophy becomes a means of counteracting rather than avoiding the disjunction between "natural" and "human". Language is the medium of this counteraction, a language "barbaric" and even animal-like by genteel standards, but which, by virtue of this very naturalness, becomes capable of supplanting dead and/ or artificial forms of expression, both linguistic and other' (47). This is where it is possible to observe an increasing paradox in Whitman's own verse. Accessing Whitman's 'Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts', Billetteri finds the following rumination on the relationship between 'language' and 'democracy':

[W]ithout... a uniform spoken and written dialect, elastic, tough, and eligible to all, and fluid and enfolding as air - , - the Liberty and Union of these Thirty Eight or Forty states, representing so many diverse origins and breeds would not be practicable... For the chief and indispensable condition a political union such as ours and (only to be firmly knit and [*illeg*] preserved, by a general interpenetration and community of social and personal standards, religious beliefs and literature, essentially the same,) is a copious and [*illeg*]. uniform language, embodying the principles of growth, change, and sloughing [*illeg*.] (Billitteri 52).

What is notable, here, is that language of proximity that once again falls on the verb *knit*.

Whitman's theory of language is shown to be one of an imposition from above, or something premised on 'uniformity'. 'Whitman does not say so directly', writes Billitteri, 'and does not make any effort to explain in his note how natural diversity and the aim of social unity might be reconciled in language when they come into conflict' (53). As far as Whitman is concerned he is

a 'prophet', whose goal is to carry the American people towards that ideal unity. 'He is a seer... he is an individual... he is complete in himself... the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not', Whitman explains his position quite clearly in *Leaves of Grass*, '[h]e is not one of the chorus... he does not stop for any regulation... he is the president of regulation' (7)

Whitman's native language doesn't obliquely reference a long since departed tribe as such, but seeks to claim its territory and absorb it as conqueror. Americans, at least to Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, are the 'race of races', they are the ultimate manifestation of identity which all other 'races' should accede to. Everything, to Whitman, must be seen through the purview of 'race'. 'It is race is it not?', wrote Emerson in his essay *English Traits*, 'Race avails much, if that be true, which is alleged, that all Celts are Catholics, and all Saxons are protestants: that Celts love unity of power, and Saxons the representative principle' ("English Traits" 203). Democracy itself, in this respect, was an Anglo Saxon invention that would never be appreciated somewhere savage like Ireland. Whitman still hasn't escaped the European mindset as much as he might like, his poetry has the same ethical base as the Puritan's colonial aspirations. It was not that cities were some kind of benign presence for Whitman, but that they were containers for the hope he identified in a uniquely American future. 'Isolated country life', wrote Whitman on the perils of the pastoral in *Specimen Days*, 'encourages avarice and a singular sort of egotism' (*Collected* 45). He recounts a story in that same text, about a trip he once took to what was then a predominately rural area of Long Island called Greenport. Having stayed with a local family, and having been given 'thin milk' and 'coarse burnt corn' to eat, he remarks that he would not let it

pass his lips but 'left a shilling on the table by way of thanks' (*Collected* 89). 'The fierce clutching look of the Women's eyes, as she sidled towards the money, made me sick', wrote Whitman, 'it told more than I could write on the pages of paper, and it told a degrading story of avarice and wretchedness' (90). Greenport is a site of paucity, in other words, where the 'superior breed' that is the American doesn't flourish but instead retreats inwards and finds it hard to hide its solipsistic nature. American 'values' are formed and nourished in New York and places like Greenport are only representative of the inevitable 'fragmentation' that would occur if the United States abandoned its historical mission. The anxiety first promoted by Winthrop's sermon weighs heavy on the poet, as he hopes to construct a community beyond the merely superficial and transient, with the personality of the poet *himself* as the very *locus* and glue.

William Carlos Williams, in contrast, certainly shares Whitman's enthusiasm for 'the people'. 'GO BACK TO THE PEOPLE', he insists, 'they are the origin of every bit of life' (*Selected* 178). The specific poetic means by which Williams encounters the city, however, necessitates that he observes Whitman's crowd from a much more distanced perspective. To Williams the metropolis was never a utopian space in and of itself, as much as the only possible site for the manifestation of an alternative American language and identity. The problem with Whitman's 'democratic' vision, as he saw it, was always to do with 'scale' or 'measure'. 'Whitman... could not go on', wrote Williams of his predecessor's limited technique, 'his invention ended where it began' (*Selected* 293). There was, indeed, burgeoning innovations in Whitman's poetic line, but his insistence on incorporating the liberal democratic city into his poetry meant the poems

themselves became empty vessels uncritically grounded in the empty rhetoric of the state. D. H. Lawrence had similar concerns to Williams when he talked of that firmly established poet's 'dead end':

Whitman, the great poet meant so much to me. Whitman the one man breaking a way ahead. Whitman, the one pioneer. And only Whitman. No English pioneers. No French. No European pioneer-poets. In Europe the would-be pioneers are mere innovators. The same in America. Ahead of Whitman, nothing. Ahead of all poets pioneering into the wilderness of unopened life, Whitman. Beyond him, none. His wide, strange camp at the end of a great high-road. And lots of new poets camping of Whitman's camping ground now. But none going really beyond. Because Whitman's camp is at the end of a road and the edge of a great precipice. Over the precipice, blue distances, and the blue hollow of the future. But there is no way done, it is a dead end (DH Lawrence 99).

To Williams this all fell back on the failure of Whitman to 'root' his work in local conditions.

'Whitman was never able to fully realize the significance of his structural innovations', Williams explains, 'as a result he fell back into the overstuffed catalogues of his later poems and a sort of looseness that was not freedom but a lack of measure' (*Selected* 218). For Williams the necessity of a poetics fit for purpose always hinges on that word 'measure'. 'Freedom', interestingly enough, is seen not as 'looseness' but the ability to 'select' and 'refine' material. 'He did as much as he could maybe', explained the poet again on Whitman's legacy, 'but we have to do better, we have to look, to discover particulars and redefine' (219).

Williams' insistence on 'particulars' goes back to his flirtation with Objectivism in the Thirties that led to some of his most revolutionary short poems. This is an objectivism that references Zukofsky and Oppen, and culminates in the concept of the poem as object. '[Williams] invites us to see the object not for what it *symbolizes* but what it *is*', writes Paul Lizotte on this aspect of Williams' poetics, 'a dynamic center of potential meaning radiating lines of force' (3). This goes

back to Zukofsky's idea of objectification or 'the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object' (*Prepositions* 268). What such poets are searching for is no longer manifest in some kind of inner monologue, but 'out there' amongst the things of the world themselves. As with other art forms less tainted by the lyric subject, Zukofsky writes of poetry as a 'making':

Utterance is but an extension or limit of this process. Poems are but phases of utterance. The action that precedes and moves towards utterance moves towards poetry. The scientist compelled to make order of a hunch, the architect building the house in which to live, the dancer telling others eyes what it is to move, an historian shaping a sum of events to the second law of thermodynamics, an economist subsuming under a fiction of value a countless differentiation of labor processes, a weaver making the garment that will drape to a body, the painter, the musician, all who achieve constructions apart from themselves, move in effect toward poetry (16).

It is interesting that Zukofsky's essay is dedicated to his own child or 'for my son when he can read'. An Objectivist aesthetic would like to hack into a more primordial understanding of language, the kind of logic that it would be much easier to learn in the flush of youth. This is a singular kind of 'communication' stripped of the extraneous material but that also hopes to avoid Pound's totalistic thinking as well. 'Impossible to communicate anything but particulars', writes Zukofsky in another essay called "An Objective", 'things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries of veins binding up and bound up with events and contingencies' (*Prepositions* 24).

It is this fresh thinking on social being that is the second inheritance of the objectivist network in the Thirties. During the strife of this decade poets like Oppen and Zukofsky attempted to respond to the social dimensions of political struggle in a manner that didn't aestheticize the

poem itself. Poets like Oppen couldn't write poetry for 'the party' and wanted a style of writing that did justice to the 'reality' of urban populations instead. Zukofsky, in particular, was a Communist Party member who refused to devote his writing to mere 'propaganda'. '[He] want[ed] a kind of understanding of poetry that did not in the manner of the contemporaneous American Left, over simplify things', writes Rachel Blau Du Plessis in an essay on this aspect of Zukofsky's writing ("Zukofsky and Folk"). In one of the moments his biographer Mark Scroggins describes as his 'red flashes', this was the poet trying to account for 'the people' in the city without suffocating them under the rubric of their 'destiny' as proletariats. The poet is not a theorist but an objective correspondent of the reality of this grim social situation. 'Zukofsky is precisely, deliberately, and elegantly side-stepping the juggernaut of agitprop art', continues Du Plessis, 'yet making a parallel claim for poetry in struggle'. The poem is not some elegiac epic for 'the people' but an alternate phenomenon that exists *with* them in all reality. For Du Plessis this is made explicitly clear in Zukofsky's own understanding of the popular craze for 'folk poetry' in America at this time. Rather than being the expression of some essential *gemeinschaft* what folk teaches Zukofsky is the importance of a particular 'simplicity and wholeness of emotional presentation' ("Zukofsky and Folk"). 'Poetry does not arise and exist in a vacuum', Zukofsky explains, 'it is one of the arts – sometimes individual, sometimes collective in origin, and reflects the social status of peoples' (*Prepositions* 18).

But objectivism also inculcated the desire in Williams for what Marta Sienicka has called a 'wholeness'. 'The concept of wholeness', writes Sienicka, '[is] the superior organizing principle

of viewing the world, man, nature, art – the whole universe’ (“Poetry” 111). In Williams’ poem this wholeness is only to be reached by marrying vital opposing elements: that of the male and the female. ‘The female principle’, writes Sienicka, ‘is associated naturally enough with fertility and life, and moreover, with creative imagination. On the other hand, masculinity is seen as basically rational and creative only when in contact with the female’ (111). The city, therefore, is the ultimate ‘male’ edifice. Its gridiron patterns, and sheer concrete walls, are the impenetrable gaze of modernity immovably and dispassionately in domination of social space. To find the ‘feminine’ in Paterson, then, there is no further to look than the fecund bounds of ‘mother nature’ herself. The feminine is the virgin territory of the Americas. It is the traces of the natural world that surround and occasionally penetrate the bleakness of the city. Indeed, this is the tone that starts the *Paterson* sequence:

A man like a city and a woman like a flower
Who are in love. Two women. Three women.
Innumerable women, each like a flower (7).

For Williams the American has the privilege of being a perennial guest at the marriage of these seemingly opposing elements. The phrase that occupies him throughout his urban epic, therefore, is ‘divorce’. The anxiety is that ‘wholeness’ may never be possible if these elements remain forever in crisis as two distinct and opposing terms. ‘Divorce is/ the sign of knowledge in our time’, writes Williams later on in *Book One*, ‘divorce! divorce!’ (18). ‘There is no direction’ for the creative imagination under these conditions, states Williams once again, ‘unfledged desire, irresponsible, green/ colder to the hand than stone’ (18).

More than any other factor, then, it is ‘the local’ that operates as the major device through which William’s might rectify this situation. The hope is that through paying close attention to his own *locale* what Sienicka calls a ‘poetic repossession of history’ will take place (“Poetry” 110). ‘THE LOCAL IS THE ONLY UNIVERSAL’, Williams famously stated, ‘in proportion as a man has bestirred himself to his own locality he will perceive more and more of what is disclosed and find himself in a position to make the necessary translations’ (*Selected Prose* 28). What is at issue in writing like this is the restitution of American history through the discovery of a language that will once again communicate a world of wholeness. In *Paterson* Williams’ own *locus* for this marriage is the falls that occupy the centre. The movement of the water in *Paterson* is seen early on to imitate the ideal language of the poet amongst this urban trauma:

Jostled as the waters approaching
the brink, his thoughts
interlace, repel and cut under,
rise rock-thwarted and turn aside
but forever strain forward – or strike
an eddy and whirl, marked by a
leaf or curdy spume, seeming
to forget (7) .

To Williams the local is the ‘universal’ because it is the only way back to that marriage with wholeness that is the *a priori* event of his poetics. What is ‘disclosed’ to the poet by a *genius loci* has ramifications far beyond a limited geographical area. To Williams the poet must deal with what he calls ‘the possibility, the sullen, volcanic inevitability of the place, [whilst] go[ing] down and wrest[ling] with its conditions’ (*In the American Grain* 225). ‘In order to help us deal with the chaos of our world and our divorce from the sources of renewal’, writes Paul Lizotte, ‘poetry must provide not an escape from the world but a means of repossessing it’ (“American Master” 10).

But in *Book One* this is immediately identified as a task beyond the reaches of traditional prosody. Those who encounter the falls in *Paterson* are stupefied by their power. The failure of language in his city is such that an engagement with the source always backfires on the residents of Paterson. '[T]he language/ is divorced from their minds', writes Williams only to reel back in a Colonel Kurtz moment of 'horror', 'the language/ the language' (12). No one symbolizes this failure to speak in the poem anymore than *Paterson's* hero, Sam Patch. As an historical figure – also known in the vernacular as 'The Yankee Leaper' – this was a man who tried to tackle the falls in Paterson at their source in the most literal sense. As Williams write in the poem, this time juxtaposing him with the failure of language:

A false language. A true. A false language pouring – a language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear. At least it settled it for her. Patch too as a matter of fact. He became a national hero in '28, '29 and toured the country diving from cliffs and masts, rocks and bridges – to prove his thesis: Some things can be as well done as others (*Paterson* 15).

Indeed, in the poem it is Patch himself who appears before the crowd to make a 'short speech' at the Falls before he jumps. If Patch can dive off the falls in all his masculine heroism, then it must be possible to create some kind of valuable utterance for the people of Paterson to hear. 'A speech'!, writes Williams excitedly, '[but] instead of descending with a plummet-like fall his body wavered in the air – Speech had failed him' (17). 'The word had been drained of its meaning', continues Williams, '[h]e struck the water on his side and disappeared' (17). Silence is followed by death in *Paterson*. The failure to speak ends in a fatality that threatens to annihilate an entire city. Juxtaposed to a Mrs Cummings – who also fell into the falls a few years later – the bodies of these two characters (either 'frozen in an ice cake' like Cummings or

'fished from the muddy swirl' like Patch) end up as 'silent, uncommunicative' (21). Divorce is represented at the beginning of the poem, by the literal submerging of the two opposing elements leading to alienation in the city. The failure to speak engenders not only death in the individual, but the symbolic destruction of the creative possibilities inherent in a linguistic community.

Williams, then, is the first modernist poet in the post-war era to nakedly tackle this problem of 'grounding'. Away from the doom of a stammering Sam Patch, the poem tries to open up new possibilities for an American poetics in the space of Paterson itself. As opposed to Pound and Eliot who surrendered themselves to the European tradition, his poetry is usually seen in the context of what Fredman calls a 'true nativism' (*Grounding* 7). Williams, then, aimed his poetry at a more recognizable America. This wasn't Whitman's New York swimming in the overwhelmingly positive sensation of democracy, but an environment where the 'divorce' between natural language and the concrete of the city were not merged but recognized in a state of perpetual conflict and division. Early on in *Paterson* the poet observes an isolated flower bud lying abandoned on the pavement:

a bud forever green
tight-curved, upon the pavement, perfect
in juice and substance but divorced, divorced
from its fellows, fallen low –

Divorce is
the sign of knowledge in our time,
divorce! divorce! (18)

The beauty of the flower bud symbolizes to Williams the impossibility of the city ever combining itself with the natural world in any kind of utopian space. But at the same time the honesty of the subject matter inflects the poem with a new sense of what can be achieved in the materials of a poem. 'A man like a city and a woman like a flower', explains Williams, 'who are in love' (7). It is written in the stars that these two seemingly opposing elements should be married together again. Perhaps 'divorce' is an element of modernity that needs to be dealt with rather than painted over and disguised by versification itself. 'It is not an "essence", a philosophic or physiochemical derivative I am seeking but a sensual "reality"', explains the poet, 'though it *might* be war, it better be a work of art' (*Selected* 197). War, or *melee*, is implicit in Williams' poetry from the very start. These aren't poems that initially suggest a balance, or blending of elements, as much as a variety of techniques that place them in constant juxtaposition and collision.

Whitman failed, then, because of his lack of 'measure'. The poems were 'doomed' because they weren't tight linguistic units, as much as the cacophonous din of the city moulded into some kind of vague linguistic register. As if the breadth of Whitman's sweeping lines could somehow adequately encapsulate American life for all of the people in the city. 'Measure', then, might be more correctly defined as precision or control over the materials. If anything it was the role of the poet to look at language in a new light now that the romantic concepts, which had generated aesthetic viewpoints like Whitman's, had been discredited. 'The scientist is very important to the poet', wrote Williams of the kind of discourses that would now influence the

vast *corpus* of his work, 'because his language is important to him' (*Selected* 31). The 'precision' that scientists employ as they 'measure' exact quantities and variables would now be a better gauge for the poem than established prosody. As he would put it himself in "Against the Weather", the poet is not a 'philosopher' but something entirely separate:

He differs from the philosopher in point of action. He is the whole man, not the breaker up or compactor. He does not translate sensuality of his materials into symbols but deals with them directly. By this he belongs to his world and his time, sensually, realistically. His work might and finally must be expanded – holds the power of expansion at any time – into new conceptions of government. It is not the passive "to be" but the active "I am"... The essence remains in the parts proper to life, in all their sensual reality... This is the artist the man of action as laid against the man of ideas (*In the American Grain* 197 – 199).

There were to be no 'vistas' in Williams' thinking but only an expression of values as they appeared in America at that time. America was a 'genius without a *loci*' and it would be up to the poet to work indefinitely at defining that centre. What was important about the local, to Williams, was its ability to reflect the particular essence of the place. Engrained in this *genius loci* wasn't just an identity, but access to an 'American idiom' or language rooted in the ground itself. New York was no longer to be the subject matter, because it didn't reflect enough the alternative reality Williams would have liked¹⁵. If the writing was not 'rooted' in the historical factors that make a city, then there wasn't really any point in that writing at all.

¹⁵ In his *Paris Review* interview, for instance, Williams went into some detail as to why New York wouldn't be suitable subject matter for his poetry:

'I didn't dare any mention of it in Paterson, but I thought strongly of Manhattan when I was looking for a city to celebrate. I thought that it was not particularized enough for me, not American in the sense I wanted. It was never enough, god knows, and I was familiar enough with it all for my purposes – but so was Leipzig, where I lived for a year when I was young, or Paris. Or even Vienna..... But, Manhattan escaped me (16).

What stands out from amongst all of Williams' writings, is a single-mindedness of which the only competitor would be Pound. For Williams poetry is 'war'. 'Bad art', he writes in a famous letter to Creeley, 'is that... which does not serve in the continual service of cleansing the language of all fixations upon dead, stinking dead, usages of the past. Sanitation and hygiene or sanitation that we may have hygienic writing' (*Letters* 140). American poetry, to Williams, was a cool, calculated machine: a hard, serious confection scored with the indentations of the typewriter, and in which there was 'no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant' (*Prose* 138). This meant renouncing not only Whitman's verbose style, but also the political vision that had spawned it. As he writes in *Book Three of Paterson* – a book that deals in the main with the burning of the library and the destruction of the storehouse of language accumulated in his city – it is the very ridiculousness of the act of writing when measured against reality that makes for the futility of the urban poem in the first place:

Doctor, do you believe in
"the people", the Democracy? Do
you still believe – in this
swill-hole of corrupt cities?
Do you, Doctor? Now?

Give up
the poem. Give up the shilly -
shally of art (*Paterson* 108).

There is simply no point in writing if the words themselves are acted upon by ulterior motives and ambitions. 'Give it up', insists Williams of the poet who will not learn these fundamental lessons, 'quit it. Stop writing' (108). Nothing can be more important than poetry ensconced within a real sense of the local materials. This is 'language modified by *our* environment', explained the poet during an interview with the *Paris Review* in his twilight years, 'the American

environment' (6). This is a form of writing that must be flexible and honest enough to reflect the real concerns of place. The poet must have his ear to the ground, his head out of other people's history and culture, and get to work engaging with a particularity that is palpably there instead. 'The only reality we can know is MEASURE', continues the poet, 'but different worlds call for different measures, each consonant with its own time and place' (*In the American Grain* 172).

But this 'purification' isn't necessarily the gleaming dawn of a poetic revolution Williams would like it to be. Indeed, to Helene Aji Whitman's romanticism always lurks as a permanent trace behind the writing itself. 'Romanticism is a remnant, an imprint still legible under the new print', writes Aji, 'a luminous writing ironically shining through' (51). Romanticism is simply repackaged in Williams' epic. The essential components that defined Whitman's own *hubris* hadn't been purged from the poetry as much as the poet would like. The poet and critic Robert Grenier's seminal doctoral thesis *Organic Prosody in the Poetry of Williams Carlos Williams* (1965), lays the foundations for a reading of the poet's *oeuvre* that sees the poetry as hopelessly tied up within that 'self expression of the individual personality' that had so obsessed Whitman during *Leaves of Grass*. What mattered to Williams wasn't just the 'objectivism' he always proclaimed as much as a genuine anthropocentricity. As Grenier writes:

W. C. Williams believed, passionately, in the Romantic idea of self-expression of the individual personality – a concept which he probably acquired, or at least considerably reinforced, through his avid reading of Whitman. In Dr Williams philosophy as a whole, the human being is finally more important than any wheelbarrow, for it is through the poet's (the artists) act of *invention* – his creative constitution of the world – that there comes of be a world of things at all (*Organic Prosody* 7).

In that sense Williams' explicitly modernist *ethos* retains the concerns over the individual that inflected Whitman's poetry but with a new focus on roots. 'My surface is myself', writes the poet during Book One in reference to the 'orotund' self of Whitmanian mythology, but immediately adds that 'everybody has roots' (*Paterson* 32). 'We go on living', explains the poet, as long as we don't stick to 'fixed concepts like/ roasting hogs, sputtering, their drip sizzling/ in the fire' (32). If anything Williams proposed a more confident self than Whitman had insisted on. 'Williams' poetry', writes Helene Aji, '[puts forward] a self that aspires to transcendence from within the immanent, to universals from the chaos of particulars' ("Romantic Dilemmas" 62). The self is that 'grounding' concept – the glue that bonds poetry and the national community together – in a much more virulent sense than it ever was for Whitman. '[T]he poet', continues Aji, '[is] the individual meant to perform this passage for the rest of humanity' (62). In the absence of linguistic edification from other channels, Williams takes on the role of invigorating the American language based in his command centre of the *polis*.

To Williams the role of the poet is to simply 'do it' much in the vein of Whitman and Olson. His work is a catalyst for which a million more Williams might build their own 'root cities' in America. 'If fourteen poets lived in Paterson N.J there would not be one', writes Grenier, 'but as many *Patersons* as the fourteen could imagine' (7). It is the 'imagination', therefore, that initially lets "the local" take shape in the poem. The poet and the land work in a symbiotic relationship in order to let the artistic work achieve its formal ambitions. 'Were it not for the local, the poem would have neither substance, nor proper form', explains Grenier, 'but were it

not for the poet, the local would never come to revelation, to being in the poem' (8). In *Book Three* there is a real sense of this relationship as Williams describes the process of 'composition' as dealing with reality in the context of the literal destruction of the hollowed-out ideas of the past:

The place sweats of staleness and rot
a back-house stench
library stench

It is summer! Stinking summer

Escape from it – not by running
away. Not by "composition". Embrace the
foulness

-the being taut, balanced between
eternities (*Paterson* 103).

To Williams the word 'composition' becomes something to be ashamed of, a word he associates with the worst aspects of romanticism and poetry that simply 'runs away' from the reality of local conditions. In Williams the local is forever tied up in the specifics of place and as such creates new possibilities for the identification of beauty in the city. The following section of *Book Three*, for instance, is juxtaposed with stories of local Patersonians daring 'tight rope walks' across the falls. 'From 1869 to 1879', Williams proudly declares, 'several crossed the falls on a tight rope'. '[I]n the old pictures', he continues, 'the crowd, below, on the dry rocks in their short sleeves and summer dresses looked more like water lilies or penguins than men or women staring up at them' (103). Poetry that does justice to a true American spirit doesn't 'run away' from anxieties inherent at the source. Perched precariously over the falls the inhabitants of *Paterson* are privileged to new aesthetic appreciations. Like Pound's 'petals' that morphed into human faces on the Metro, only from a position of true daring can the citizens of Paterson

be seen in their striking nature. 'Fleetwood Miles', another historical figure Williams describes as a 'semi lunatic' tried the same, '[but] could not be found when the crowd had assembled' (103). For the braggarts in Paterson, although this equally applies to those engaged in the vagaries of 'composition', this particular feat is out of the question.

Indeed, to Grenier 'the local' in Williams is nothing but a revived version of Coleridge's attempts at 'organic form' (*Organic Prosody* 9). Coleridge believed that the poem's organicity was necessarily opposed to formal arrangements more 'mechanical' in constitution. What mattered was a structure that emerged confidently from the actual conditions, rather than one robotically grafted onto the writing. The poem has 'value to Williams', writes the critic, 'only insofar as his world may be embodied in it' (9). To write a poem is a process of active listening, it involves sensitivity to a dialect and topography that a poet like Whitman had missed in his jumbled lists that simply showed a failure to 'select' and 'refine'. 'So much talk of language', explains Williams, 'when there are no ears' (*In the American Grain* 107). 'Continually tilting the loam of his American *locale*', as Grenier puts it, '[Williams] is looking for devices which might contribute to the growth of a native American prosody' (12). What interests Williams is the economic *autarky* of the poem, or the ability of the writing to stand by itself in all its originality. As the poet writes in his essay on Edgar Allan Poe, the truly impressive thing about a writer that reaches an American idiom is the presentation of an artifact that constantly tries to 'DETACH something from the inchoate mass' (*Prose* 221):

The language... is a remarkable HISTORY of the locality he springs from. There is no aroma to his words rather a luminosity, that comes from a disassociation from anything else than thought

and ideals; a coldly nebulous, side to side juxtaposition of the words as the ideas – it seems to fall back continuously to a bare surface exhausted by having reached no perch in tradition. Seldom a long or sensuous sentence, but with frequent reduplication upon itself as if holding itself up by itself (223).

Williams isn't describing some kind of mutated alien extension of European writing here, but rather a poem that emerges from the local conditions of Paterson. 'The library is desolation', writes Williams of the storehouses of knowledge that had been available to American poets up till now, 'it has a smell of its own/ of stagnation and death' (100). Using the principles of organic form – appropriated, as they clearly were, from the romantic book of tricks – the aim was to create a truly American poem that would finally break out of the reoccurring tensions of the past. 'Americans have never recognized themselves', Williams lamented in his essay on Poe, 'how can they? It is impossible until someone invent the original terms' (*Prose* 226). Until that momentous occasion, until there emerges a genuinely autonomous American poetics, they are only capable of being their own 'dupes' (226). Instead of writing from a position of distinction and credibility, the American poet perpetuates a logic of negation effectively destroying any notion of an American poem in the first place.

But romantic aesthetics were also incorporated into Williams' modernist credo in ways that were a little less benign. In her essay "William Carlos Williams and the Politics of Form" (2007), for example, Carla Billitteri writes on the influence of German Idealism on Williams' poetics specifically as they reproduced Hegelian ideals of 'beautiful semblance' or 'the appearance of spirit... in its immediate... sensuous form, created by the spirit as the form adequate to itself' (46). Williams' innovative turn to the local, in other words, could also be seen as a blending of

romantic and modernist aesthetics in order to create a singular idea of beauty utterly detached from the lives of ordinary people. Billitteri is referring to Walter Benjamin's work on the 'aura' of the work of art, specifically as laid out in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935). As the critic explains, the 'blending' of romantic and modernist preoccupations held a very specific danger in Williams' poetics:

In so far as his fascination with modernity did not lead to a break with the notions of beautiful semblance, nor with the ethos of authenticity and its episteme of final revelation, the end result is an auratic modernism that, just as Benjamin saw, was perfectly compatible with developing forms of social control... Williams democratic opening towards the vernacular American language was but a show of aestheticized populism, structurally functional in masking a politics of form where the semantic order achieved with the poem-machine goes hand in hand with the promotion and establishment of a larger design of social order ("Politics of Form" 50).

What Williams recreates in his call for a purging of the American canon, in his call for the literal 'burning' of the libraries, is that totalistic self that first emerged in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* but somehow transferred into the machine age. 'Williams' auratic politics of form places great emphasis on the [r]omantic ideology of the poet as the outsider individual of genius', writes Billitteri, '[the] member of an aristocratic elite contributing to social struggles only by bringing the order of his formal inventions into the world' (51). The apolitical nature of Williams' urban epic, then, becomes an attempt to separate himself from Whitman but also the means by which an almost aristocratic distance could be maintained. Billitteri sees Williams engaged in trying to reproduce the aesthetic ideals of German Idealism within the context of modernity. His desire for 'war' in the poem – indeed, as he puts it in his letter to Creeley, for 'hygiene' in language – could be contrasted with someone like the Italian futurist Marinetti¹⁶. If poems were

¹⁶ Marinetti is an interesting comparison to Williams, purely because the rhetoric of his manifestoes craved a similar sense of 'hygiene' and 'war'. 'We Futurists, who for over two years, scorned by the Lame and Paralyzed, have glorified the love of danger and violence, praised patriotism and war', Marinetti wrote during the First World

the cold, hard machines that would bring 'beauty' into the world, then only the destruction of all previous knowledge would ever suffice. 'We read', writes Williams in *Book Three*, 'not the flames/ but the ruin left/ by the conflagration' (123). Through war, through forcing his idea of beauty onto the rest of the world, Williams takes it upon himself to rescue America. 'So be it', Williams echoes repeatedly through this section of the poem, '[b]ring it down... consume and submerge' (97).

Billitteri's analysis certainly positions Williams' poetics within a wider context of the technocratic impulses synonymous with modernity. Moreover, this is a romantic subject work where modernity becomes the technological means by which *alterity* is oppressed. In her text she likens Williams' aesthetics to those of Henry Ford, in as far as the poet was engaged in duplicating a certain idea of beauty as an *a priori* standard. But there is another aspect to Billitteri's study when it turns more widely to the question of Williams' attitudes towards social organization in Paterson. Drawing on an imaginary exchange Williams has with his brother – an architect – on the subject of 'slum clearance', the critic isolates Williams' protestation that the people of the slums are 'different than you and me' to be an admittance that:

The writer... is a social designer bringing his imagination to the "technical interpretation" of the state of affairs around him. The best writer is thus the artist "with the most profound insight into the lives of people *and the widest imaginative skills in... [the] technical interpretation* – of any part thereof". The artist "has to serve" his society, not only in the function of a social designer, that is, as a social technocrat... for the technocrat in the machine age is a member of a new aristocracy, and his purpose is not simply that of monitoring, but also of controlling the masses, from a safe distance ("Politics of Form" 57).

War, 'the hygiene of the world, are happy to finally experience this great Futurist hour of Italy, whilst the foul tribe of pacifists huddles dying in the deep cellars of the ridiculous palace at The Hague' (Marinetti 79).

Williams ideal Paterson is one over which he has absolute control. The poet reproduces the instinctual biopolitics of the state, when he seeks to indefinitely 'reform' those who obstruct his idea of the 'beautiful thing'. 'Poetry... is meant to be of social "use" by supplying a strong and singularly invisible means of social control', writes Billitteri, '[they should] be thought of as habitations for the unknowing and brutish masses' (57). This is of particular interest to this study because it brings to mind Le Corbusier's dictates that architectural modernism must 'create a mass production state of mind' (*The City of Tomorrow* 99). 'We must see the establishment of standards so that we can face up to the problem of perfection', Le Corbusier insisted, 'man must be built on the axis [of harmony] in perfect agreement with nature and probably the universe' (89). Williams' idea that the beautiful can be infinitely reproduced within poetry is a simple corollary of architectural modernism own standards for the city that similarly gained prominence in the post war years¹⁷. The refrain 'so be it' now takes on a particular malice as it resonates in town planning offices across the length and breadth of the world¹⁸.

Williams' *modus operandi* for writing *Paterson* was the insistence that its history needed rescuing from the single narrative that saw it is a place of commerce and density only. This is a problem not only with *Paterson* but also with the construction of its own historical narratives.

¹⁷ I refer here to the principles of the Congres International D'Architecture Moderne – or CIAM – whose series of meetings in the late Twenties and early Thirties sought to codify the principles of the 'functional' Corbusian city into the design practice of local governments and were actually to become implemented by administrations all over Europe in the post war years.

¹⁸ This is in no way to state that CIAM urbanism is essentially unprincipled, or to be dragged into the kind of arguments that fundamentally reject architectural modernism that proliferate wildly in the present. Rather, my rejection of Williams' position is more in line with the rejection of state planning logic put forward by James C Scott in his text *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (1999). See also the film *The Pruitt Igoe Myth* (2011) that reveals the complicity of ideological factors in the failure of these schemes somewhat independently from the designs of planners themselves.

The problem of the city might be rectified, assumed Williams, if the socio-human element of the urban environment could be revealed once more. '[H]istory follows governments and never men', explains Williams in an essay called the "Virtue of History" during *In the American Grain*, '[i]t portrays us in generic patterns, like effigies or the carvings on sarcophagi, which say nothing save, of such and such a man, that he is dead' (188). *In the American Grain* focuses in some detail on the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan largely as a point of comparison with the city in modernity. Tenochtitlan interests Williams because it was an example of a civilization that existed before the commercial values of America took hold. Tenochtitlan was a city not just of mud and wattle after all, but technological advancements that rivaled a modern day New York:

Scarcely an element in the city's incredible organization but evidenced an intellectual vigour full of resource and delicacy which had given it distinction. Half land and half water the streets were navigated by canoes and bridged at the intersections by structures of great timbers over which ten horses could go abreast. For water supply a masonry pipe, two places broad and five feet high, ran from the mainland over one of the great causeways, carrying excellent drinking water. There were two such aqueducts, side by side, each to be used alternately while the other was cleaning (*In the American Grain* 32).

What stands out about Tenochtitlan to Williams is that it a city just as advanced as anything in 'modern' America. This is a place with 'public squares', 'porticoes' and where 'sixty thousand souls [were] engaged in buying and selling' (32). In this vast technologically designed marketplace city, the only problem was the Spanish who eventually came to conquer and impose the beginnings of a limited Christian worldview on the topography at large. '[T]hey obeyed under the names of King or Christ', writes Williams at the ignorance of their endeavours, 'while they watched the recreative new unfolding before *them*, deafened and blinded' (27). If anything it was the Spaniard's themselves that were exposed to 'newness' when they encountered Tenochtitlan. 'Spain cannot be blamed for the crassness of the discoverers',

continues Williams, 'it was the force of the pack whom the dead drive' (27). In strict adherence to their history – to the 'dead history' of Kings and Queens – the Spanish were automatons unable to realize the beauty that lay before them. Without poets like William's to guide them, without that vision of the individual creative spirit to show them the way, this would always be the fate of 'the people'.

This is in contrast to the Indians who had managed to create a working city totally in tune with its origins. There was no divorce in Tenochtitlan because Tenochtitlan was a city that existed for a purpose acknowledged by everybody who resided in it. Talking of the temples spread in earnest around the city Williams notes that what stood out about Tenochtitlan above all else was how this city had definite roots. Indeed, in Tenochtitlan the people weren't lost in their 'desires' but physically planted in the necessity of place:

Here it was the tribe's deep feeling for a reality that stems back into the permanence of remote origins had its firm hold. It was the earthward thrust of their logic; blood and earth; the realization of their primal and continuous identity with the ground itself, where everything is fixed in darkness. The priests in black robes, tribal men, never cutting or combing their hair; the instinctual exclusion of women from all places of worship; the debarring of priests from female society; it was a ceremonial acknowledgment of the deep sexless urge of life itself, the hungry animal, underlying all other power; the mysterious secret of existence whose cruel beauty, they, the living inherited from the dead (*In the American Grain* 33)

The knowledge of history absorbed by the Indians wasn't imparted from dead books in a library or the ossified dictates of a previous King or Queen. The society that existed in Tenochtitlan – although at times brutal and based on the exclusion of women – was something 'instinctual' or of a 'continuous identity with the ground itself' (37). 'The earth is black', insists Williams, 'and it is there... only art advances' (34). The brutal reality of life in Tenochtitlan means nothing

because it is only from this close relationship with the earth that a city can be taken seriously. 'Williams' evocation of Tenochtitlan at the moment just before it is destroyed', writes Stephen M Park, 'attempts, unsuccessfully, to recover it from the province of the "dead", to which contemporary culture has resigned the Aztecs and so many other indigenous civilizations ("Mesoamerican Modernism" 44). It wasn't that the poet wanted to blame the Spanish for the destruction of a civilization, but give an example of the restorative alternatives that can be glimpsed under the conditions of apocalypse. 'Streets, public squares, markets, temples, palaces, the city spread its dark life upon the earth of a new world', writes Williams, 'rooted there... [t]he whole world of its unique associations sank into the ground to be rekindled never' (*In the American Grain* 31-32). By approaching Paterson with a similar apocalyptic fury, a hidden history premised on the 'beautiful thing' could be reestablished in the present day.

This is largely the kind of original social relationship between people that Williams was attempting to establish in *Paterson* as well. To the poet the 'beautiful thing' that runs throughout the text – and the purging fire that dominates it in 'Book Three' – are intimately related to each other. 'When all attempts at ordered containment fail', writes Billitteri, 'violent destruction of the living is justified, even glorified' ("Politics of Form" 60). The 'Sunday in the Park' section, for instance, attempts to 'marry' the common people of Paterson as they commune with nature, but his observations are undergirded with a barely hidden contempt for the people themselves. The following scene where two residents of Paterson fumble and sleep drunk in the park – as he writes in *Book One* 'locked and forgot in their desires' (*Paterson* 6) –

shows them to be completely unaware of the possibilities inherent in the coupling of male and female that would be his utopia. There is no awareness of the potentialities for union between the residents of the city as they ineffectually bump and grind against each other his beer bottle like a 'spear' projecting Williams' anxiety about a primordial coupling of which only twisted traces now exist:

She stirs, distraught,
against him – wounded (drunk), moves
against him (a lump)desiring,
against him, bored .

fragrantly bored and sleeping, a
beer bottle still grasped spear-like
in his hand (*Paterson* 59) .

This is a passage that strongly draws on the 'caresses' and sterility of the passionless coupling of the typist and her lover during the 'Game Of Chess' section of *The Wasteland*. It is born, no less, of the same scorn for a people envisaged in Eliot – an Eliot who Williams was quick to label a 'conformist' who 'wanted to go back to the iambic pentameter' in later life – a people who have been effectively removed from their sources¹⁹. It preaches the futility of an urban public moving hopelessly over the terrain of newly constituted parkland, forever circumambulating the rubbish-strewn ground in the hope of political and linguistic edification:

Loiterers in groups straggle
over the bare rock-table – scratched by their
boot nails more than the glacier scratched
them – walking indifferently through
each other's privacy (*Paterson* 56) .

¹⁹ Williams stated this during an interview with the *Paris Review* in later life, where he also railed at Eliot for a complete failure to preach the American idiom he would like. 'Eliot on the other hand, was trying to find a way to record the speech and he didn't find it', explained Williams, 'he wanted to be regular, to be a true American idiom, but he didn't find a way to do it' (12)

These people resemble Williams' automatons as they trudge over a glacier as if it just any other rock. Their indifference infuriates Williams. It is indifference not only to an awareness of culture and history, but to that sense of *polis* that the poet is truly trying to create. At the end of the first section of *Sunday in the Park*, for instance, Williams describes 'humped roots... polished by the feet of... picnickers' as if they are the last vestiges of a natural world now smeared with the 'rancid grease' of their sandwiches. The poem ends with one of these 'picnickers' discordantly playing the trumpet as if somehow symbolic of the divorce predominating in Paterson. To Williams the sound is 'deformity' – or 'a corrosion, a parasitic curd, a clarion' – that somehow communicates to the citizens the 'belief/ to be good dogs' (61). Instead of engaging with the topography of where they live, the people of Paterson lie down to have their 'tummies tickled' in the summer sun.

It is this blind obedience in *his* city that Williams despises above all else. The values that his citizens aspire to are the values of the powerful property owners who have always staked a claim on the topography since the founding of the Paterson. Again, Williams sees this as an issue with language. Just after the residents of Paterson hear the trumpet as a sign of their obedience as 'good dogs' there is juxtaposition of a sign that reads 'NO DOGS ALLOWED AT LARGE IN THIS PARK' (61). It is as if language in Paterson serves only the demands of governance when true communication is abandoned by people only 'seem[ing] to talk' (50). This is what those who govern Paterson rely on, and it is awakening people from this dream that is the poet's ultimate goal. 'That the poem', writes Williams in this section of 'Sunday in

real time in order to make it a root city once again. This is a dangerous logic, that when it leaves the realm of the poem takes on all kinds of frightening associations. Williams envies the postwar destruction in London for the same reason, then, because in the vast conflagration of the ruins lies not only devastation but the possibilities inherent in renewal. By burning vast swathes of Europe, Hitler had enacted the kind of 'tough love' Williams would like to adopt in his own city:

The doing away of the slum districts of London is an excellent thing. War has become the demolition of slum districts in London... The necessary destruction could have been better done, more economically, with less collateral waste through the agency of peace but only a violent peace dominated by revolution. The means were locked up in stupidity; war released them (*Letters* 167).

The technological innovations 'released' by the war are something that Williams praises despite the 'collateral damage'. 'Williams' wartime homage to the Futurist aesthetics of violence', writes Billitteri on the same letter by Williams, finds a rather alarming culmination in *Paterson's* celebration of the destructive, clearing force of fire' ("Politics of Form" 59). Indeed, the tone of 'Book Three' is frenzied in its pursuit of a fire that is the only way to reach the eventual hygiene of a language able to communicate directly. This is about the paring down of the city to its base elemental forms. It is about tearing down anything that cannot be explicitly stated as of 'use':

The "Castle" too to be razed. So be it. For no reason other than that it is *there*, in – comprehensible; of no USE! So be it. So be it (*Paterson* 100).

William's phrase 'so be it' - meant, no doubt, to reflect the poet's indifference to renewal in *Paterson* – comes across as a lot more sinister when put into this historical context. The fire prepares the ground for the raising of a more harmonious city; it finally leads the way for the appreciation of urban space as the beautiful *polis* it should be. 'Beautiful thing', writes Williams

later on in the poem, ‘- the whole city doomed! And/ the flames towering’ (116). Destruction makes way for the new city, the obliteration of social life as it currently stands in Paterson has to make way for the greater good.

But to Williams the fire doesn’t simply make way for the eventual preeminence of his aesthetic ideas, as much as become an embodiment of them. Poetry doesn’t come after the fire, it should be the very process by which the beautiful thing manifests itself. Otherwise the poet is ineffectual, directing *his* words towards a world of things in futile fits and ‘squirts’:

Beautiful thing

- intertwined with the fire. An identity surmounting the world, its core – from which we shrink squirting little hoses of objection – and I along with the rest, squirting at the fire (120).

Submitting to the fire isn’t portrayed as an act of weakness as much as an inevitability. In *Paterson* Williams compares the ideal poet to the war heroes currently fighting in the course of the Second World War in the Japanese territory of *Iwo Jima*. Ideally the American nation would be rendered an effective political entity again by writers of ‘heroic’ verse engaged in these selfless tasks of comradely warfare:

Poet

Are you there?

How shall I find examples? Some boy
Who drove a bull-dozer through
The barrage at Iwo Jima and turned it
And drove back making a path for others (121)

War is the always in the background in Williams' writing. War predominates in his poetry because it is the very means of 'selection' towards 'hygiene'. The 'measure' that Williams is searching for is maintained not with words alone but an aloof and violent sensibility that aims to reassert order in the poem by any means necessary. Just like in the city of Tenochtitlan before there can be renewal the old structures must be burnt to their very foundations. To Williams the maxim 'the local is the universal' becomes a totalizing procedure by which ground is cleared for aristocratic ideas pertaining to poetic form. The 'grounding' that Williams aims for is only achieved by a slash and burn policy. 'Marry us! Marry!' Williams sees the man and the woman of his poem calling to him, 'Or! Be dragged down, dragged/ under and lost' (83).

Polis-tician: Olson's Polis

Charles Olson is the concluding point in this chapter, because he writes from an awareness of the inadequacies in both romantic and modernist perceptions of urban space situated in the bounds of a post war climate where – at least more so than in Williams' endeavours in the thirties – 'war' and 'hygiene' were becoming increasingly intolerable terms in the context of aesthetic practice²⁰. Olson's root city, in this sense, would be free from the traces of romantic

²⁰ Olson's *polis* wasn't regressive as much as a genuine attempt to conceive political space in the context of the failure of post war totalitarianisms. 'Man came here in an intolerable way', wrote Olson in an essay entitled "La Resistance" (an illuminating work penned in response to sketches of the death camps drawn by his friend Jean Riboud in Europe), 'when man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground, a ground he comes to by way of the precise contrary of the cross, of spirit in the old sense, of old mouths' (*Selected* 58).

subjectivity that defined the poetry of Whitman and Williams, whilst at the same time attempting to write 'outside' of the totalitarianism implicit in apperceptions of the city in poetry. Olson's identification of 'postmodern man' must be seen as the beginning of attempts to define a space for writing beyond the stalemate of the modern. His was poetry that consciously engaged with a genuine awareness of the inadequacies of the inherited poetic traditions in America. In his seminal "Projective Verse" essay, and later on in the *Maximus Poems*, he insisted that 'the poetics of [the contemporary] situation/ are yet to be found out' (*Collected* 249). What mattered in his poetry was a critical engagement with both romantic and modernist pedagogies in order to ascertain a formula by which the reality of the contemporary situation could be effectively transposed *in verse*. It wasn't just in terms of poetics that Olson hoped for a continual 're-vision' of the American tradition either. These aesthetics were intrinsically political in as far as poetry was the very means by which the *necropolis* would be reversed. In her essay "Who Can Say Who Are Citizens: Casual Mythology in Charles Olson's Polis" (1998), for example, Susan Vanderborg labels Olson a 'polis-tician' (378). 'Olson took seriously the metaphor as the poet as a polis-tician', writes Vanderborg, 'who could provide a sense of common origins without ignoring the individual or the local allegiances of his audience' (378). His was a political vision that aimed to merge the tension always present between the individual and collective, in order to create what Vanderborg calls 'a new model for a participatory polis that might spur his audience to political reform' (365). 'All my life I've heard/ one makes many', Olson deliberately writes at the beginning of *Maximus*. Reversing the American dictum on the importance of the individual – as encapsulated in the *de facto* motto of the United States *e pluribus unum* or 'out of many one' – Olson bases himself in the locality of

Gloucester in order to reassert the predominance of the American people over the mere legislative and economic powers of the state. These words, first heard in a conversation by a chef called Cornelia Williams at Black Mountain College, display the fundamental process of bottom-up re-visioning that was always taking place in Olson's poetics. Based in the locality of Gloucester his poem would put emphasis on the importance on the micro-political impulses usually smothered by narratives of the powerful, and reassert those who had 'polis in their eyes' instead. What follows will juxtapose Olson's writing to his romantic and modernist predecessors in order to closely examine both the pragmatic and aesthetic considerations that lay behind his own root city.

It is hard to claim Olson's *polis* as 'totalitarian' in the same manner as Whitman and Williams, because the poet consciously aimed to construct his ideal city based on the knowledge that it was a morphing entity wholly resistant to rigid interpretations of the political. During his essay "Olson's Republic", for example, Nick Lawrence positions Olson's work at the margins of accepted narratives of what constitutes civic space. The poetry is first and foremost seen as a means of active engagement with the variety of publics that make up the city. 'To write a republic is to perform it as relation, to rescue it from the status (stasis) of arrested happening', explains Lawrence, 'it is a process of doing' ("Olson's Republic"). Olson's tool of choice is poetry because poetry refuses to be co-opted into the narratives that make up the state. As the only form of writing explicitly banished from the *polis*, poetry can be utilized as a very effective linguistic tool towards an opening. Or, as Lawrence would have it:

Poetry [is] that form of discourse that distracts the state. Dis-tracts, that is, not simply by diverting its attention from the good, but by drawing it apart, dispersing and multiplying its loci of value; not just by constituting a space alternative to that of the state-form, but by de-gridding the concept of state space, revealing it as lumpy, heterogeneous, desquamated; energizing it into spills and flows. Field as phasal, tendential, in formation. The alternative to such anti-hegemonic agitation is a tendency towards brittle simulacra, pasteboard masks ranged around an absent centre of power ("Olson's Republic").

Olson's *polis* is a city in dispersal only; its nodes of communication 'lumpy' rather than 'homogeneous' in the *necropolitical* sense. Olson aims to envisage social space in terms other than how it is traditionally articulated in the west. Poetry in Gloucester is a genuine attempt to reposition the terms of a debate that is continually running round in circles. *The Maximus Poems* call for the rearranging of language into forms that resemble something other than the merely monolingual dictates of the state. 'It is Olson's task... to recognize their transformative potential', writes Lawrence, 'to see in them the forming ground of a potential energy constitutive of meaning' ("Olson's Republic").

Olson was a poet who, from the very start, sought to reawaken a genuine sense of being together opposed to the prevailing atomization of liberal democracy. The sheer size of the North American continent had given the earliest American authors the opportunity to rethink their classical inheritance. In his first serious work *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), for example, Olson aimed to show that before the years of economic expansion in Jacksonian America there had existed a country more used to living respectfully in tune with the natural environment. Writing on the character 'Ahab' from Herman Melville's famous novel *Moby Dick*, Olson aimed to show a previous communal life in the United States that had been utterly corrupted by industrial society. To Olson what an occupation like whaling – which is, of course, the subject of Melville's text – shows, is the loss of an intimate sense of life understood in a reciprocal relationship to its

environment. 'Whaling started, like so many American industries, as a collective, communal affair', writes Olson in the essay, 'see any history of Sag Harbour or Nantucket. And as late as 1850 there were still skippers to remember the days when they knew the fathers of every man in their crew. But it was already a sweated industry by the time Melville had a hand on a lay' (*Collected* 24). The subject of the 'cross of the spirit' had destroyed this ideal situation in its aim to dominate the natural world. Instead of a human world existing in respectful harmony with its surroundings what emerged was over one hundred years of plundering and indifference:

'In place of Zeus, Odysseus, Olympus, we have had Caesar, Faust, the city. The shift was from man as a group to individual man. Now in spite of the corruption of myth by fascism, the swing is out and back. Melville is the one who began it... Logic and classification had lead civilization toward man, away from Space. Melville went to space to probe and find man. Early man did the same: poetry, language and the core of myth, as Fenollosa says, grew up together (19).

What Olson is describing is a world where the human being no longer separates itself from its surroundings. Taking his lead from Pound, this is a linguistic community in tune with the mythological yearnings consonant with the anxieties generated in modernity. His contribution to poetry, then, is a whole scale reversal of this anthropocentric relationship in order to posit the individual in a non-totalitarian relationship to space. 'Like Ahab', writes Olson on the central lesson to be learned from Melville's text, 'American, one aim: Lordship over nature' (17). Rather than exist in tune with the natural world the history of America has been the dominance of what D. H. Lawrence calls 'monomaniacs of the idea' (DH Lawrence 169).

Best thing to do is to dig one thing or place or man', Olson writes in *A Bibliography On America for Ed Dorn*, 'until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man' (5). For

Olson even William's focus on the value of the local wouldn't be enough if conditions in Gloucester were to be effectively transformed. 'To say that in America that goods are as fruits, and the people as goods, all glistening but tasteless, accomplishes nothing in itself', he declared in "Human Universe", 'for the overwhelming fact is that the rest of the world wants nothing but to be the same. Value is perishing from the earth because no one cares to fight down to it beneath the glowing surfaces so attractive to all' (29). Even William's attempt at a *Genius Loci* in his poem is accused of 'localism' or the desire to confect some kind of 'Blueberry America'. As Iain Sinclair has recently suggested, Olson was not looking for a necropolis in reality, but a way of writing that linked his seaport town with the wider world:

[H]e didn't do what William Carlos Williams, one of the modernist figures he most admired, wanted to do; he called his great work *The Maximus Poems* and not *Gloucester*, in the way that Williams called his book *Paterson*. Williams missed the point. Olson chose the figure of Maximus because he was completely taken by the idea of size and scale; he wanted something bigger than life, a figure he could relate to Gilgamesh and Samson, to Odysseus and the idea of the eternal voyage. [He was] questing for verifiable evidence, combing records and charts, to underpin Homer, Hesiod and Herodotus ("On the Back of an Elephant").

'Whatever it is that we can call its replacement (Bill very much a little of it)', wrote Olson in a letter to Robert Creeley, 'HAS, SO FAR, not been able to bring any time so abreast of us that we are in this present aim going straight out of ourselves into it' (*Complete Correspondence* 29). That term space becomes increasingly key to Olson as he aimed to break with the conventions and restrictions of a former world of discourse. 'The locus of value was no longer in a coherently-ordered community rooted in a world whose geographic limits contributed to the community's definition of itself', writes William McPherson in his essay "Charles Olson: Mythologist of History", 'Value was now locked solely in the individual. The emergence of a new concept of heroism shattered communal action' (192). It was the State, furthermore, that had

perpetuated this vain ideology. In order for the poet to counteract this it would be necessary to dig down much further and deeper than Williams had ever envisaged linking his *polis* with a greater sense of the world.

It is in Olson's revolutionary understanding of the epic poem, then, that the key to his understanding of *polis* resides. Indeed, that sense of 'closure' that informed the political model in the West was exactly what he was working against. His verse aimed to shatter the egoism ingrained in poetry since the romantics, by being more open in terms of form and technique. In his seminal essay "Projective Verse" (1950), Olson made a clear distinction between the realms of 'projective' and 'closed' verse. 'Closed verse, that verse which print bred', Olson explains in his essay, 'and which is pretty much what we have had in England and America, and still have got, despite the work of Williams and Pound' (*Collected* 39). On top of Pound's attempts at the epic poem in *The Cantos*, Olson demanded a poetry that would take the thinking of the history poem further and expunge the 'egotistical sublime' from the Western tradition altogether. If 'breaking the pentameter' was the 'first heave', as Pound puts it in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley', then it was up to Olson to finish the project. In doing so he proposed more open forms, or more specifically what he called 'composition by field' (56). Instead of strictly structured lines in stanza form Olson aimed to create a new poetry where 'FORM', as he put it would always fit 'CONTENT'. 'If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in the breath', he wrote, 'the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse, which has not (due, I think, to a smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept

or foot) been sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead' (78). Instead of thinking about preconceived forms, the poet must exist alongside a world of things rather than separate himself from them. This would hopefully lead to what Olson called 'objectism'. '[This is] the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects', Olson explains, 'For a man is himself is an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages, the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages' (45). What matters to Olson is what he terms 'humilitas', or the bringing down of the sacrosanct individual to once again make him 'of use'.

Olson's history poem is not simply a reflection of 'conservatism', then, but a form of writing directed precisely towards such an 'opening'. This is where the key to the social function of his poetry starts to become clear. 'It is more than a call for versification', writes the poet Rosemarie Waldrop in a seminal essay entitled "Process and Relationship" (1977) 'it is a manifesto of an attitude toward reality' (467). 'ONE PERCEPTION', explains Olson, 'MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO ANOTHER PERCEPTION'. Indeed, Waldrop draws on Olson's main philosophical influence Alfred North Whitehead to note how his poetics are a statement on process and 'kinetic energy'. A philosopher like Whitehead is engaged in explaining how every action has an effect upon both other human beings and the world that we

inhabit at the same time. This is how Olson hopes to avoid 'closure' as such, by understanding that he is in a world where one worldview is immediately countered by an infinite series of other possibilities. 'Olson's attitude to history is separate to Pound's', writes Waldrop, 'He accepts fully the flux, the process, and does not hanker for a mythical past' (475). It would be hard to accuse him of 'nostalgia', then, because he has seen where Poundian myth leads and he rejects it entirely. As Waldrop explains:

[I]n *The Cantos* the pattern of analogy in the constant metamorphoses implies an original oneness. They describe a kind of emanation of myth where the original *One*... is subjected to time. That is to say, it is re-enacted in history, in a series of metamorphoses which become more and more diffuse until the only way to get back to the original unity is death, the descent into Hades. Time is the villain of the piece. Time has to be redeemed, that is, abolished. Thus the basic gesture of *The Cantos* is a pulling toward a centre, towards a oneness, a timeless condition of light, against the grain of the outward flow of history; where *The Maximus Poems* moves with history, expands, pushes outward into the manifold. The place which metamorphosis holds in *The Cantos* is held in *The Maximus Poems* by topography (of Gloucester) which is in itself a pattern of adjoining spaces and of expansion (475).

Whereas Pound works against 'the barb of time' ('Canto V'), Olson throws himself head first into it. His poetry doesn't attempt to reach what Pound famously called 'the great acorn of light', but a form of knowledge that is always contested, always 'in process'²¹. Olson's process of composition entailed not only writing a poem in the privacy of his Gloucester residence, but letters to the paper with the eventual aim of trying to start a conversation with the community at large. 'An American/ is a complex of occasions', writes Olson in 'Letter 27 [withheld]' as if throw light on the complex relationships of individuals to their community, 'themselves a

²¹ It was Pound, however, who definitely allowed this kind of 'open' aesthetic to emerge in Olson's work. 'Ez's epic solves problem by his ego: his single emotion breaks all down to his equals or inferiors', he writes in a letter to Robert Creeley, 'which assumption, that there are intelligent men whom he can outtalk, is beautiful because it destroys historical time, and thus creates the methodology of the *Cantos*, viz, a spacefield where, by inversion, though the material is all time material, he has driven through it so sharply by the beak of his ego, that, he has turned time into what we must now have, space & its live air' (*Mayan Letters* 90).

geometry/ of a spatial nature' (*Maximus* 185). It is the failure of those in Gloucester to effectively realise this relationship that is the most necessary social function of the poem itself. 'I compel Gloucester/ to yield, to/ change', as Olson continues, 'Polis// is this' (185).

This 'opening' in his poem was achieved not just in the radical structure of the poetry, but in a distinct attitude to space. 'Olson [invites] the reader to move... out of [the totalitarianism] of Europe', writes Joris, 'into a new, more open possibility, that of the American space, unencumbered by history' ("Where is Olson Now?" 7). This is the methodology of what Jeremy Prynne famously called in his lectures on *Maximus* 'the obscure epic'. In Prynne's seminal lectures on Olson's epic poem given at Simon Fraser University in 1971 following the poet's death, Olson's method is revealed as an attempt to construct a poem based entirely on what he calls the 'figure of outward'. This is where the key term 'space' begins to enter Olson's method in a more complicated sense. As Prynne explains, when Olson tells the reader to face the 'sea' in the poem he is essentially 'means space and the large condition of the cosmos' that inescapably surrounds it:

[W]e must understand that for Olson to look from the Gloucester coast out into the Atlantic is to look into the livelihood of the past, to look into the economic support of the whole of the beginnings of that race from which he felt he came, to look back to the cultural origins of the whole settlement of New England, and to look back to the mid-Atlantic ridges, those up-thrusts of mountain ridges down beneath the Atlantic, which figure so largely in his imagination as the last residues of the birth of the great continents in the original orogenies that formed the earth as we know it ("Lectures on *Maximus*").

Prynne positions Olson's thinking as having a dual relationship to the kind of mythological perspective that enervated Pound's poetry. To Olson, there isn't just one single mythological narrative undergirding the human race, as much as two interrelating ones. Firstly, there is the

story of where 'we' come from – of 'what sand we have on bottom' as Prynne calls it – and only then can there be anything like the 'grand' narrative usually associated with mythological perspectives like Pound's. 'Nowhere have I been so struck', explained Prynne in those lectures, 'that the planet, the whole globe, the earth upon which we live is home to us'. The key to *The Maximus Poems* is that each separate sentence, each isolated part of text, 'participates' in what Prynne calls 'the curvature of the whole spatial condition'. Olson's 'root person' must be 'rooted' in place because without this local knowledge there would be no real understanding of how the individual relates to the particular at all.

Olson's poetics are opposed directly to 'the state' or 'nation' as such. They are a cogent attempt to forge a community of purity 'outside' of the dominion of all political constructs. Although Olson was concerned with 'community' he was very cautious not to link this too deeply to an understanding of the nation state and historically impotent discourses on American exceptionalism. Where Olson departs from this 'yankee' sensibility especially is in his relationship to commerce. He admires the early settler's self-sufficient life style, but questions it when it morphed into the quest to profit from Gloucester and the environment more generally. In 'letter 22', for instance, Olson describes an early fight between the residents of Gloucester and some interlopers from the town of Plymouth, who had built a fishing stage on Cape Ann:

What we have in this field in these scraps among these fishermen
and the Plymouth men, is more than the fight of one colony with

another, it is the whole engagement against (1) mercantilism (cf. the Westcountry men and Sir Edward Coke against the Crown, in commons, these same years - against Gorges); and (2) against nascent capitalism except as it stays the individual adventurer and the workers on share – against all sliding statism, ownership getting into the community as, Chambers of Commerce, or theocracy; or City Manager (*Maximus* 101)

The importance of this dispute doesn't lie in a rejection of 'commerce', as such, but in two distinctly different ways of carrying it out. The residents of Gloucester did not tie themselves up within the cash nexus or seek to become 'city managers', but worked very much from the premise of sustainability drawn on an intimate knowledge of the local conditions²². The alternative is 'mercantilism' or 'statism', which instead of being the 'individual adventurer' in the wilderness exploits the environment for profit and then moves on somewhere else. This is epitomized for Olson by the Puritan governor Endicott, who moved Gloucester's oldest dwelling away for its original position and all the way to Plymouth instead. This was not a caring attitude but one premised on exploitation from the very start. '[T]he adventure/ of the new frontier', as Olson puts it, '(not boom, or goal,/ the lucky strike)' (*Maximus* 104).

²² Olson generally uses Pound's word 'pejorocracy' to describe this situation, which, according to Michael Gilleland, comes from 'from Latin *pejor* (*pejor* = worse, which serves as the comparative degree of the adjective *malus* = bad) and Greek -κρατία (*kratía* = rule, dominion). We see the root *pejor* also in English *pejorative*' (Gilleland "Pejorocracy").

Olson's poetry positioned itself as a reaction to such a closed, insular world. *The Maximus Poems* are, first and foremost, a reaction to the closing down of possibilities that had been formulated in that limited conception of self and space introduced by the Puritans. In 'Letter 23', for example, he gestures to the ultimate consequences of such solipsism leading to 'a nation fizzing/ itself on city managers/ mutual losing banks' (118). The marriage of the individual and commercialism, in this sense, had corrupted the face of this continent that had so much potential to 'the first comers'. Instead of the logic of the bankers – a solipsistic 'sameness' that still echoes in Congress today – America needed to look at its roots, to engender again the kind of responsibility to place that should exist in a country with such a historical mission. Instead of monuments to politicians and statesmen Olson suggests raising a statue to ordinary fishermen:

They should raise a monument
to a fisherman crouched down
behind a hogshead protecting
his dried fish (*Maximus* 123)

Olson writes directly, in fact, of a grisly murder on Boston Common by the Puritans during the poem as a kind of atavistic reaction that almost mirrors the reactionary inward-looking culture he observed around himself at that time²³:

²³ Olson refers here to the murder of two Quakers by the Puritans, an occurrence that was the final stage in a legalized extradition of recalcitrant Quakers from the Puritan villages. Before such an aggressive act once the Quakers had been excluded their re-emergence in a village would warrant a different punishment each time they returned. 'And if they have once suffered the law as before and shall presume to come under its jurisdiction again', explained the statute book of the Massachusetts Bay General Court, 'every such male Quaker shall for the second offence be branded on the hand with the letter 'H', be committed to prison till he can be sent away at his own charge; and for the third offence shall be branded on the other hand, committed to prison and kept to work as aforesaid' (Wood 104). The ultimate 'charge' for these 'foreign Quakers' was to have 'their tongues bored through with a hot iron'. If they returned after this, then it was up to the Judge to set his own punishment as he saw fit. This came to a head, in fact, on Boston Common in 1629 when two Quakers were hung for their failure to

enthusiasm does not lead
to progression they took Quakers
(Mrs Davies cookbook kind)
and sold them,
as slaves, or burned them

Boston Common. Proportion's
not the easiest thing
to bring if character's
(Cartesian monads)
desperate densenesses (128)

'Enthusiasm' the poet seems to be suggesting, is never a route to a progressive form of social organization. The Puritan character is impenetrable. They suffer from a 'hardness' of personality that will never surrender itself to an exterior world. By shutting people out, by enclosing themselves within the strict confines of their villages, the early Puritans had turned in on themselves and revealed their base impulses and desires. America now was a heady mix of this intolerance and unthinking consumerism. 'Cheapness shit is/ upon the world', explains the poet in no uncertain terms. There is a need to reassess the original mission, which has been corrupted beyond belief:

...About seven years
and you can carry cinders
in your hand for what

America was worth. May she be damned
for what she did so soon
to what was such a newing
that we, who out the side
of her come (have cut ourselves

out of her drugstore flattened-hillside gut (135)

conform. In the need to 'purify' their community, in other words, the Puritans were more than willing to engage in murder to protect what they thought was right.

Olson's poetry will separate itself from the prevailing sentiments of the day. His city of Gloucester will become an oasis in the heart of this nation on bended knee before Mammon. By concentrating on his home city of Gloucester in meticulous detail, and as a life long resident himself, the poet will hold his *polis* up as a microcosm of effective social organization to the world.

Olson's city is the site for individual responsibility to the community – an aesthetic rooted in Herodotus idea of history as *istorin*, or 'finding out for yourself' – as the poet attempts to adumbrate a poetics that reaches beyond the alienation of modernity towards a more organic and authentic social world. Indeed, it was deemed that it was through poetry itself that the concept of 'city' could be effectively reappraised. This is because his 'projective verse' aimed to measure itself not the closed system of Pound's *Cantos* ('the beak of [his] ego' as he puts it), but on the rhythms and contortions of the body and its breath; on the sheer physicality of poetry torn from the page and into a sensuous, oral world (*Mayan Letters* 105). 'As the people of the earth are now, Gloucester/ is heterogeneous', Olson makes his intentions clear in letter three, 'and so can now know Polis' (*Maximus* 15). As if to reflect such an aesthetic Susan Vanderborg sees Olson's *polis* as an attempt to reappraise the 'hidden histories' of its inhabitants (370). 'In a sense, the *Maximus* Poems is a series of hidden histories', she writes, 'from the opening description of *Maximus* as a liminal speaker addressing us from a position at once "offshore" and internalized: "islands hidden in the blood"' (378). This is the necessary function of the history poem to Olson. '[Olson's history poem] cannot simply bear witness to

the past', writes Joris, 'it has to be resolutely tuned towards the future... it has be open... to be imaginatively engaged in the construction of a new world' ("Where is Olson Now?" 8). Olson hoped to achieve this 'opening' formally by making Gloucester the site where utterances emerge freed from the grand narratives that defined America as a whole. 'We who throw down hierarchy/ who say that the history of weeds/ is the history of man', writes Olson in the poem, 'do not fail to keep/ a sort of company: all' (*Maximus* 98).

Having said this, however, Olson's poetics were still informed by the entirely antagonistic relationship between nature and culture that runs throughout this thesis. The situation was urgent, in fact, and this is made perfectly clear by the poet in an essay like *Human Universe*:

I have been living for some time amongst a people who are more or less directly the descendents of a culture and civilization which was a contrary of that which we have known and of which we are the natural children. The marked thing about them is, that it is only love and flesh which seems to carry any sign of their antecedence, that all the rest was once a greatness different from our own has gone down before the poundings of our way. And, now, except as the bodies jostle in a bus, or as they disclose the depth and tenacity of love among each other inside a family, they are poor failures of the modern world, incompetent even to arrange that, in the month of June, when the rains have not come far enough forward to fill the wells, they have water to wash in or drink. They have lost the capacity of their predecessors to do anything in common (*Collected* 165).

Indeed, Olson looked in particular to Sumerian civilization to imagine a time when things existed more harmoniously. '[U]ntil date 1200 BC or thereabouts civilization had ONE CENTER, Sumer, in all directions, that this one people held such exact and superior force that all peoples around them were sustained by it', writes Olson in "The Gate and The Center", 'nourished, increased advanced, that a city was a coherence for which, for the first time since the ice, gave man the chance to join knowledge to culture... to make life a dignity and sufficiency' (*Collected*

170). The Sumerians were part of a unified human history that had existed ever since the continents were joined together in the form of Gondwanaland²⁴. Digging deeper, looking back further and further into a past, was not a 'retreat' to Olson but a point of connection with a primordial unity he could only dream of in the United States.

These linguistic strategies towards an opening in the text, then, find themselves colliding with an understanding of language more recognizably 'conservative'. Indeed, to Olson, the best way to surmount this cultural situation came in observing the objective language systems of the Mayans and their 'Glyphs'. As Olson wrote to Robert Creeley during a trip to Mexico:

[T]hese Maya are worth remembering because they were hot for the world they lived in & hot to get it down by way of a language which is loaded to the gills of the FIRST GLYPH with that kind of imagination.... i have yet to find *one* man among all who have worked this street in the last century who is, him-self, confident of his taste, is even possessed of that kind of taste, or drive towards a hot world, which is called creative power! (*Mayan Letters* 57)

Olson insisted Creeley should be amazed 'at the nature of this *language*, of which the glyphs are the most beautiful expression' (58). This was a language ultimately more fascinating 'than sculpture' or 'architecture' because the Maya had literally carved their letters in stone. 'The Mayan *glyphs*' writes Philip Kuberski, '[are] authentic things' (Kuberski 184). 'Olson conceives of the Mayan glyphs as supplements to his own corrupt platonic heritage', writes Kuberski, 'and venerates them as the thing of his thing, flesh of his flesh' (184). This is where Olson's cratyism ultimately exceeds the materials of the poem itself. The *Maximus* poems become an attempt at the purification of the common tongue in the United States in a way similar to Williams. 'Our

²⁴ Gondwanaland is the great landmass that had originally encompassed both America and Europe before continental drift in geological terms. Such a desire for unity was an attempt at dissolving nationalist distinctions and was an intrinsic part of Olson's 'open' technique.

captivity by *logos* is the product of a vast collective delusion', writes Billitteri on Olson's epic, 'since we have been socialized so as not to see or consider the fact that the epistemological foundations of our lives alienate us from our own experience' (*Language* 124).

Olson achieves equilibrium, then, by centering his poem in the *polis* of Gloucester that he always stresses as the most radical poetic space. 'The question now is: what is our *Polis*', wrote Olson in an unpublished essay entitled *The Methodology is the Form*, 'even allowing that no such thing can be considered as possible to exist. When such homogeneity as any Greek city has now been displaced by such heterogeneity as modern cities and nations are?' (Butterick 160) His answer, as condensed down by Butterick in his helpful guide, speaks volumes: ' "the very whole world" not "a bit smaller than the whole damn thing", it is "the state", "the system", the "totality", adding that is necessary "to invert totality – to oppose it" (160). Olson's *polis* stands as a parallel mode of dwelling opposed to the state as such. It is a form of communal organization 'outside' of the accepted structures and norms, deemed necessary in the associative logic that bound together people in the city. In a typically 'American' understanding of political space, it becomes a site whereby individuals can exist together both *in* community and also *apart* from it, retaining their distinctive nature. This is a form of economic and social autarky, in other words, and it seeks to remain an organic construct separate from the dictation of central government as such. 'Because of the *agora*', explains Olson, 'America is, was, from the start, the moral struggle' (*Maximus* 52). In his *Special View of History*, furthermore, Olson works out the etymological meaning of his *Polis*:

POLIS, then, is a filled up thing (in the passive as City, the community or body of citizens, not their dwellings, not their houses, not their being as material, but being as group with will, and that will is from the Sanskrit stem to fill or fulfill, and includes such words as plenus, plebes, populus, publican, thus our public etc., and manipulus, thus manipulate, ample, English, full – and the Greek milk-pail, *pellā*, or Latin pelvis which means a basin for which our meaning pelvis comes... THE PURE PLACE is POLIS (Butterick 160).

That phrase ‘group with will’ emerges as particularly telling, because it conjures up an image of a ‘community’ with purpose, with ‘destiny’, all working towards the same end. Much like Whitman and Olmsted saw in Central Park this is a community of citizens ‘knit together’ reflecting the foundational anxieties that always coalesce around the American dream. ‘Polis is a nucleus of true believers’, writes James Merrill, ‘an ideal an integrity and a prime of value’ (173). ‘You are thus suddenly without a face’, Olson wrote of a person without out the collective identity engendered by the city in his “Essay on Herodotus”, ‘a name, clothes, set down in the midst of the city a no-face’ (*Collected* 78).

It is at this point that Olson finds himself engaging with the most regressive aspects of the American *necropolis*. To Mellors, for example, the poet simply continues the mythic method of Pound in his search for an organic *oneness*. ‘Olson’s attempts [to] transform Pound’s mythic method into a new conception of civic virtue, yet [this] splenetic critique of consumerism’, the critic writes, ‘remains caught up in a nostalgic opposition between the forces of modernity (as technocratic alienation) and nature as the origin of the human and sacred’ (144). ‘O tansy city, root city’, Olson makes perfectly clear in Letter Three of the poem, ‘let them not make you as the nation is’ (*Maximus* 25). ‘I believe in religion not magic or science I believe in society’, Olson explains in the poem, ‘as religious both man and society as religious’ (55). Olson doesn’t mean

an established religion here, such as Christianity, but a deep, all-inclusive religious sensibility pertaining to the whole human race. Not God as traditionally conceived in the individual, then, but a god that connects to the wider world and the cosmos. Olson's attention in these poems falls on Dogtown, an old settlement near Gloucester that has long since been devoid of human habitation. 'By diverting his reader's attention to Dogtown', writes Craig Stormont, 'Olson's intention is not only to illuminate how past and present literally collide there but also to raise awareness that truths can be arrived at through analysing the archaic' (7). His Sumerian ideal was not some glorious example of 'cohesion', but a place that welcomed slavery as well as being the site of an unreconstructed aristocracy²⁵. 'When a place comes into being, and when it is harmoniously ordered towards the unity of the collective unconscious', writes Mellors on Olson's main organising principle, 'it is to be called *Polis*' (105). '[T]his *topos* is always in the position of an origin, pitted against the decadence of the modern city ('shitty')', the critic continues, 'and it represents a point from which true perception may be recovered, the destination of the poet's visionary quest' (105).

Olson is extremely persistent in this thinking, however, making the *polis* of his dreams an increasing impossibility. Towards the end of the poem the poet mourns the demolition of one of the oldest houses in Gloucester called 'Mansion House'. Two years before his death the poet

²⁵ 'In its basic character Sumerian society was hierarchical and patriarchal', explains Song Nai Rhee, 'at its top was the *ensi*. Below him were the high-ranking officials of the palace and the temple... who made up the majority of the nobility... at the bottom of Sumerian social hierarchy were the slaves. Owned by the powerful families, the temple, and the palace, slaves were the major source of free dependable labour and so were acquired as prisoners of war, but the head of a family might sell his children or entire family into slavery in times of need ("Sumerian City States" 22).

associates this demolition as an affront to the values that undergird his entire system. The sense of nostalgia is astounding, here, as Olson actively resists any change in his urban landscape. As Bearsé noted earlier, his dream for a *Polis* is over as Gloucester finally succumbs to the model of 'business' over 'community' ("Polis is This"). 'And once a gap-tooth is blown in that complex', the poet wrote in a letter to the Gloucester Times dated 11 January 1968, 'it is modern jungle immediately, and all that clash and error of like war wrong and ugly and depressing' (*Maximus to Gloucester* 67). Or as he writes in volume three of *The Maximus Poems* on the same subject:

... oh Gloucester
has no longer a West
end. It is a
part of the country now a mangled
mess of all parts swollen
& fallen
into
degradation, each bundle un-

bound and scattered
as so many
units of poor
sorts and strangulation all hung up each one
like hanged
bodies (579)

In this one move Gloucester's claim to 'exclusivity' as a place has been irreparably damaged.

From this point onward it is all downhill, as the poet concedes defeat. In Gloucester everything has become unreal and artificial, just like the rest of the continent:

fake gasoline station
and A & P supermarket
construction
the fake
which covers the emptiness
is the loss
in the 2nd instance of the
distraction. Gloucester too
is out of her mind and
is now indistinguishable from
the USA (580)

The city that he loved so much had become subsumed by the forces of 'general equivalence' he was attempting to hold back. 'Take the top off/ Meeting House Hill', Olson berates the planners who were building Route 128 (a dreaded road that would connect Gloucester to the rest of the United States), '128 has cut it on two sides' (580). The destruction that has come to Gloucester under the guise of modernity will never be reversed. Route 128 had not improved anything for Gloucester's residents other than link them directly to the values of a wider continent.

When Olson dreams of a Polis in Gloucester, then, he both engages with a national mythology and replicates the propensity for a mythological thinking that had transfixed Williams and Pound before him. America becomes an 'exceptional' place, in this respect, with a unique historical mission and destiny. Olson's 'people', in this sense, are nothing to do with the America that currently exists but instead have a direct route back into the past in communication with their origin. The problem with the world as it stood in the Fifties and Sixties is that the people had lost their way. Gloucester, in this understanding, is a talismanic place; a living reminder of the primordial possibilities of place. In 'Letter 14' of the poem, for instance, Olson gives us an example of the earliest dwelling he can imagine. Going right back to the origins of the city he describes the kind of values that were shared with Gloucester's original inhabitants:

Where fishing worke
was first set up, and fourteen men
did what with Gloucester's nothing land
and all here harbour?

The ship which brought them
we don't even know its name, or master,
as they called a Capt
then, except that that

first season, 1623

the fishing, Gloucester
was good (106).

Olson's attention, here, is drawn to the fourteen men who originally founded the city and the difference in their lifestyle and attitudes when compared to the time in which he was writing. Gloucester, at this point, was only 'good', because of the sustainable way in which these original inhabitants took part in a domestic economy based on 'fishing' and comradeship. As

Olson wrote in his essay "Human Universe" these were 'Men dwelling on the earth and not yet slaves of it, but lovers; I saw them defended on all sides and yet without any defense, I saw men possessed of nothing except what all men possess' (105). These 'founding fathers' did not 'harm' the earth, but they worked it as only a people of their time could. Further on in the poem, for instance, Olson compares their actions in Gloucester to his own adventures in the same area when he was a child. What results is the recognition that these men were of a completely different caliber:

Indians in 1606
as thin as dogs
came to hover

around what confines
these fourteen Englishmen managed
where I as a young man berthed
a skiff and scarfed

my legs to get up rocks
this cost is all its
made of, not soil
not beaver

fish fish fish (107)

To escape hostile Indians at the time the fourteen men managed to scurry over the same rocks that Olson struggled to transverse as a child. Their connection to the place, shown in their agility and courage, had long since disappeared by the time that Olson had been born. Again, it is 'fish' that he reminds us of here: the advantages of a rooted existence that shuns the atomization typical of the values brought to Olson's citadel by Route 128.

Anyone who doesn't honour the terms of this ideal community, therefore, is immediately castigated. 'The newness/ the first man knew', Olson complains, 'was almost from the first dirtied by second comers' (*Maximus* 107). Olson becomes more like King Canute as he tried to hold back wave after wave of cultural incursions. In 'Letter 5', for example, Olson berates Vincent Ferrini (a local poet and, as it happens, Henry's father) for publishing poetry in his magazine *Four Winds* that wasn't tied up in a specific ethos of place. 'I do not know Four Winds has a place/ or I a sight in it', writes Olson, 'in a city where highliners breed/ if it is not as good as fish is' (27). *Four Winds*, in this respect, has no 'place' in Gloucester because it has nothing to do with the *polis* as Olson would like it. The 'highliners' Olson refers to, here, are the very best schooners that catch the most fish. To Olson, there is more inherent value in a ship such as this – one intrinsically a part of the local landscape and traditions – than there would ever be in a poetry magazine that bears no relation to its surroundings. As the poet writes further on in 'Letter 5':

Nor assuage you that I use the local as a stick to beat you. Such pages
as you now have published twice do not need one small Gloucester thing
to be a Gloucester magazine. The point of the fix of your cover
is otherwise (I prefer it, in fact, to the rhetoric of your title):
North 42 ° 37 West, 70° 40' it is enough Gloucester
to say where it had you only the will to be as fine as
as fine fins are
as firm as
firm mackerel is

(fresh out of water) (29).

Olson's problem with Ferrini, in other words, is that 'you/ are more like Gloucester now is' (29). He would do better to focus on the map coordinates themselves which would hold much more immediate relevance for Gloucester and the sense of *necropolis* that is rapidly becoming prevalent in his poetics.

Olson represents the double-bind of the problem of the city at this point, because, on the one hand, he admires the 'old world' values of Gloucester, but, at the same time, he cannot accept this as the lifeless 'localism' of the corporations. Perhaps Olson's anxiety is most immediately recognizable in the following section of the poem, where he tries to bring things back into the present away from a mere sentimentality:

I'd not urge anyone back. Back is no value as better. That sentimentality
Has no place, least of all Gloucester,
Where *Polis*
Still thrives

Back is only for those who do not move (as future is,
You in particular need to warned
Any of you who have the habit of
"the people" - as though they were anything/ the equal of / the context of/ now! (26)

But Olson's disdain for "the people" of the United States, here, suggests the most exclusive vision of community imaginable. He will be their visionary, their leader, as he points the way towards a new dawn. But he makes a vital mistake at this juncture because, and as Peter Barse states in his review of Ferrini's film, "[T]he most important 'particularity' of a place is not its geography, or its scenic beauty, but its people and whether they, indeed, "have polis in their eyes"" ("Polis is This").

Olson's vision of Gloucester was not so much an 'urban' one, but impenetrable from the start. Built far from the corrupting influence of the city, he pushes beyond Sumer, to situate his *polis* as the end result of a 'timeless' human struggle. 'Olson's quest into the past refuses to stop at

Sumer. He drifts to Gondwanaland, our primal mass; back to the original chaos, Tiamat', writes Catherine R Stimpson, 'sadly, the restless daring fails to disguise the benign authoritarianism of his morally-charged political vision and theory of archetypes. A center is to a culture as sun to sky: a radiant, vital, dominating, presence' (164). Whether Olson seeks to bring a people into being that is the very opposite of 'the people' of the United States of America, takes nothing away from the reality that this is the same process of identity formation that has obsessed poets since romanticism. In the end Olson's *polis* was an investment in the same call for a revivification of society that had obsessed John Winthrop. It is a social world strangely removed from the social itself, or a withdrawal from the political arena in the very act of presenting it. Olson had written as much in *Casual Mythology*, where he puts his 'pristine vision' as deeply rooted in that utopian longing for a specifically 'American' mode of existence²⁶. 'Mr Winthrop said, almost in the first act of legislature of Massachusetts, "let man live in a city", meaning a society, "which shall shine as this city does upon its hill"', Olson stated, 'that is my dream, of creating a city that will shine as such. And this is only what I am is the builder of this dome' (*Muthologos* 142). It would be possible to view Olson's longing for a 'polis' through the prism of a text like Robert D Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), or Robert N Bellach's *Habits of the Heart* (1985), whereby the American response to a lack of community is simply to add more 'social

²⁶ I mean the city of earth, which as far as I know on this continent arose in Massachusetts, as was, as you all know quoted by [President Kennedy]... in fact, the only time I found Mr Kennedy interesting, verbally, was when he made he made his appearance, just after his successful election, before the General Court of Massachusetts. I don't know how many of you would have known that he, immediately after his victory, came to, appeared, and made a speech before General Court of Massachusetts and quoted that remarkable phrase of Winthrop's 'that this colony shall shine like a city on a hill'. I may garble it, but some of you who know the speech. That's the one time I was moved by Mr Kennedy ("Casual Mythology" 128).

capital' to the dwindling civic infrastructure. 'Far from transcending the restrictions of the state', confirms Bill Friend in his essay "Postmodern Eden: Nature and the City on a Hill in Charles Olson's Maximus Poems", Olson remains mired in National Mythology' (86). This new perspective would certainly confirm Waldrop's close reading of the poem. The problem was never 'form', but the more pressing matter of content. Indeed, Olson does seem to contradict himself by pressing forward with a revolutionary format that disappoints when it is applied to a hackneyed political vision.

City of Traces:

**Roy Fisher, Iain
Sinclair and
Allen Fisher**

"The history of a nation is the history of its religion, its attempts to seek after and serve its God,' says an old writer. Of no nation or country is this more true than of Great Britain, where from the standing stones of Stennis in Orkney, to the Maen Ambres in Cornwall--the prehistoric remains of open-air sanctuaries -- artificial mounds and scientifically constructed astronomical circles, bear witness to the vigour and vitality of a national religion, which has already passed from the primitive into the metaphysical stage, and embodies abstract ideas, astronomical observations and a high and pure code of morals" (Gordon 4)

*...Never
in the centre. Not the old centre,
nor any of the new ones. Suspect
repeated shifts of centre. The pace gets quicker. (Birmingham River 16)*

'hands out of the entrails of time. Myths are lies' (Suicide Bridge 147)

City of Traces

'Our position is quite clear/ but our elevators are out of date// clanking beneath us' (*Place 17*)

Following on from Olson's failure to articulate the bounds of his 'root city', this chapter returns to some of the more fundamental aspects of his poetic vision as repackaged by various *avant garde* approaches in the late sixties and seventies in the United Kingdom. These individual aesthetic trajectories – namely those of Roy Fisher, Iain Sinclair and Allen Fisher – can be identified as a '*post-mortem*' poetics in as far as at least two of these poets rigorously engage with the central tenets of the recently deceased Olson in ways that both intersect with, and reinterpret, some of the foundational premises of his late modernist technique. Indeed, perhaps 'failure' is entirely the wrong term for Olson's dream of a *polis* when writers such as these have so eagerly taken up his poetic mandate. Their willingness to see Olson's *polis* as a work 'in process', or part of a continuing poetic conversation, is perhaps the most fitting tribute to the practical scope of the writer's project. With Roy Fisher, however, there is an even deeper attempt to reinterpret the possibilities by which a poetic centre might be orientated in his own *locale* of Birmingham recast from within a reactive response to the fetish for 'things in themselves' that undergirds this whole tradition. Drawing more specifically on Williams' focus on 'the local' this initial section works towards a reappraisal of the theoretical base from within which a late modernist poetics originally emerged. From within the bounds of a specifically 'English' sensibility, his writing will be seen as the culminating point of an alternate poetics of place more fitting for the postindustrial landscape from within which all of these poets were operating. Indeed, Fisher's reappraisal of the cratylistic desires undergirding American poetics – particularly from within an understanding of a city as a region of 'traces' subject to new spatial

and social complexity – will be positioned as the generative point of departure for writers loosely operating under these aesthetic conditions. It is during Sinclair’s *Lud Heat* and Allen Fisher’s *Place* sequence however that the terms by which the necropolitical impulses deeply rooted in Olson are finally surmounted. Both poems will be positioned as early attempts to transpose an Olsonian methodology into cultural sites that render utterly useless the cratylistic desire for an origin. Moreover, Sinclair and Allen Fisher’s urgency to be culturally relevant calls for entirely new linguistic paradigms preternaturally opposed to closure as point of fact. Using Fisher’s more recent *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape* (2005) project as evidence of this achievement, the analysis will point the way to significant methods of confounding the problem of the city focused on strategies loosely tagged ‘decoherence’ in his professorial lecture *Traps or Tools and Damage* (2010).

What follows, then, focuses on writers in the United Kingdom who have adopted some of the strategies of their American forbears only to adapt them to their own specific ends. At that level this is work that happily foregrounds linguistic experimentation and has no qualms about incorporating the recalcitrant materials of the city into the poem itself²⁷. Coupled with the confidence to take on urban subject matter, then, this is writing that also carries with it all of the propensities for enclosure that have typified the problem of the city so far. Indeed, to some extent, there is a risk that in transposition of aesthetic principles such as these the same

²⁷ Moreover, just like in the case of Williams and Olson - this is an explicitly ‘political’ poetry in as far as it was ‘resistant’ to what Robert Sheppard calls in *When Bad Times Made for Good Poetry* (2011), ‘the post Movement aesthetic of domestic epiphany, dosed with a suitably distancing irony... which articulates the civic virtues of a supposed democratic poetic consensus’ predominating at that time (81).

tensions and anxieties will merely be reproduced. As Iain Sinclair has recently explained – in an attempt to isolate where these poetic conversations between *avant gardes* originated – this cross-fertilization of British and American perspectives was implicitly part of the same cultural project:

So there we were with Charles Olson and his special sense of history, spreading right out, infiltrating English culture – and at the same time as this, extraordinarily, the English poet who is our leading Olsonian of the period, and who is supplying Olson with research materials and helping with the editing and sourcing of *Maximus*, Jeremy Prynne, was actually in Olson's flat in Fort Square in Gloucester. He's writing poems on Olson's typewriter. So you have these fertile conjunctions going on without anybody being aware of it. The visit to Olson is a rite of passage to young English poets of a particular dispensation ("On the Back of an Elephant").

Poets like Fisher and Sinclair had a similar relationship to their poetic 'champion' as Olson did with Pound. As the progenitor of an ultimately unsuccessful experiment in Gloucester, the dangers inherent in an uncritical adoption of his aesthetics are obvious. But whilst this is writing that does, indeed, take its cue from the advances in poetics being formulated across the Atlantic it similarly refuses to see these innovations as cast in stone. Fisher's insistence that 'our position is quite clear/ but our elevators are out of date', will be taken as an axiomatic statement gesturing towards the need for fundamental changes in the materials of the poem itself. For Fisher, this isn't a superficial 'tinkering', however, but a necessary 're-visioning' of the very means of poetic representation. Rather than 'clanking beneath us' the materials of the poem need to recover effective formal strategies that trouble the inevitable process of linguistic closure. Indeed, to Fisher '[e]xpectations of centering, coherence and geometric prediction' are 'encumberments' towards any form of 'open' poetics ("Confidence in Lack"). 'This is a necessary dilemma in conceptual and historical terms', continues the poet, 'set against the western proposals for logic and its modernist aspiration to cohere' ("Confidence in Lack").

City of Traces: Roy Fisher

The immediate interest of this chapter, then, is to specify the distinctive nature of the British situation as opposed to that in Gloucester. Ed Dorn could use the same basic framework in his own writing, for example, but across the Atlantic things were ultimately different. The focus on 'place' within British poetry was an alternative strategy that aimed to harness fundamental aspects of American poetics in an attempt to dilute the stultifying influence of 'movement' orthodoxy in the post war years, as well as come to terms with the anxieties generated in urban *locales* experiencing the continual flux of postwar regeneration. In his work 'City' (1962), for example, Roy Fisher tried to replicate the concerns that had prompted Williams' own aesthetic approach in Birmingham. But this time the juxtaposition of prose and verse sections became a useful method of reacting to a post war environment that had been decimated by a combination of German bombs and the slum clearance projects making way for the institution of design precepts informed by International Style Modernism. It was this carnage wrought on his social environment that would see the poet still issuing a 'defence' of spatial poetics even in his later volume *Birmingham River* (1994):

There's no shame
in letting the world pivot
on your own patch. That's all a centre's for (13)

But this 'defence' – contained in the poem 'Six Texts For A Film' – is juxtaposed with a warning about the dangers inherent in such an aesthetic. Writing of the Bull Ring, an ancient marketplace in the centre of his home city that stands as its symbolic heart even today, he

suggests that the fixity of place is not always a good thing. '[I]t stays centered/ on the same spot', writes Fisher, 'ignoring superseded/ layouts and the quick turnover of people' (15). Ignoring the movements of the citizenry, just immovably there, such a 'rooted' aesthetic is described as 'holding the inertia of an authoritative will' (15). This sense of origins 'planted' firmly in the ground has a menacing quality that completely hides the reality of place. 'The forum of Augustus', writes Fisher, 'sitting firm and new/ drawing centrality to itself', is but a distraction for a whole other world of hidden miseries behind it. 'Set there to mask/ slum tenements', continues the poet, it is the physical manifestation of a power that seeks to hide what it can underneath the polished veneer of urbanism. It is 'that sort of place', explains Fisher, a dangerous site that keeps the controlling powers of the state unchecked (15).

Indeed, Fisher's Birmingham almost immediately troubles the kind of aesthetic appreciation of place that fuelled the *Maximus* poems. 'Olson and Ed Dorn', explains Fisher during an interview with Eric Mottram, '[t]hat sort of work seems to be very necessary for them' ("The Sixties" 61). In terms of his own poetics, however, there is something about the landscape of a post war Birmingham that runs utterly contrary to the use of this method. It is as if the historical space of the city works completely against the establishment of 'place' as a fixed category as such:

[T]hose two... USE the idea of location in America inevitably quite differently from the way in which any Englishman COULD use a sense of location, or could use a sort of game of time axis versus place axis. It's meaningful for me as I read them. But not for me. I mean, its commonplace to say that for an Englishman looking at place, compared to an American his thing has got to be historical. He's only got to look out of the window and something a few hundred years old is going to stick through his awareness (61).

This is not to say that the American focus on place hadn't been extremely influential at this time, but that the conditions in England necessitated a turn towards a somewhat different focus on 'the local'. 'I've become more aware of history', explains Fisher in that same interview, 'and I take a good deal of pleasure in seeing the medieval or the very English things of hundreds and hundreds of years of, say, farming' (61). The special qualities of England lie not in the 'grounding' of a tradition – or even the cratyism of establishing a natural language – but in uncovering the space of Birmingham in all its complicated reality. '[T]he place was dependent upon [a] very evanescent, temporal, subjective rendering of it', explains Fisher, 'which might never BE rendered'(62).

This is because places such as Birmingham are subject to a level of historical sedimentation that is largely absent in somewhere like Paterson or Gloucester. If anything, urban topography in Britain's much-vaunted 'second city' resembles one huge palimpsest replete with the 'traces' of previous generations. This is the kind of thinking that informs a compelling study on the topography of London carried out by the social historian Gillian Tindall in her text *The Fields Beneath* (1977). With her own focus on Kentish Town, Tindall makes clear the problematic construction of these places when considered next to the *tabula rasa* already identified in early American history. 'It is much more a matter of wielding a spade or pick, of tracing routes – and hence roots – on old maps, of reading the browned ink and even fainter pencil scrawl of preserved documents', writes Tindall, 'whose edges are often crumbling away into a powder, themselves joining the fur, flesh and faeces to which they testify' (15). These places, as Tindall

so wonderfully articulates, remain the site of multiple layers of interpretation or the vestiges of many different struggles and conflicts, which are ultimately more important than 'land' in any fixed sense of the word:

The earth itself is indestructible – the tough sticky London clay studded like a currant cake with the fragments of other lives. But what stands on the earth seems like a geographical formation. A hundred years ago this image was already used by a foreign observer (Karl Copek) to describe the amazing agglomeration of terraced housing that met his eye, but today, when the terraces are broken and interspersed with so many recent deposits, the metaphor still seems appropriate. The buildings of different periods, themselves converted or modified in different ways are mixed together like stratified rocks that have been churned up not once, but several times by changes in the social climate... In the 'urban sprawl' the petrified tide-marks of earlier building waves are clearly visible: here the airy stuccoed facades give way to heavier, mid-Victorian ones with porticoes, here these in turn lie alongside late-Victorian debased Scottish Baronial style' (15).

Poets in Birmingham are distinctive because they write amidst the residue of historical layers where any 'origin' is seemingly untraceable. This doesn't mean that these poets don't desire the purity of the romantic city, but that such knowledge is soon caught up in the empirical impracticalities of such a gesture. 'I want to believe that I live in a single world', wrote Roy Fisher in 'City' as if to encapsulate this dilemma, 'that is why I am keeping my eyes at home while I can' (43). The possibility of the *polis* amidst this fragmentation is less than likely. The *necropolis* not only finds the topography of Birmingham resistant to closure, but fundamentally opposed to a new set of alien conditions. 'The countries on the map divide up and pile up like Ice-Flows', continues Fisher, 'what is strange is that I feel no stress, no grating confusion, no loss;... [e]ach thought is at once translucent and icily capricious; a polytheism without gods' (43).

In a poem called 'The Poetry of Place' from *Birmingham River* Fisher draws the reader's attention to subtle differences in his own poetics and the varieties put forward by his cross-

Atlantic cousins. Taking on William's famous 'Red Wheelbarrow' he creates a satirical encounter with his modernist masterpiece that deserves quoting in full:

A resident of Rutherford, New Jersey,
happens to have for sale, at collectors'
price, a wheelbarrow,
old, but not old enough, red,
but too red: painting it up,
he's obviously not seen the shade
quite right. His greed makes him
a hasty reader. Glazed
with varnish, it'll do. Whoever buys it
gets to see the room where the original
things with ideas in them are (24).

At first glance this poem seems like a satire of Williams quite limited in scope, when in all actuality it marks the fulcrum on which a poetry of place would always differ from that in the United States. The wheelbarrow is 'old', but 'not old enough' for this English poet. It has a sheen that Fisher finds somewhat disconcerting. To the poet 'no ideas but in things' – or that inclination to maintain 'a limited perceptual field' in the poetic work – was a positive element of modernism that had been reduced somewhat to the husk of an 'idea' (*Interviews Through Time* 63). 'The doctrine of ideas in things is the nearest slogan of any poetic slogan that I'd want to carry around', writes Fisher, 'that I WOULD want to carry around, but I wouldn't want to carry it around all that much, because it can turn into a thing to hit myself over the head with' (63). In the poem the famous wheelbarrow has become a saleable product, wheeled out at some kind of antique 'collector's price'. The lucky new owner, then, will have access to the 'room where the original/ things with ideas in them are'. Whoever 'buys it' – and 'buys it' must be taken in its colloquial meaning of whoever is 'fooled by it' here – will have a gleaming artifact rendered in the glazed sheen of the commodity. 'His greed', continues Fisher, 'makes him a hasty reader'

(24). In the hope of uncovering a purity of form, Williams' 'off the shelf' poetics are the refuge of those who crave only the immediate gratification of an origin.

This is because the standard Fisher calls for when encountering 'place' requires a different attitude to the perception of reality entirely. In his 'Poetry of Place' poem Williams' wheelbarrow is seen as deceptively red. 'Painting it up', writes the poet, 'he's obviously not seen the shade/ quite right' (24). The vividness of Williams' 'things in themselves', in this sense, are immediately troubled by the reality that 'the beautiful thing' is reliant on individual perception. Williams' efforts to subjugate the residents of Paterson – to reinstate a principle of 'order' – was part of a totalitarian poetics that has no place in his own aesthetic considerations. Indeed, this is a poet who watched in earnest as the Birmingham he grew up in was literally razed to the ground as he approached his thirties. During 'City' he attempts to write of the alienating feeling as he 'came back' to Birmingham 'at a time when it was being rebuilt' from the rubble and ashes of war (*Interviews Through Time* 62):

There is not a whole brick, a foundation to stumble across, a drainpipe, a smashed fowlhouse; the entire place has been razed flat, dug over, and smoothed down again. The bald curve of the hillside shows quite clearly here, near its crown, where the brilliant road, stacked close on either side with warehouses and shops, runs out towards the west. Down below, the district that fills the hollow is impenetrably black. The streets are so close and so twisted among their massive tenements that it is impossible to trace the line of a single one of them by its lights. The lamps that can be seen shine oddly, and at mysterious distances, as if they were in a marsh. ('City' 72).

Experiencing the other side of Williams' 'tough love', Fisher was party to the violence that attempted to resurrect the 'beautiful thing' in the bounds of his own 'centre'. The planners refrain 'so be it' echoes around a wasteland where house lamps shine 'oddly' in a surrealist landscape seemingly emptied of the human altogether. This is a landscape constructed by a

single imagination, a topography that is formed only as a result of individual perception as if to mimic the fragmentation and flux that now make up this urban landscape. 'Really the place... is a way of exploring inner space', explains Fisher to Mottram, 'rather than in any way trying to do justice either to the place as itself or... having any large conception of place' ("The Sixties" 62).

Indeed, in an interview with Robert Sheppard Fisher calls the 'place tag' a 'literal' one which doesn't fit his writing in the slightest. This is because as a writer he is not a 'literalist' and the city he writes about is of necessity 'unstable' or 'unsettled' ("Roy Fisher" 87). 'I found quite simply, that having a very long memory, the place is visibly unstable, though it stays stable in itself', explains Fisher, '[to] be in Birmingham now: I could only be in Birmingham as a journalist writing about what I once thought of it.... I couldn't use the place again' (87). John Kerrigan sees Fisher as encapsulating, therefore, the ultimate aesthetics of post-war urbanism. Here, 'place' isn't as important as the experience of 'dislocation' from it. What concerns the poet is the way in which the urban environment is constantly morphing and changing beyond any sense of coherence:

[B]y seeking to register the contingency of what one geographer calls 'a city of process and dynamic change'; Fisher has developed a writing-field which is often exploratory and metamorphic, even when the topics he addresses are not Birmingham that he thinks with. The poetry that results can seem difficult – not least when compared to Fisher's forays into light verse – but it could be enjoyed by a wider readership than it currently reaches because it is so often mobilized by the sights and the rhythms of a city which is exceptional only by virtue of being so extensively representative of post-war urbanization ("Roy Fisher on Location" 18).

To Fisher the perception of place must always be something partial, because the urban conditions that surround him are never homogeneous. 'Space is part of our mental life', writes the poet in an interview with Peter Robinson ("Roy Fisher" 75). As such the veneration of the

mystical qualities of 'place' elude him. 'I'm not very good at separating space-time', notes Fisher in an interview with Robert Sheppard, 'how anybody after Einstein can separate history from geography puzzles me somewhat' (86-87). 'I've held my hands to the displaced/Omphalos-stone, the single centre', he writes during *Birmingham River*, 'not of the planet, but of the earth's shifting/ surface, the live map' (14).

'It is not just the locational intricacy of Birmingham but the rapidity of its industrial decline [and] its manifestation of temporal process', explains John Kerrigan, 'which has made it such a rewarding place for Roy Fisher to think with' ("Roy Fisher on Location" 42). It is into this climate that the distinctive poetics of Allen Fisher and Iain Sinclair equally struggle for 'grounding'. The cities that they write from are pock-marked, cratered, and distinctive only because they similarly repulse all claims for orientation. Most fundamentally, they are examples of poetry trying to subsist in a postwar climate not only founded on dissonance, but the gradual fracturing of territorial control symptomatic of the postfordist city. Constructing such a poetics will never be a simple task. The starting place for all the poets in this study remains the assumed coherence of the polis. During his essay "*Bombing*" (2010) - and affecting a Williams-esque 'auratic' understanding of architectural modernism - Chris Petit mourns Hitler's bombing campaign in order to claim that 'the Germans didn't bomb enough' (*Restless Cities* 19). Perhaps this is an aspect of the war that needn't be mourned in England. It would certainly be easier to construct a poetics of urban space in London if there was a *table rasa* and the reassurance of 'coherence' this suggests. '[A]rchitects dreaming of a modern future saw wholesale destruction

as a saving on demolition costs and slum clearance', continues Petit, 'making redevelopment inevitable without the usual problems of planning committees' (19). But the aim of this thesis isn't to present a situation whereby one form of linguistic order is annulled to reassert the terms of some other purity of vision. The tone of what has preceded this chapter has aimed to point the way to poetry as a means to entirely destroy the logic of the *necropolis*. The distinctive nature of Iain Sinclair and Allen Fisher, therefore, is in how they both write from within an 'opening' entirely antagonistic to the problem of the city. The realization that London is a city of 'traces' becomes the starting point in both their work for a 're-visioning' of urban space premised not just on its 'sacralization', but a recognition of the temporal processes that trouble conceptual categorizations of place. 'Time comes in layers, it's plural', explains Sinclair in the wake of Roy Fisher, 'where place is singular' (*Blake's London* 42).

Iain Sinclair: Olsonian 'Allegiances'

There are poets, then, who initially seemed less resistant to the adoption of American aesthetics in this climate of shifting surfaces and contingency. Indeed, for writers after Roy Fisher it was Prynne's later *Maximus Lectures* that provided the major catalyst in theoretical terms for this cross Atlantic pollination. That 'homelessness' identified in Holderlin, provided the jumping off point for a whole series of poetry focused on the 'epic' in an attempt to emulate the successful experiments of Olson and Dorn. Formally, such work attempted to transpose the 'open field' priorities dictated by Olson's Projective Verse. In a blog entry Robert

Sheppard looks to Eric Mottram as the main progenitor of this approach, and charts a timeline from the seventies into the early to mid eighties:

Mottram's densely allusive exposition, 'Open Field Poetry', published in the magazine 'Poetry Information', probably influenced many writers to adopt this style, approach, or assimilative improvisational activity – 'the poem could now use whatever material in whatever form that comes into the process of composition - but also to follow Olson, in exploring the petites histories of geography.... For example, Mottram's keynote paper for the Polytechnic of Central London conference, 'Inheritance, Language, Location: Data for British Poetry 1977' was premised upon the primacy of the otherwise obvious statement that 'a poet works at the intersection of his time and place', and a plethora of British Poetry Revival poets are read in this light ("Looking Back").

Indeed, it is Iain Sinclair that remains the most persistent originator of this Olsonian-inspired poetics. Along with Allen Fisher's *Place*, in *Lud Heat* the poet attempted one of the earliest examples of such an approach. '[A]t the time of a period of employment as a gardener in the riverside reaches of East London', explained Sinclair recently during a talk at a Charles Olson conference at Kent University, '[*Lud Heat*] was my crude attempt to register an allegiance to Olson' ("On the Back of an Elephant"). His 'working credo' – as he puts it during that same conference – was to 'plot... alignments between significant London buildings' in order to 'see... streams of history as a plural entity rather than a series of laminated notice boards'. As a genuine attempt at an open poetics in the manner of Olson, Sinclair took on the unenviable task of using the poem to unearth a logic of enclosure propounded by the state.

But Sinclair encounters the city in a manifestly different manner than Olson. From the beginning the proviso is whatever is accomplished in the medium of poetry must be gained through an intense struggle with historical 'layers' as such. *Lud Heat*, and Fisher's *Place*, both articulate the tensions and anxieties that go hand in hand with this post-industrial climate

whereby the utopian demands of the sixties and seventies had dissipated somewhat amongst more localized concerns. In Robert Sheppard's contribution to a text entitled *Art in the 1970s: Cultural Closure* (1994), for instance, the poet and critic marks the period as a time in which writers in the British *Avant Garde* aimed to root their poetics at the margins of 'Empire'. 'The responses... to social and political decline', writes Sheppard, '[resembled a] relocation within the world of the everyday, particularly in an insistence on "place" that rejected the world in favour of autonomy and artifice' (148). In Fisher's South London, but most glaringly in Sinclair's *locale* of Hackney and its surrounding industrial wasteland, crumbling buildings stood as testament to fracturing discourses on progress that had previously characterized the Nation. It was the scene not only of the National Front, therefore, but of a general environment where 'time' had stopped still in any productive sense. Fisher and Sinclair become the surveyors of an exposed seam underneath the apparent gleam of modernity. More specifically – and this forms the basis of Sinclair's fiction even today – these places become sites for redevelopment under the rubric of 'regeneration'. The importance of 'the local' is therefore foregrounded as one of the central organizational platforms of such an approach. Knowledge of place is precisely the kind of strategy that is needed to counter what Sinclair calls the 'anti poetry' of 'bureaucratic copywriters, playing with vacuous propaganda and warped sentiment' (*Blake's London* 42). In contemporary London this is no more evident than in the decimation of the suburbs of the city by Boris Johnson's Olympic committee. Here the city becomes a physical site for the penetration of capital. '[T]he deal is being done with invisible people', writes Sinclair of the impersonal process of these attempts in his own *locale* of Hackney, 'and all respect for the local, the sense of local democracy is gone' (*Blake's London* 46). Place is overwhelmed by the kind of

monolithic desire for the same that has generated the problem of the city throughout this thesis. '[In London] we see the dominance of the virtual over the actual', writes Sinclair, 'the computer generated version over the particulars of "locality"' (*Blake's London* 42).

Sinclair's project, then, is an explicitly political one. During his recent talk at the University of Kent, for example, he positions the terms of his *polis* as the search for something more 'real' than the public sphere allows. His *polis* – if he is to use that word at all – is formed from what he calls a 'love of the fabric of multidimensionality' and 'also a cynical despair at the changes being wrought' ("On the Back of an Elephant"). The Olsonian intentions are clearly evident, as he presents the act of writing as a direct correlative to the lack of community in the civic realm at large:

Ed Dorn has this beautiful statement: 'Only writer's are real'. Of course I agree, completely, and I think the world is dividing into zones where writers are real because they have been condemned by some Faustian contract into brokering discriminations of love in the world – while other enclosed and invaded zones are given over to politicians promoting non-human entities. CGI terrains fit only for cyber people. The public men are so smooth, they've trained themselves to absorb consensus, the opinion of others. They have no morality of their own beyond immediate gratification. They are weeping and apologizing for anything not to do with them, anything that happened twenty or thirty years ago. They'll apologize for the War of the Roses and the Black Death but ignore Iraq and Afghanistan ("On the Back of an Elephant").

Essentially Sinclair looks towards the same 'working *polis*' as Olson. Something is rotten in London, so it is necessarily the job of the writer to try and counter this situation with a vision of community that defies that of the 'cyber people' and their promotion of a city that is fundamentally 'non human'. The writer is the one with 'the vision', in this regard, the very fount of defiance amidst a social world that is rapidly losing its way. Furthermore, there are what Sinclair calls 'ethical responsibilities' enshrined in such a poetic (*The Verbals* 85). In an interview

with Kevin Jackson he notes how just 'being a poet' is a vocation seriously weighed against the futility of a decimated public sphere such as this. 'The care with which you have to choose the words that you are using', explains Sinclair, '[i]t can't be throwaway... it can be loose, free, but at the same level you have to take a real responsibility' (85).

In a talk for the Liverpool School of Architecture, for instance, Sinclair referred to an 'ontological panic' that extends from these waves of redevelopment in Hackney ("Mapping Memory"). Just like it became evident in Roy Fisher earlier, Sinclair is responding in earnest to a new form of post war urbanism that pulls no punches in its active embodiment of values entirely antithetical to the preservation of place as such. As he writes on the Olympics, what the United Kingdom is experiencing now is far worse than the damage done by International Style Modernism and Hitler's bombs combined:

The city is being remade in the most dramatic and absolutist way since the original age of the railways or the Blitz; landscapes that have laid dormant for many years, sometimes being nudged and revised, are now undergoing the troubling process, a lot of fence work, fence art, and weary crocodiles of the expelled are visible as ghosts in the CCTV monitors; allotment holders; travelers, workers in inconvenient industries, artists in endangered warehouses (*Blake's London* 53).

The process first noted by Roy Fisher in Birmingham, is one that extended right the way through the eighties and nineties reaching its ultimate fruition in post-Thatcherite policies Sinclair is unabashed to call 'demonic' (*Verbals* 56). In Sinclair's terms the Olympics is no different in essence than the Dockland's initiative in the eighties. These aren't simple building projects but the conscious attempt to let free enterprise enter planning with the entire

propensity for 'simulation' that entails. This is not a place-orientated planning, then, but root and branch attempts at making these parts of London ultimately like any other²⁸.

In *Lud Heat* Sinclair attempts to place himself at the heart of this ontological panic as the city morphs and shifts around him. But to Sinclair it doesn't necessarily create the stress it did for Wordsworth as much as an opportunity. 'Buildings disappearing overnight, huge principalities being thrown up', writes the poet in conversation with Kevin Jackson, 'and it couldn't have been better for me... things were so bad they were really great to write about' (*Verbals* 121). From this region of building and rebuilding Sinclair sees the potential for a reading of social space that goes further and deeper than anybody else previously. With the city in tatters, and the social order intent on creating artificial monuments to what will eventually become the canker of Thatcherism, there is the briefest chance to look for something much more permanent. As Peter Barry has pointed out Sinclair's poetry is best described as a kind of 'mapping' of the city as if to reinstate some kind of conceivable 'order' (Barry 100). The aim is to gaze past the ephemeral and reach a time and place before the institution of anthropocentric logic and values. Constructed in prose and verse sections, the poet's lyrical observations occupy the former space, whilst the writing on the city occupies the latter. It is as if the poem is torn between some ideal pastoral and the prosaic contemplation of the urban realm itself. 'Tower Hamlets cemetery respite', writes Sinclair in one of those poetry sections,

²⁸ Peter Hall, the architect in charge of Docklands, was instrumental in coming up with the 'non-plan' initiative in the 1960s. To Hall, cities weren't about a collective identity, but 'enterprise zones' and an environment stripped of place in any meaningful sense. '[N]on plan not only made the places developers wanted', explains Anna Minton, 'but created the "non places" identified by the French anthropologist Marcel Auge' (*Ground Control* 185).

‘the man/ who the trees did not love/ makes peace kneeling with earth worms/ his small heart/ creased’ (52). In a section on hay fever, for example, the poet positions himself as of the same ‘estrangement’ as Olson. Nature, which should be an intrinsic part of him, produces simply an allergic reaction instead. Hay fever becomes a ‘glyph’ or ‘pure message’ to the poet, a sickness as the sign of a more protracted cultural disease. ‘Darkness is the price of their power’, claims Sinclair of those bodies locked indoors on this summer’s day, ‘Power is the measure of their failing as natural men’ (66).

At some level Sinclair’s poetics display an uncomfortable obsession with some of the more toxic elements of Olson’s project that is a direct result of an engagement with the *Maximus* poems. ‘Essentially the whole thing’, Sinclair writes of his early publishing venture Albion Village Press, ‘was about place’ (Jackson 68)²⁹. This is certainly fuel for contemporary critics to accuse him of conservatism. ‘Britain’s best poets – J.H.Prynne and Iain Sinclair – became infatuated with Charles Olson’ complains Ben Watson on the malign influence of space on British poetics in the seventies during a Cambridge Poetry Summit in 2004, ‘[t]his infatuation along with that for the Fascist Pound, injected a liberal equivocation into self-styled “Modernist” poetry in England which has made it impossible terrain for serious Marxist critique’ (Watson 15). Or, as he

²⁹ In his interview with Kevin Jackson Sinclair describes an early exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery with Brian Catling and Renchi Bicknell in the same terms. The exhibition – entitled ‘Albion Island Vortex’ – was utterly obsessed with examining English culture through the kind of sacred sites mentioned by Elizabeth Gordon:

There were lots of Renchi Bicknell’s paintings of numinous sites, dream journey’s through places like Brockenhurst in the New Forest, visionary episodes to do with the matter of Britain. The influence of Blake and David Jones was beginning to be felt. It was Brian Catling’s first public show, he did lots of spidery pen-and-ink drawings of landscapes in Wales and Wiltshire, which he was very keen on. There were stones, bits of wood, all aligned North-South-East-West, ley lines.... And these were my paintings and photographs of sacred sites’ (86).

explains in more detail, that logic of 'enrootedness' and 'homelessness' inflects such purportedly dynamic versification with a penchant for cheerleading 'the state':

The study of "people and space" sounds innocuous, one can imagine such a project in a university today, but it's actually just a reformulation of the famous Nazi couplet "blood and soil" (Blood means people; soil means space). Conceiving society as "people in space" avoids considering the actual force which moves them around, which gets them to work in the morning, and which allows them to go on holiday, or which today gives them less and less leisure time: money or wage labour. *Raumdenken* meant thinking in ruling class terms: a national struggle over territorial sources of surplus value.... When Charles Olson decided he was no longer a Marxist because "space" was now more important than "time", he may have been reacting against the Stalinist/ Sartrean travesty of Marxism – history as the extinction of the subject – but fell for a quasi-fascist solution. If he'd listened to Walter Benjamin rather than Ezra Pound *Call Me Ishmael* (1947) wouldn't have been a celebration of American history over Japan in the Pacific (14 – 15).

The focus on 'space' in such work, Watson claims, acceded territory to potentially conservative elements in the British avant-garde through the focus on a desire for 'belonging' and 'place'. Rather than opposing the state Watson is accusing Sinclair of perpetuating the same situation as Olson. The churches of Nicolas Hawksmoor were a way of mapping the city that recovered a primordial sense of being together necessarily opposed to the profane time of the present. 'You knew the city through these stone fingers pointing in spiritual affirmation towards the sky', writes Sinclair, 'you were fined, as Shakespeare was, if you failed to attend your nominated local church' (*Blake's London* 9). In this reading Hawksmoor's churches are a centre, or point of orientation, from within which it is hoped a coherent narrative will emerge.

Watson's accusations are not completely unfounded either. Sinclair's writing is very similar in scope to someone like Peter Ackroyd who is specifically interested in what Robert Bond has called the 'mythization of time' in a manner synonymous with high modernism (*Iain Sinclair* 73).

In such a perspective the sacralization of space aims only to conceive of time in terms of an immutable totality. 'Ackroyd's attendant refusal of progressivism', writes Bond, 'recalls Eliot's suspicion of the role of 'development' as a 'partial fallacy' encouraged by superficial notions of evolution' (74-75). Time is a continuum, in such understanding, and in early work on modernism like Ackroyd's *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), human agency is entirely subjugated to the whims of this repetitious cycle. This would certainly explain Sinclair's willingness to draw affinities between his own work and those of his predecessors such as Blake. Indeed, writing of John Clare, alienation in the city is suddenly repositioned as something recognizably timeless:

[John Clare] was attempting, as was his practice, to get away from the eyes of the village, to find a place where he could write. And he saw three men in the fields with sticks and chains doing something that he thought to be a magic ceremony or ritual. And they were surveyors for the railway. And once the railway had come – a great ladder out of London, clawing this place in two – it was over. The village had been absorbed into another totality, into the shadow of London (*Blake's London* 50).

Here, alienation is contextualized as a phenomenon afflicting poets since time immemorial. Wordsworth, Clare and Sinclair exist happily in an uninterrupted continuum. Beyond the specific landscape of London generations of writers have found themselves struggling under the same sets of circumstances. The traces of the city, then, must be examined for the clues that they provides towards some arch-vision or universal plan. To someone like Ackroyd this is because the etymologies of words themselves divine a direct route towards a history and culture of the city. 'The speech we use today contains or conceals previous levels of speech', writes Ackroyd in *Notes for a New Culture*, 'from the most recent to the most ancient. They are as it were implicit in modern speech, modern writing, and it only takes a little effort to peel back layers' (58).

Such a perspective carries within itself an almost religious devotion to place which Bond figures in Sinclair as an attempt at 'sacralization' (*Iain Sinclair* 53). 'Sinclair's sense that emotions have become conditioned under capitalism', writes Bond, 'lies behind his desire to re-invoke the needs and emotions behind religious belief' (53). What is desired in this 'mythization of time' is access to a deeper logic able to replace the monolithic values of the state. The poet is a shaman, in this regard, a diviner of the kind of timeless energies that exist under the pavement. In his brochure for an exhibition - *The Shamanism of Intent* (1991) – it is on these precise terms that the poet conceives of the city. To Sinclair the artists in that exhibition share the fact that they are explicitly engaged in what he calls a 'sickness vocation'. To Sinclair the artist is indeed a 'shaman', but one that is 'deregulated' or purged of the desire for totalitarianism that had obsessed Pound. This is an aesthetic position he outlines with reference to the Expressionist painter Max Beckmann in order to point out some fundamental similarities and differences:

For the great Max Beckmann there were only two worlds, the "spiritual life" and "political reality", worlds that his paintings, paradoxically, insisted on fusing. We have been obliged by the temper of the times to feed such nice distinctions into the shredder. The heavenly and the mundane interpenetrate any of the present worlds that we retain for a moment before our eyes. Apparently, occult acts are revealed as survivalist reflexes. Shamanism has developed its own *realpolitick*.... Seasonal sacrifices still take place in public, but deposed rulers sink into a shrill exile that can never satisfy Frazerian literalists, drooling for a bog side strangulation (*Shamanism* 18-19).

Sinclair's approach is immediately distinguished from someone like Ackroyd, but it nevertheless carries the same associations. 'The health of the city, and perhaps the culture itself', continues Sinclair in that same document, 'seemed to depend on the flights of redemption these artists could summon and sustain' (7). These divided poetics emerge from the same division between

nature and culture that has confounded every poet in this study. 'The ideal', explains Antony Mellors, 'is couched in the reified monocultural rhetoric of *the city* and *the culture*' (*Late Modernist Poetics* 8). Even if the aim was to inflect these distinctions with something of a postmodern flavour the desire for coherence still seems to lurk in full view.

In the 'Theory of Hayfevers' section of *Lud Heat*, for example, this 'shamanism' is foregrounded as the only way that a writer can effectively take on the city. '[T]he necessity of the journey', writes Sinclair in a more recent work, 'under the burden of greater writers, greater books, previous memories, the noise and density of the city' (*Blake's London* 52). Interestingly this 'sickness vocation' is tied into geography as a positive inclination to stay rooted in place.

Sweating at his desk in Hackney, the writer becomes the privileged observer of a culture unseen by other people on the street:

Local pains block the ease of conduct in the world. What you suffer is the place you choose to live. Do not remain victim to a solitary level of discourse. To play safe and obey the surface warning of sickness – or to take the pain route, grasp the nettle, move into one plague after another; reach the godhead by the muddiest route. Alchemy of body particles; avoid the static condition. The magician is born of incest; is, by definition, diseased. Suffer it (' Theory of Hayfevers' 69).

The goal of the poet is to 'reach the godhead' by suffering a world of pain denied to those of a more humble persuasion. 'Sinclair's essay suggests that specifically literary treasures are revealed to the sufferer', writes Bond, '[this] grants its possessor inspiration, or the ability to formulate 'pure message' (82). Sinclair talks in that essay about how he found a plastic Shabti figure when cutting the grass in one of the churchyards he was frequenting as if to mark himself out as an ambassador – or high priest – of this geographical area. This pseudo-ancient trinket

purportedly transposes powers of immortality to the writer in the Egyptian afterlife³⁰. But the fact that Sinclair's version is plastic positions his own shamanic object as a product of some debased culture that no longer takes such rituals seriously. What matters instead is to intellectually shore up the culture, by revealing a hidden knowledge inaccessible to the initiated. 'Sinclair converts the Cambridge poetic diaspora into a literary priesthood', explains Bond, 'consisting of 'high consciousnesses'' who are 'hidden' from those in the quotidian world of things'(86).

This 'shamanism', 'deregulated' or not, permeates Sinclair's writing in a manner that suggests the worst possible cultural vanguard. When asked by Kevin Jackson of his 'shamanistic' beliefs, Sinclair describes himself as a '*flaneur* of the mystic' (*Verbals* 59). 'I'm suspicious of it', he claimed, 'but at root I'm a really big believer' (59). His wanderings through London were originally inspired by books like Elizabeth Gordon's *Prehistoric London: Its Mounds and Circles* (1914). 'This [was] exactly what I wanted', writes the poet in that same interview, 'because it lined up sacred sites of geography in London and I thought this definitely applied to what I know – like Hawksmoor's churches' (59). His obsession with Hawksmoor was that he had a 'vision of the whole', or an overarching plan to 'rebuild' London based on a principle of order with its roots in myth. As Sinclair obsessed early on in *Lud Heat*:

These churches guard or mark or rest upon, two major sources of occult power: The British Museum and the Greenwich Observatory. The locked cellar of words, the labyrinth of all

³⁰ Robert Bond writes further of the significance of the Plastic Shabti figure in his text on Sinclair. 'Possession of a Shabti enabled its Egyptian Owners to assert his membership of the class of mental workers even after death', writes Bond, 'Sinclair's Shabti... enables him to assert his membership of a class of mental workers, even as he works manually' (85).

recorded knowledge, the repository of stolen fires and symbols, excavated god-forms, and measurements, stars knowledge, line calculations, Maze Hill, the bank of light that faces The Isle of Dogs. So many spectres operate along these fringes: Yeats in the British Museum, at the time of the Ripper murders, researching into Blake' (15).

These spectres are, for Sinclair, both literary and cosmological. In times of unease, writers fall back on the same assurances regardless of the epoch. The crust of profane time is destroyed and links are built from Blake to Yeats and eventually himself taking in all the macabre events in between. Sinclair circumambulates the city, then, not only to discern alternative histories, but to divine occult power. This is a poem reluctantly placed in the quotidian world of London, but which is also in the poet's own words about '[the] epic, [the] nature of the city from the grandest scale from the very beginning' ("On the Back of An Elephant").

In a radio program with Paul Green from the eighties the writer calls them 'squat, immense and out of place'³¹. They are somehow buildings with no explanation, a series of mysterious structures that remain forever out of context in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. 'From what is known about Hawksmoor it is possible to imagine he did work a code into the buildings', writes Sinclair during *Lud Heat*, 'knowingly or unknowingly, templates of meaning, bonds of continuing ritual. The building should be a temple, an active place, a high metaphor' (17). They are simply bricks and mortar, and the fact they are associated with "magic" in *Lud Heat* will always be cause for concern. To Brian Baker, for example, there is "unresolved tension" in Sinclair's writing between "materialist critique and non materialist vision" (*Iain Sinclair* 38).

³¹ This radio program used to be available on Paul Green's website, but has since been taken down. It can still be found as part of the following little-known vinyl release instead: Green, Paul. "Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches". *Stone Tape Shuffle*. Test Centre Publications LLP, March 8, 2012.

[T]he alienated poet outsider', writes Baker, 'who is able to forge a place "outside" of society through an avant-gardist poetic practice, and thereby see contemporary conditions both more clearly and in totality' (38). In this reading, the churches become symbolic of some kind of hidden knowledge that only the poet can access. 'Place needs the poet to give it voice', explains Sinclair in that same radio program, 'place activates the poet' (Green "Nicholas Hawksmoor"). As someone walking down the street the poet doesn't exist in the same quotidian world as the others. His role, in other words, is 'to activate a monologue that is already available there'. The problem with the continual redevelopment of London is that this knowledge is only available for so long: it needs someone like Sinclair to bring it back into the present again. 'We are at the very end of an era that we can tap into this', Sinclair explains, 'at the furthest point out' (Green, "Nicholas Hawksmoor").

In the section 'The Immigrant, The Sentimental Butcher' Irish immigrants are portrayed as somewhat confused as to their own roots and origins. Starting the section with a quote from Olson – "life/ with a capital F" – he portrays the people of Spitalfields as somehow Ferriniesque in their misplaced way of living. This judgmental apperception of urban social being not only repeats Olsonian arrogance, but carries with it vestiges of that condescending 'beer bottle on the statue's pediment' tone associated with Pound. As he writes in this section, if there is a principle under-girding London then it is lost in the displaced and violent identities simmering in the pubs and bars close by:

All Immigrants, BUT in this web, in this net of ugly brickwork mosques and god hoardings, they are mostly Irish Catholic. It is there in their names, if not their voices: Pat Coyle, Peter Healey

(new immigrant Yorkshire fish dock), Joseph Rust, Charlie Leahy, the keepers, soft-voiced Dennis (who returns to the West for every holiday), and Johnny Cashman...

It is Johnny who remains closest to the root tradition, lives in the family drama and brawl and loquaciousness of drink, fights, monologues, jokes, vomit on the stone steps... a tribe of sons... has a solution to all the major political social and economic problems (119).

Everyone is an immigrant here, as Sinclair is quick to explain, but that doesn't stop the possibility for violence. Cashman is the physical manifestation of the kind of 'loquacious' loudmouth whose presence resembles the 'root tradition' of western Ireland rather than that Sinclair associates with London. Identity is portrayed as problematic in such places. Too caught up in their 'doings' they are missing what is important about this urban landscape. This particular piece moves on, in fact, to describe the "memory" or "legend" of how the Irish first turned up in this area, including how they built their own 'protective enclave' around the time of the Ratcliffe Murders, only to eventually be responsible for keeping out the Whitechapel Jews with 'boot and fist' a few years later³². 'A thick vein', writes Sinclair, 'down into the life of the place'. Violence and murder are portrayed as something that will keep happening in this area regardless of human agency. There is something essentially present beneath the streets of East London that makes all human activity seem like perpetual, alienated repetition.

With a need to 'belong' – indeed, castigated by the others when they first arrived themselves – these Irish immigrants 'plug in' to this localized rage with all the brutish abandon that might be expected from them. Their only way to 'connect' with the environs of Spitalfields is with the crude stamping of boots on their victims. This is opposed, almost immediately, to Sinclair's

³² When Whitechapel was experiencing a wave of Irish immigration in the early nineteenth century two figures called 'Murphy' and 'Marr' were held responsible for brutal murders in the vicinity. 'Murphy' (also known as Williams) was buried at the junction of Commercial Road and Cannon street road with a stake through his heart.

colleague 'Arthur Vinton' who is the 'odd man out'. Of 'Huguenot extraction', and therefore one of the 'last first people', he is privy to a kind of deep knowledge that they are not (120). Concerned with 'bird song' and the 'work ethic' Vinton is a remnant of a social world before the estrangement. Mowing around graves in the diary section that follows this, the chaos and anxiety of London is transcended by Arthur and Sinclair at work. 'The grass is thick and lush', Sinclair writes on 'August 31/ Wednesday', 'Arthur spots a Goldfinch... they are almost able to fly. Involvement, suspension of all other activity' (121). There is almost a sense of Karma amongst Vinton and his colleagues because they are privileged to know something that Johnny Cashman never will. Arthur is a 'visionary' free from the anxiety, which manifests itself in the form of an ugly propensity for violence in Cashman and his ilk. As someone who truly 'belongs' in this place, he exists at one with the harmony of the natural world.

But it is impossible to escape a sense that Sinclair doesn't particularly take this penchant for mysticism as seriously as he should. The poet seems to interpret such moments as a way of working out problems that don't necessarily constitute a political vision in and of itself.

'[T]here's always a serious edge', he claims in conversation with Jackson,' [but] the notion of some kind of possession or magic, outside the usual parameters, [isn't] an aesthetic or political movement' (*Verbals* 126). Recognizing the energy patterns, then, Sinclair falls short of consciously trying to connect them into some kind of coherent plan for the city itself. This is particularly evident in Sinclair's understanding of Hawkmoor's 'unrealized' Basilica After the Primitive Christians. Such a project was conceived as an 'enclosure' – or to 'keep off the filth,

nastiness and brutes' as the architect put it at the time – remains only an 'unrealized... hope' when the poet passes by the area himself (17):

The east London churches still draw the meths-men and derelicts, fire-alcohol devotees, to the attendant parks. The mendicants have escaped from the Five of Pentacles. They rest on gravestones and benches. This is almost medieval. They are waiting, hanging around, debating, ferocious solitary monologues – in the clutch of root instincts. It is the opening shot of a Lepers' pilgrimage. Hard charity is expected. Scourges and soup kitchens. Sanctuary (20).

Whether Sinclair actively believes in this mysticism in East London is largely irrelevant when what matters in the 'process' by which they enable an effective mapping of urban space. 'So the process goes on and on', writes the poet, 'we're sucked into the vortex of energy' ('Suicide Bridge' 359). The churches are an attempt to damn up the uncontrollable energies of the city when such grandiloquent design gestures as Hawkmoor's are an impossibility. 'British wine bottles smash against the numbered steps', continues the poet on those derelicts, 'the broken fragments of brown glass are part of the design' (20). Regardless of how much Hawkmoor wishes to control these inhabitants of London within the regularity of his proposal, they are unaccountably resistant to the worst excesses of his ambition. Such 'meths-men' might be absent from his blueprint, but they are an intrinsic part of the city itself. 'The walls are varnished with urine', writes Sinclair, 'They study and inscribe the graffiti with prophetic seriousness' (21).

Although Sinclair undoubtedly carries these Poundian and Olsonian ticks within his poetry, he was also aware of their individual fates. Any mention of 'place' and 'myth' in Sinclair's later poem 'Suicide Bridge', for example, is almost immediately put in the context of its problematic

constitution. 'But man is like a plant', Sinclair insists, ' he is utterly possessed by what place is. He stands where a precisely defined exchange is consummated between star & ground. He is the saline medium. He marks place with a stone. But he is not rooted. He moves away, inflamed, into myth' ('Suicide Bridge' 149). So myth is the end product of the negation of place in any real and understandable sense. Like Hawksmoor, these patterns of mystical connections could just as well be as meaningless to Sinclair as they are to everyone else. What matters is the 'desire' that he articulates here, and how it finds its most 'inflamed' and riotous form in the realm of myth. Indeed, 'root thinking' for Johnny Cashman – his 'deep vein' into place – represents the potential for an 'over spill' of violence that runs historically from the Battle of Cable Street to Lewisham³³. The poet describes fascism himself in the poem as a menacing 'vertical energy': the top down rooted philosophy that would destroy London completely given half the chance:

Dreams are back-tracked, names & symbols noted, cooked, released. It lies on the tongue like a grub. It climbs out of the book into a vertical energy called: FASCISM [...] The need for the old myths is a confession of our failure to handle the world, to be on terms with the life-spill of the moment. We want back to what was never there. Immediate parentage is denied. Deeper & deeper into the sand ('Suicide Bridge' 149).

Myth is stasis to Sinclair; it represents the thick staff of Fascism immovably forced into the ground. But this is not to do away with 'myth', however; rather it is a call to treat it as the potentially ruinous occurrence that it is. 'Myth emerges as a weapon, a tool of resistance', the poet explains, 'it emerges in the hands of men wanting to maintain contact with the previous, with the era of high power and function; men who know that they must lie fallow in a time that is so distant from the plexus of their own unplanted sun' (148).

³³ I refer here, of course, to the now mythical Battle of Cable Street where the Jewish community organized to keep Oswald Moseley and his Fascist followers out of the east end. But also the 'Battle of Lewisham' in the late seventies when the National Front were prevented from embarking on a similar provocative march by both local residents and the Caribbean community.

Hawksmoor's churches take on another dimension in this reading. Rather than the transmitter of hidden secrets maybe they represent something much less grandiose. It is Hawksmoor who had the 'vision of the whole' as Sinclair puts it. His churches represent not only his individual vision, but that sort of attitude that has always defined the planner. They are structures to strike fear into the heart of Londoners, in other words, to tap into their mythological power is to be manipulated by Hawksmoor directly. In Green's recording Sinclair notes that especially in building his unrealized Basilica After the Primitive Christians Hawksmoor hoped to 'clear the area of the human altogether' (*Nicholas Hawksmoor*). 'This was his ideal or archetype', writes Sinclair, 'He wanted a 'Septum or Enclosure... to keep off filth Nastyness and Brutes' ('Lud Heat' 26). This was a cleansing of the land, primarily, a method that wouldn't be out of character in Williams' city. 'This hope', Sinclair quickly announces, 'was also unrealized'. In that interview Sinclair refers to the 'demotic energy' of those Londoners that Hawksmoor wasn't able to suppress. In fact, the Hare and Hounds pub that eventually occupied this space became the dominion of the Kray Brothers and their criminal misadventures. This grew to be a different type of 'myth', perhaps, but at least it wasn't the top down version favoured by present day Hawksmoors in the city. Staying rooted the Krays eventually harnessed these energies to their own end, but they were like Johnny Cashman and all of the other Immigrants creating their own violent protectorate and secure space. 'The place had its own strength', writes Sinclair, 'it was an impossible place to clear' ("Nicholas Hawksmoor"). With Arthur and colleagues in the churchyard Sinclair stands out not as some 'visionary' who had transcended the violence and anxieties of London, but as someone who is aware of their destructive potentialities. He sits in

the churchyard utterly defiant of the 'death cult' that Hawkmoor had put in place. His belief in the people of London – although not 'idealized' in any way – is much greater than the investment in the buildings. The churches are not a force for good, in this respect, but represent the very worst aspects of what an attachment to place entails: obedience and control. They were built by Hawkmoor precisely in an attempt to focus meaning into the landscape; they are the conductors of nothing but a calculated warning to those who step out of line. As Sinclair writes of their malign influence:

'The constant drag of day to day reality, practical considerations, blunts the overt statement of high ritual, the claim of kinship so that the more obvious symbols, the elevated pyramids, are excluded – while the arcane and disguised, the subversive sentences get through, and are still operational' ('Lud Heat' 32).

Place can only be conceived as a dead end in this context. 'Place, finally, can only be one thing: where you die', writes Sinclair in no uncertain terms, 'The motor word, *logos*, scorched into your chemistry; a sign on the ground that is yours & no one else's. It is the elimination of absolutely everything, nothing remains, distance is wiped out, a total renunciation of all you had claimed as knowledge up to that moment' ('Suicide Bridge' 153 – 154).

'The interconnection of myth and place', writes Baker, 'means that although the use of myth is problematic, it is also unavoidable, even necessary' (*Iain Sinclair* 50). Myth reveals, in other words, the logic of power and domination that is a byproduct of human activity. But it is also an intrinsic 'fact' of the how Londoners make sense of their surroundings as shown in the 'counter myth' of the Krays. Without it the urban environment remains a single narrative; the place of statues, monuments, or the adoration of that vertical energy. Sinclair wasn't unaware of

Charles Olson's own failure to articulate the bounds of his *polis*, but was rather determined to see these brutal impulses for what they are. Indeed, in 'Suicide Bridge' he proffers his own reading of a colonist's attitude towards space:

The colonists, getting-away from as much as going-open-towards, have to push further & faster as space retreats in front of them, the known swallowing the unknown, the unknown regurgitating the known as something new: gobble it up, it isn't there. America, Africa, the Stars. Extending the metaphors of pain.

[...]

Where there is unclaimed space, unwritten land, there is the quest & the there is musing, a sickly clawing, not only for minerals, crops, dead artifacts but also for mythologies. What tales the land holds buried. Drag them out with grappling irons & tractors, record them. Hoard the images in mausoleums with chained walls & uniformed attendants (150).

Olson's take on Mexico, for example, was a 'primal scene' not so much to draw inspiration from, but to pick up in 'grappling irons' and examine from within the controlled and secure environment of a museum. What these myths teach 'us', if anything, is their potentially catastrophic half life, their capacity to blunt and erode any truly progressive thinking with the dead weight of a blind adoration and inertia. 'He has escaped the faltering & over-informed vortex of centre where the city dweller, unraveled by centrifugal motions, has fallen victim to a weight, an ever-increasing density of myth', explains Sinclair of the enlightened poet, 'the city swivels on its axis, the sky is buried alive, buildings grow into the clouds, we carry the pains of architectural ambition on our shoulders' (152).

To avoid claims of fascism Sinclair's texts are not based in some sedentary world, but are mobile around a specific area instead. 'So place becomes active once more & this is the purpose

of the walk – to keep track open, to lay hand on the 19 stones, to bear witness’, the poet confirms, ‘place trembles in you. Long man moves out from your chest. The traveler is not’ (‘Suicide Bridge’ 151). More than a ‘vertical energy’ what matters to Sinclair is constant movement across spacetime. ‘What we walk is myth flattened into space’, he declares, ‘its hide’ (150). Sinclair differs from Olson, however, in as far as he refuses to ‘channel’ or ‘conduct’ and instead becomes a ‘witness’ or the detached ‘surveyor’ of a particular area. ‘To walk... is to recover the connection between myth and place’, suggests Baker, ‘in bearing witness the walking subject returns to the condition of conduit we found in Olson’s poetics. The poet is not an agent but a ‘witness’, a transmitter of energies rather than the creator of them’ (*Iain Sinclair* 51).

‘Decoherence’: Allen Fisher’s City

In opposition to Sinclair Allen Fisher states from the very beginning of *Place* that his poem is ‘not Maximus’ and that he is a ‘citizen of Lambeth/ cyclic on linear planes’ (11). His method is anything but ‘rooted’, and he describes his technique as ‘the loci on the point of a moving sphere’. The real point of divergence between these two writers, then, comes primarily in how they encounter the romantic traces that saturate place-orientated thinking. In Fisher’s poem, for example, there is an exchange with Sinclair on the publication of *Lud Heat*, which shows both praise and concern for the function of place within his work. Fisher seems to enjoy the work, in other words, but is concerned about the ‘symbolic attachment’ Sinclair hopes to create in that first section on Hawksmoor:

It becomes increasingly necessary in a society fashioned into obliged mobility, the jet set and the economically insecure, to insist that 'home' be made. That we "feel at home" whether as settlers or locals or nomads looking for comfortable surroundings. At the same time it becomes necessary not to be fooled by, what at best is, romanticism, the Ivor Novello, and, what can lead to that *Blut and Boden* homeland propagated by the Third Reich... This is not to suggest that all you are concerned with is a matter of this rooting, but your symbolic concerns strongly relate to and impinge upon this area... Lud Heat assumes the kind of symbolic value particular architectural forms possess: what associations depend on. Symbolic attachment to place, apart from the social relationships of groups, concerns itself primarily in the built up urban environment. It is from these buildings that the energies of the area are – I was going to say "generated" (152).

Fisher seems concerned that certain aspects of Sinclair's writings leave him open to reproducing the kind of aesthetic that generates the *necropolis* at the heart of this study. That his obsession with Hawksmoor's structures is simply the desire for a possession of or identification with London creating more problems than it solves. As one of the most obvious points of contrast in both writers work, Fisher maintains a critical distance from idea of the mystical in Sinclair's work. For Fisher it is not these 'connections' that are important in buildings as much as the 'energy' that surrounds them. 'Your concern is energetic and about energy where the place becomes symbol of ourselves', writes Fisher, '[i]t is in inter-relationships of situational fields, lapping, overlapping. Where area, the town, becomes radius or action and where action takes place' (*Place* 153). The real import of 'Lud Heat' stems not from some mystical force, but the actual interactions of individuals as they 'overlap' in social space. 'There are subtle mechanisms at work subjugating our psyches', explains Fisher, 'trying to keep... our senses, our awareness, at a lower level than they need to be in view of the social and economical potential of our situation' (152). Divining that 'potential', mining that 'overlapping' in the city, is Fisher's primary goal.

Olson provided an opening for Fisher's *Place* project in as far as it allowed him to reveal 'hidden layers' of London beyond the machinations of city planners. It is a poem that writes *against* logic, in other words, it is a poem that aims to delve into the hidden places unrecognized by dominant discourses in the city. The most obvious example of this perspective is the use of rivers in Fisher's text as an allegorical device. These aren't just any rivers, however, but the 'lost rivers of London' first researched by Nicholas Barton in his book by the same name that came out in the early sixties. These were rivers like the Fleet which had become channeled under roads and the basements of pubs and offices in the city centre. Largely unnoticed their only effects became evident during a flood or when they went above ground at some point. To Fisher they were representative of the truly complicated make up of social space. 'The Peck' river under Peckham, for example, instead of being viewed rationally becomes a vital energy source leading to 'the distribution of ideas':

a stream not only to convey the water sheds
the washing waste the shit
but a stream as a meeting line of different sheds
a source of ideas (*Place* 44).

This is something Fisher likens to literature, which is conceived as a reciprocal process rather than something that moves in a linear fashion. 'I read Pound who calls me to read Dante', explains the poet, 'who gives me better sight to read Duncan/ who suggests I read Pound' (46). Nothing concerns Fisher more than the fear this vital process might one day become artificial or one dimensional. There is an anxiety registered in these lines, as he imagines the consequences if these multiple sources were somehow corrupted. '[I]f our sources become artificial/ our

sources will dry', he writes, 'and the trees we have planted to sup them will wither with them' (*Place* 45).

But this isn't fear over 'estrangement' as it was for Olson and sometimes threatened to become for Sinclair. Rather, it is part of an aesthetic that sees the importance of a world that 'continually reshapes the going moves' as he puts it in his homage to Olson during *Unpolished Mirrors*. Without that flow – that 'distribution of ideas' – social space becomes inert, one-dimensional, and assured in its monologic certainties. The 'ritual' of the rivers is a 'treasure' to Fisher, but a 'treasure' that is:

Throttled by us here
In Brixton market herded
by the bosses of this brickwork
That insists our rivers be straight
From here to here by way of the Ring Road
not by the body's measure the earth's pulse (*Place* 52)

For Fisher the emphasis on space is a way of opening up possibilities for social being that are denied by the planning ideology and temperament of the Greater London Council. To Fisher these ideas were a starting point from which the hidden places of London could be exposed in his present. This is something that Tim Woods nails down in his article 'Allen Fisher's Place Project and the "Spatial Turn"' (1996). There is no clear dividing line between an authentic *place* and one that may have been constructed writes Woods on Fisher's work, 'People are

never fixed within a *locale*, but are active bricoleurs' (45). Fisher is attracted to spatial thinking only because it provides the possibility for an opening. Or, as Woods explains:

In his attention to space, Fisher is therefore concerned with unsanctioned histories, those not directly oppressed but occluded. His works between and among endorsed categories of knowledge, and in doing so he jostles the sequencing of location. Instead of seeking direct casual links or claims, the emphasis is placed on establishing loose sets of relations, capillary actions and movements, spilling out and among different fields. Consequently Fisher is not interested in distancing himself from the *locale* in order to study it: universalizing the local is perceived as obscurantist and dangerous. Rather than collapsing the local he opens it up' (45)

For Fisher everything falls on an 'opening' such as this. Place isn't 'where you die' as much as a physical environment that is constantly 'craving to continue' with new possibilities and actions. Examined from this perspective the 'layers' of London bring up more questions than answers. Social being is an unending process, and the only problem comes when an individual tries to halt this 'moving field of resources' (*Place* 398).

Fisher, then, finds himself involved in much less of that 'circumambulation'. The poet, undoubtedly, makes use of the 'open field' method, but the London he divines is a place of more mundane realities. There is less emphasis on 'ley lines' during his work, and more sense of everyday life. This is work that stems from Olson's revolutionary poetic form, but is somewhat reticent when it comes to mythic content. The poet Ron Silliman, for instance, sees Fisher's text as a continuation of where Olson himself left his unfinished project in 'Book Three'. Moreover, the poet describes Fisher's epic as a distinctly 'British' work. 'British' in the context of this study, means purged of the sureties that seem so easily accessible when considering American origins, or an acceptance of that 'polytheism without Gods' or 'shifts of centre' first referred to by Roy Fisher. Indeed, Silliman points to Fisher's 'homage' to Olson in the final part of the project as a

vague key to their relationship. In this section from 'Unpolished Mirrors' called 'Second Release: Homage to Charles Olson', the tone is one of careful veneration. 'This is no zig zag neurosis or call for return to hierarchic parenthood', writes Fisher during this brief section, '[but] medical malfunction with altering blush or change of speed' (398). 'Building', writes Fisher, 'can mean Becoming'. In this poem he carefully suggests that the recently deceased Olson let go and realize the true possibilities that his formal innovations heralded:

Your place is the moving field of resources
around a war of the intellect
that is exuberant and not aggressive,
a dance preceding mechanics knowing rest made kinesis
"how to get friendly, but with dignity"
not centered but craving to continue speaking
getting at matters that way learning
how to alert hearing in intense extempores
that continually reshape the going moves (398).

This is a vital passage because Fisher essentially uproots Olson, and points to the function of spontaneous 'extempores' in conceiving of place. 'Clinical singularity confuses', writes Fisher, and Olson's place-centered work only *works* if it removes that centre in the first place. The 'open field' method or 'field of resources' is praised by Fisher as providing an 'exuberant' attempt at the epic that demolishes the 'aggressive' ego in Pound. But, nevertheless, there is still a background worry about the poet's 'failed vision' in Gloucester itself. Fisher's point isn't to 'understand' Olson, however, and he warns against the 'events' of his life being 'made commodity' after his passing. What is important is his 'cyclic' method of constructing the text, which leads the reader away from a single interpretation – 'randomly scanning', as he writes it,

‘for the plume of love’ (‘Unpolished Mirrors’ 389). This thinking will become fundamental to Fisher’s later poetry. But, for the moment, it places him separately from Sinclair as he stakes out a position not only ‘deregulated’ but mobile enough to reject rooted topographical distinctions altogether.

‘The perception’, writes Fisher during a poem called ‘Cakewalk’ in *Gravity as a Consequence of Shape* ‘results from a continual cross-reference/ amongst a variety of stolen properties’ (155).

For Fisher the dissonance of the city called for new modes of aesthetic practice, completely divorced from previous modes of thinking. In an interview the poet points to a new kind of confluence between aesthetics and technology as it impacts on traditional ideas of place.

Answering a question from Mike Weller – which amongst other things problematized the relationship between ‘neo-romantic 20th century psychogeography and the impact of the internet and virtual spaces on the writing process – Fisher segues into a discussion of work by a performance artist in the UK who he describes affectionately as ‘Fred’:

Fred is a performance artist that used to be with a group called Pants twenty years ago or thirty years ago, and he’s currently got a blog running in which he walks around on a daily basis with a mobile phone camera at arm’s length, so he’s talking to himself or he’s talking to the camera, and it’s philosophical and it’s a long debate. But what he does is to continually walk and do this in the same space, so you recognize the same tree, just with different weather or different lighting, so that he creates a locality for you – even though you don’t know where that is, you know he’s walking somewhere, there’s a tree. It could be in Scotland or it could be in Buffalo. So there’s a moment then when what’s significant about the place isn’t that it’s in Buffalo or its in Manchester, it’s that it’s the same place (“Opened”).

Technology, in other words, creates the opportunity for identification with a place, even though that place could be anywhere in the world. What matters isn’t the city as an actual locality – be it, Buffalo or Manchester – but a new mode of spatial thinking that even if it isn’t tied to a

particular geographical area is perceived differently. Waking up every morning – indeed, taking the time to perceive of the city as honestly as possible – recognizable topographical features can be ‘made strange’ in the light of the technological present. The physical environment is one consistently ‘acted upon’ by processes largely out of the control of individuals. Moreover, it is possible to create new virtual spaces that destroy completely the idea of a fixed territory.

To make sense of this new relationship to the urban environment, a good starting point is Fisher’s inaugural professorial lecture “Traps or Tools and Damage” (2010). This lecture is a detailed account of the change in aesthetic practice for the ‘Gravity’ sequence that would abandon all attempts at linear construction. Going further than *Place* – where the organizational premise was the ‘loci on the point of a moving sphere’ – Fisher claims in this lecture that ‘the compositional procedures used in *Place* were radically reappraised for the ‘Gravity’ work, taking into account the critique of classical and ideal modes of preparation and existence’ (“Traps” 8). What the poet means by this, is that all of the desire for ‘purity’ in the work of modernist authors of the past needed to be jettisoned entirely for new principles that actually reflect the systematic functioning of the physical world. It is, naturally, science that leads him to this conclusion, more specifically a reading of quantum physics and Heisenberg’s work on the ‘uncertainty principle’ in the 1920s. Whilst writers in the literary world focused on harmony and cohesion in the Twenties and Thirties in the west, quantum physicists like Kurt Godel had already come to the conclusion that ‘the truth was not demonstrable’ (“Traps”). As Fisher explains:

In quantum physics part of this debate has led to the naming the situation 'decoherence' that is beyond the state fought for by 20th century Modernists like Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno as coherence, to an understanding that part of our existence cannot be realized, is beyond perception, has a proven actuality and is typically experienced indirectly through artifacts ("Traps")

This brings to the fore not only the contingency of the phenomenal world, but the importance of the reader as what Fisher calls an 'active participant' that has an 'affect on the completion of the aesthetic production' ("Traps" 7). Moreover, what Fisher calls 'measurement' becomes 'an ethical issue; ideal and golden proportions must be replaced' ("Traps" 7). The measurement of a place in a poem – the writing about a geographical area as such – remains problematical if it makes no attempt to take this 'decoherence' into account. The poet, as surveyor, suddenly becomes a complicated figure within a network of intransigent factors largely beyond the control of the author him or herself.

'Gravity', then, is a very specific attempt to rewrite the city in the context of a presiding 'decoherence'. Learning lessons from the 'Place' sequence in terms of organization the entire poem is an attempt to disrupt totalistic thinking even further than a limited Olsonian aesthetic would allow. Sheppard, for example, describes this attempt to write against totality as founded in Fisher's reading of science and quantum physics:

One of these is 'Totality' as constructed by a blind scientific and technocratic worldview, the sum total of knowledge pointing towards one irreducible answer, the bad "technology" examined in episode two [of Gravity]. This position is at odds with Quantum physics which lies behind the statement that gravity is a consequence of shape (more properly mass), a singular fact about the universe so far as Fisher is concerned. Another totality concerns political reality, at its most extreme in the totalitarianisms that have wounded twentieth century history, but were equally present in any ideological construction of society, such as in contemporary integrated world capitalism (*Bad Times* 184)

The aim of Fisher's method is to finally confound these totalizing processes by the structure and content of the poem itself. 'Fisher's point', writes Sheppard in an earlier piece on 'Gravity', 'is that the place of London where he lived in those years of deprivation and riots is traceable only by his irregular technique' ("New Memories"). It is still a fundamentally 'urban' poem, in other words, it is just that the aesthetic practice Fisher uses to document this particular territory has changed to counter the problems of writing poetry that, as he puts it in 'Unpolished Mirrors', [is] not centered, but craving to continue' (398). In order to avoid this *Gravity* is a text that works consistently towards an opening by harnessing decoherence as a textual strategy more representative of the nonlinear constitution of urban space. Parallel with the desire for an 'opening' in this study, Fisher's poem is one that continually works against any sense of grounding.

In "Traps or Tools and Damage" Fisher explains how far this technique permeates the poem, especially in terms of that third term *Damage*. The starting point for the structure, Fisher explains, was a Fibonacci ratio drawn on a metal cylinder that was subsequently 'damaged' by the poet who crushed it in a vice. Fisher describes this 'overall plan' as consequently leading 'to a new set, but of damaged proportions' ("Traps" 8). Effectively what the poet has done here is take classical proportions – otherwise known as the 'golden mean' or the 'golden ratio' – and then signal his distance from this tradition by making his starting point as far from that time worn pattern as possible. This is a symbolic act, but then again a genuine attempt at fleeing from accepted orthodoxy from the very beginning. The problem of the city, therefore, would no

longer be a problem of 'closure' but one that has its very starting point in 'decoherence'. As

Fisher explains:

The image's display of numbered rows crushed into each other, causing geological shifts in and out of sequence due to stress and strain, produced unexpected patterns of connectedness, thus unexpected consciousness, and this the need for proposals for an aesthetics that would help solve the trauma, the damage of the situation. During the process of this work, scheduled for completion in 2005, the damaged structure has led to the need to constantly reinvent compositional conceptualization to overcome or, so to speak, repair the damage perpetrated against humankind by humankind, as much as a ploy to maintain personal homeostasis and homeorhesis ("Traps")

Unlike authors in the classical period or the twentieth century Fisher starts his project not at the beginning, but at very end point of damage and corruption that afflicted every long poem from the *Cantos* to *Maximus*. Fisher doesn't start with an idea that he 'defends' throughout his work – although he does begin *in medias res* which could be interpreted as a nod to his predecessors – but the realization that whatever his eventual direction the field of 'decoherence' can be the only place to begin. For both reader and writer, therefore, the only task is somehow to make sense of this damaged structure. Starting with the strange, the unrecognizable, 'homeostasis' is always the elusive element except for in the 'ploy' of Fisher's subjective outline to the poem itself. The overriding principle is one of tension and stress. Only through genuine 'activation' by the reader will moments of insight come about.

This is where the idea of 'traps' comes into the poetic artifice for Fisher. During an email exchange with Karen MacCormack Fisher draws heavily on Hilary Lawson's theoretical treatise on 'closure' to sketch out what might constitute a 'trap' in both the aesthetic and linguistic sense of that term. As the poet also makes clear in his lecture it is the attempt to transcend and

question the 'traps' of linguistic systems that is the central focus of his poetics. 'Traps are what we are inside of, traps constitute what is known, where to place what is known', he explains, 'between what boundaries' ("Traps" 1). In that exchange with MacCormack Fisher puts emphasis on a passage from Lawson's text that describes 'closure' using an apposite analogy of a mouse trap:

A mouse trap, for example, can be regarded as having two discrete states; it is either set, it is ready, or it has sprung, it has gone off. Many different causes may have led it to being in one state or another: it may have been knocked by someone or something, or someone could have deliberately set it off. In the context of the mechanism all of these variations are of no consequence, it is either set or it is not set. Any mechanical arrangement that enables a system to alternate between two or more discrete states is thereby capable of providing the basis for preliminary closure (*Closure* 30).

Fisher points in his email to this 'reduction' in meaning using the phrase 'crowd out'. Fisher works towards an 'opening' beyond the 'authority' of the author. His poetry inhabits traps, but only to explode their logic from the inside out. His 'damaged' poetry resides at the tenuous gap before this distinction between open and closed is formulated. Before language hardens into an 'either or' polarity, it is Fisher's hope to work between these two essential categories. 'The mark is left open', writes Lawson, 'as we look for a closure that can be realized as meaning' (67).

This is why the role of the reader is so important to Fisher in his conceptualization of 'decoherence' in the poetic work. In the essay "Necessary Business" – coterminous with the beginning of the *Gravity* sequence itself – Fisher once again inhabits scientific discourse in order to refer to the problem of closure in the post romantic work. Using the term 'chreod' – which he sources this time in the biologist C.H.Waddington's terminology for a 'necessary path' where 'change is canalized once started in a certain direction' (34) – he points to the poetry of Cris

Cheek, J H Prynne and Eric Mottram as an example of poetry that aims to disrupt this 'necessary path' or one dimensional perspective. The importance of poetry stems from how it is able to break out of these pre-determined attempts at closure, or as Hilary Lawson has put it earlier it is a poetics that praises 'cues' rather than 'tags', a poetry where like in Eliot 'the present is the still point, but it is not still in any sense that we can grasp' (*Closure* 220). Slipping past definitions, and therefore 'canalisation', this is writing that breaks out of those patterns of closure as soon as it enters them. '[These] poet's, writes Fisher in the essay, 'deliberately break or fracture this patterning as part of their aesthetic function' ("Necessary Business" 34). These 'pattern breaks' or 'fractures' produce discontinuities or 'leaps from expectancy' as Fisher suggests, but they also join together to give a wider sense of a social world beyond the text of the poem itself. 'As a "book" only part of the production process has taken place', writes Fisher later on in that essay, 'the next part, the reader's own enactment then begins' (51). To Fisher this is described as a 'post-romantic weltanschauung', whereby the goal of this comprehensive world view isn't one of 'total freedom' as much as creating the opening for that freedom to emerge in the first place. 'If nothing else, the work reveals the possibility of a freedom', writes Fisher, 'In Heidegger's terms, it reveals that open region within which the participator, with regard to what they are and how they are, can properly take their stand and become capable of being said' (51). This isn't a call for relativism, however, but for works that actively engage with keeping themselves 'open'. 'Significant poetry can only take place through participatory engagement', continues Fisher, 'but this is not to say that *any* poetry can have significance' (51).

For Fisher, as Izenberg, poetry is something that carries with it an irrefutably social dimension.

As the poet explains in “Necessary Business”:

Ideas are not independent of material conditions of existence; the relationship of the two is not coincidental or haphazard, but structured and systematic. Thought and consciousness do not originate in material, but in activity and the human capacity to reflect on such activity. The external stimulus of the presence of a problem in society, an understanding of one class or group, becomes a prerequisite in the process of poetic production. What ever way this “group” is defined, poetry becomes constructive and transformative facture. It is the tendency of human labour generally to be socially located in action. The dialectic of society is constructed historically by people and groups of people, and those people themselves have been constructed in and by society (50)

The city, therefore, becomes the locus of both poetry and community. But this isn’t a realm of ‘identification’, but something much more complicated. In that exchange with MacCormack, for instance, Fisher stresses how this leads to a non-totalizing aesthetic genuinely interacting with the world. ‘One of the understandings from what we have been exchanging is that any specialist practice is secondary to aesthetic necessity’, writes Fisher, ‘and that any specialist practice needs interaction, however framed or broken, with another practice and more’ (*Philly Talks* 18).

This ‘damage’ as the points on that corrupted Fibonacci scale collide, becomes not only symbolic but an ‘aesthetic necessity’ for poetry to exist in any serious sense. The melee of the social cannot be reduced anymore to classical principles. Any realistic account of its ‘energy’ must bear in mind the necessary tensions between itself and the environment it inhabits. ‘Of course, once we grab aesthetics as a requirement, but not a precedent or a simple outcome for active consciousness’, explains Fisher to MacCormack, ‘the momenergy, subsequent on the impertinent, imperfect fit becomes the wonderful’ (*Philly Talks* 18). The ‘wonderful’ embraces

the collision – that is the momenergy or momentum and energy combined – as something necessary to thinking of spacetime adequately. The impertinent fit or the square peg in a round hole, becomes the necessary point of departure.

For the city and its architecture, these principles apply equally. In their email exchange which centers around numerous accounts of architectural theory MacCormack points to Bernard Cache's text *Earth Moves: The Furnishing of Territories* (2001) as a possible place where thinking on poetry and the city might converge. Cache:

If we wish to define architecture as an operation on space we must then define the nature of this space more precisely. Classical philosophy saw it as a form of coexistence or simultaneity; it is a space where coexistence is not a fundamental given, but rather the uncertain processes of separation and partitioning. The wall is the basis of our coexistence. Architecture builds its space of compatibility on a mode of discontinuity (*Earth Moves* 87)

Being together in the city isn't premised on some Golden Ratio or Mean, but like Fisher's aesthetics has its roots in disruption and discontinuity. Simultaneity is actually a process that negates the very premise of building. To create simultaneous structure would be a kind of non-building that refuses to take into account both partitioning and division in the structures themselves. In his text Cache refers to the process of building as a form of 'reconstruction' that not only constructs walls and barriers that rarely does justice to the original 'site'. 'For machines', Cache explains, 'will flatten the site, so that respect for its contours becomes a sort of reconstruction. Strong singularities erode and give way to softened fluctuations' (151). The city, in its regenerating and reconstructing fervor, encourages nothing less than decoherence as point of fact. This 'reconstruction', moreover, substitutes a precise 'measurement' of

topography with what Fisher describes as ‘hypothetical blur’. ‘The diversity of the immediate environment is thereby reduced to a single state and its absence’, as Lawson would put it, ‘it is either set or it is not set’ (*Closure* 25).

But ‘crowd out’ in Fisher’s conception is also something that provides the writer with distinct opportunities. The idea is not to wait for the closure to happen but to work *within* that ‘hypothetical blur’ before it takes place. That is, Fisher technique focuses on cognition and the meaning-making processes at a linguistic level. As he writes in his inaugural professorial lecture:

The patterns of connectedness that enable traps and consciousness to work involve descriptions of the predated and forethought for predation. Traps can be benign like a camera or a cider press capturing light or the juice from an apple. Traps can be concealed from us inside of habitual experience and conditions. Traps involve inventive perception and thus ‘crowd outs’ and as such provide tools, that is, they bring about procedures of selection that produce pattern, and thus patterns of connectedness, through measurement, repetition and recurrence. My work challenges the conditions of being trapped by what we know. I use deliberate acquisition of knowledge, a reappraisal of poetics as method, and specific tools for transformation from damage, with a view to spring traps to meet the aesthetic and pragmatic functions of art (“Traps” 1).

‘Brixton Fractals’ – the first poem from the *Gravity* sequence – is a text that seeks to explode the limitations of ‘knowledge’ as immediately presented. Rather than simply describing the city’s topography it proceeds by ‘jumps’ of decoherence as to mimic that corrupted Fibonacci scale. The juxtaposed quotations and extra textual resources that formed the main stay of the Olsonian method in *Place*, therefore, become much more compacted and dense on the page itself. This has the effect of not only looking formally recognizable as a ‘poem’, but also of creating juxtapositions and ‘clues’ that aren’t marked for the reader as much as hidden amidst the appearing normalcy of the syntactical ‘flow’ of the poetry itself. These poems rarely, if ever,

proceed with what might be termed 'narrative coherence'. Fractals are part of the scientific terminology of Benoit Mandelbrot and Fisher describes them in the introduction to the poem as 'an extremely irregular action, broken design, or fragmented object' (*Gravity XI*). 'The work is strongly influenced by itself, rather than what arrives outside of it', writes the poet, 'by its need of indeterminacy, its distrust of the effectiveness of education' (*XI*). These poems set a charge at the base of linguistic coherence and closure. '[B]ecause the rotten danger in present-day living is the kind of reduction of language to communication to manipulate things', remarks Fisher in a similar anti-prose, 'or can become merely instrumental to prevent going in many directions' (*XI*).

'My working practice involves poetry, poetics, painting, drawing and art history', writes Fisher during his inaugural lecture, 'that is a deliberate praxis of more than one discipline and in critique of the archaic Modernism of singular focus' ("*Traps*" 1). This method aims to move the poem in as many directions as possible as long as it is away from the 'gravity' traditionally associated with an authorial identity. His entire poetics, therefore, are implicated in numerous disciplines in order to work against closure as a first principle. But 'Brixton Fractals' is still 'about' urban topography – at least the poem is still created from an engagement with the territory of Brixton in South West London. It is no coincidence, for example, that just after he has defined the term Fractals in his introduction he immediately sets out to define the second:

Brixton is that part of southwest London extending South/ North geohistographically from its prison and windmill down through the high road to the police station on one axis, and from the employment exchange in Coldharbour through the market to the Sunlight laundry factory east/west on another (*XI*).

Brixton is simply a local environment and therefore 'mappable', but what is interesting from the outset is how Fisher hopes to 'map' it as such. This will not be the mapping that emerged in *Place* or the 'high occulting' map of East London provided by Sinclair in *Lud Heat*. Rather, from the beginning, the poet will give a non-totalizing image of Brixton with an emphasis on fragmentation that aims to question all attempts at closure. The drama of the city – including the Brixton riots in Fisher's locality at this time – is enacted in the poem as simply a trace within a surfeit of information. 'On one side a ley line buckles', writes Fisher, 'a rush of green vans and police weapons/ send the needles into peak/ and damage the Dolby' (5). Tuning into the police radio frequency, the riots are juxtaposed with the energy of those familiar ley lines. Only, this time, the energy that is an integral part of Brixton is felt in the 'white noise' of the police radio. The 'spectacle' of the riots is observed by Fisher on a radio that almost combusts in that intense moment. 'Memory', he writes on how technology is intrinsically implicated in this scene, begins to rely on the instrument panel/ as well as the force/ felt in the chest' (5).

Indeed, the tone of this first poem in the *Gravity* sequence – 'Banda' – makes clear that Fisher is setting out to do something very different from the beginning:

Began to decide how to perceive
Dreamed once of where we were going
too precise about direction
said, That's the way to the city, but
I wouldn't start from here, if
I were you (8)

This is a poem to be built on imprecision – the recognition of walls, traps and discontinuity. To simply state 'That's the way to the city' – noting, especially, the uncomfortable capitalization of

'That's – is to amble in the same ever-decreasing circles, to be trapped *inside* knowledge with no hope of ever approaching urban topography in reality. The poet is always in danger of being 'too precise about direction'. So the city, instead, is felt as a whole plethora of different determinants always overlapping and acting upon each other. 'It's the city alright', writes Fisher, 'felt in the tropai of directions' (8). Not a singular destination as previously, then, but 'directions' defined as emphatically plural. Just like the Mexican Banda of the title, 'precision' is futile amidst the crowding out of numerous other opposable factors. Like cells in the body the city ages. It is subject to memory depletion and the constant fizzling out of neuron activity:

It happens quickly not as you might expect
takes a long time moving towards
its suddenness and when it does
quicken
it surprises. Even so, as I say it
it has gone and more deliberate
or expected mode takes form,
changing the minimally real at once into
a memory (9)

Like the poem and the author itself, the city is constructed from those jumps and fractals symptomatic of decoherence. 'Renewal has the potential for neganthropy', writes Fisher in his lecture, 'the natural expectancy of aging, the loss of brain cells. It is the potential for neganthropy that art proposes, albeit rhetorically, a kind of immortality' ("Traps" 2). There is no point in the 'experiencing individual' giving an account of urban space, when in the next minute what the observer views could be a distant memory. Without the reader there is no Brixton, without the reader there can be no social space at all.

Indeed, *Gravity* proposes not only the relief from one-dimensional structures of meaning, but new ways of conceiving of 'mapping' in itself. In the poem the 'archetypes' of the Mathematician, Poet and Engineer – all, interestingly, described as 'surveyors' of different sorts – are shown to be repeating the logic of closure that has come to define the problem of the city throughout the course of this study. Of these three figures, however, it is the Mathematician that seems to be the primary target for Fisher. 'Thus through reflection and analysis/ the Mathematician distinguished values', writes Fisher, 'as a formal criterion for understanding/ narrative structure' (77). It is logic, therefore, that is the unruly element in western aesthetics and the poet and engineer as representations of poetry and the city are suffering from something of an infection. The problem with such systematic thinking is its failure to recognize discontinuities. Or, to put it in the correct terminology, a rejection of 'fractals'. As the poet continues:

Nevertheless,
the wet and the solid were in a fractal dimension and
required a dialectical procedure of domination and attribution.
It burnt his eyes and gave him an erection.
In embarrassment he relaxed back at the map table
and began to show hysteresis as a problem
of percolation between the movement and the lattice
where transformation of the virtual to the actual
became substituted as domination and the desire to be dominated (77)

The Mathematician rejects the multi-layered perception favoured by Fisher, even though it amounts to erotic stimulation. Retreating to his 'map table' with his coconspirators he is tacked assuredly to numerical certainties, he privileges 'hypothetical blur' as linguistic fact. This *misrecognition* replaces what actually 'is' with what the Mathematician now 'wants' or 'desires'. 'It meant the introduction in the surface of his perception/ of a wanting', writes Fisher earlier

on, 'a perception that included a guessed at seeing,/ a wanting that prevalourised the solution converted/ into a description, then into attributive utterances' (76). Undergirding this logic is always the 'desire to dominate' or to 'tag' natural phenomena with words. 'A naiveté between what is thought and said', continues Fisher, 'irrespective of social life' (77).

The reality of perception simply doesn't matter in this dominant purview of social being.

Moreover, 'society' itself – life in Brixton – completely undermines such a perspective by its resistance to such interpretations. As Fisher writes in 'Birdland':

Beneath helicopters
Brixton abandoned
Challenges the closure of meaning
So far removed, nothing will have taken place, but the place,
flattening housing for ecological reasons,
fuses with a beyond,
a successive clashes in
formations, memories of bodily contact, but
warmth and nourishment do not underlie the air (82)

During the riots Brixton is a place that challenges the dominant discourses that seek to give it a particular vibe or explanation. What exists in this section of south west London is the eruption of violence as something of a singularity. Even then, this violence was founded on spontaneous energies that can neither be recreated nor duplicated in any form. This is not 'nourishing' or 'warming' to think about, but the simple consequences of Brixton as a self-referential entity devoid of any attempts to subsume place into aesthetics. Interestingly, in this section of the poem such an 'opening' is juxtaposed to the figure of the Mathematician perhaps as he sets off to work the morning after:

The Mathematician
gets on the subway in a pinstriped
with a microchip blackboard. A spotted handkerchief
matches his tie
On the back of his head someone
has singed a domino it
matches his ear rings ('Birdland' 83)

The Mathematician is a fusty figure when contrasted as he clearly is here with the tumultuous events of the previous night. Black and white he is the very epitome of the either or polarity at the root of systems of closure. He is the limited possibilities of Lawson's mouse trap made flesh, or a physical representation of the binary logic sketched out by linguistic traps. More than this, he attempts to engender some kind of equilibrium or harmony into last night's 'race riots'. Something for which – at least if the singed domino in the back of his head is anything to go by – either the locals are less than appreciative or he must remind himself of in the most masochistic fashion.

Bullied, isolated, the Mathematician exists in a Brixton that is the opposite of his monopolizing desires or 'wanting'. To those that live there Brixton is completely understandable, but to the Mathematician who sees 'hypothetical blur' as closure it is a decoherence that must be pacified at all costs. 'It is that blur, which has to presented as measurement', writes Fisher, and attempts to 'dominate' it seem like subjugation in this context. When the Mathematician begins to take some time away from his formulas and 'accounts', for example, the effect appears to be one of carnivalesque revelry:

As he starts to leave
his accounts, he pulls the arms from his jacket,
sets them alight.

The effect is laughter
an imprint of an archaic moment,
a threshold of
spatiality as well as sublimation.
Suddenly a path clears Sleep relates the squeezed
State to a lack of community. He leans
towards me, last night, he insists,
I had a strange dream (83)

The response to a truly spontaneous action by the Mathematician is laughter. The unexpected moment, which Fisher describes as 'archaic', remains the only acceptable one. But this moment only lasts for so long. The ultimate – atypical even – reaction is to envelope it in denial and closure. This is certainly what is suggested in the great narrative 'cop out' that suggests that his actions were "just a dream". The Mathematician, insistent, retreats to a trap of his own making for both healing and sustenance. In doing so, however, he simply repeats the 'black or white' dogma that has plagued aesthetic decision-making in the west. '[It] is important to notice that notions of healing are semiotic not pragmatic, that is mainly illusory and at best figurative', writes Fisher in his revealing lecture 'aesthetics is still a young discipline and not a science, but imperfect fit is the more appropriate machine to engender our active enquiries' ("Traps" 6). This 'betweenness', at the fold between what Fisher calls in the poem 'naming it' and the 'autonomy of the subject' is the only sincere place for meaning to reside. 'I become a mere/phenomenal actualization moved through a burning gap', Fisher ends the poem, 'the irrational state insists on control' (83).

It is in a poem called 'Cakewalk', however, that Fisher takes this approach to aesthetics ever closer to apperceptions of urban social being. He starts this poem with the image of a woman

'frottaged' by 'the Burgular/ to the wall' (149). This image is important in two ways. Firstly, 'frottaging' is the kind of avant garde 'brass rubbing' technique used Max Ernst, but secondly this image has the sexual meaning of two people rubbing against each other in the act of love making. Whether this is just an artistic image created in a specific manner, or a sexual act against the image by the Burgular himself, makes no difference because the telling details come in another archetype – the Informer's – report:

The informer's report confirms
they are metallic balls of
crystalline liquids sandwiched
in saliva honeycombs and
dynamically disordered into droplets
disturb the gravel (149)

'Oh what a wonderful world', the informer seems to exclaim in wonder, only for him to follow this up with 'tries to stop it and cannot'. This image is fascinating, enticing even, but the natural response is to shut this excitement down. At one point the Informer notes how the image has 'stabilized', whereupon he is able to approach it in the language of the 'City's/ sintered adhesion' (150). Sintering is a chemical process whereby powdered metal is joined together before it reaches melting point in order to create a solid mass. 'Sintered adhesion', then, represents the stopping of the city and its melee. Sintered adhesion is the joining together of singularities through a manufactured process that keeps their molecules together and separate at the same time. It is the appearance of a collective body, in other words, even though that collective body is the result of a manufactured process. As Fisher notes, this is something the very opposite of 'natural':

Away from the perinuclear destruction
in his cell bodies

to the subterranean horizon
his holdings are achieved by macromolecular stabilization:
a vocabulary trench
almost voided by the means to dredge (151)

The Informer's world is one that rejects the very biological processes that keep him alive. Even his cells are not subject to renewal but a kind of molecular stasis. Just like his alien body his 'word hoard' becomes a 'vocabulary trench' or the stagnant remnants of a language with no social use. 'Return to a Faraday Cage', writes Fisher of the informer's resistance to the world of experience, 'dizzy from the static/ metal escalators/ on the way down slope/ defines/ in completeness' (151).

Moreover, when it comes to the city this 'Informer' is seen as a divided figure. He encapsulates the same tensions synonymous with both the romantic and modern periods. As Fisher writes:

He lives in fear of breakdown
in sensitivity of capture.
His skid turns from calm
austere garden
back to the consequences
of the city transcendence of its glow (152)

His failure to 'make sense' of the 'frottaged' image, his failure to reduce it into a recognizable order of things, sees him torn between the 'city's glow' and the 'calm' and 'austere' garden where sincerity holds sway. The fact that he 'skids' between both states suggests a confusion manifesting itself in quite a physical way. 'Place', as he finds it, negates the city in any plural sense. Like the image of the woman, its 'enticements' and 'glow' refuse to be subordinated to any kind of system. As Fisher continues:

He cannot teach himself
to ignore the
screams and riots outside
but evades approaching darkness in both
the garden and the city move against him (152).

The informer's hyperactive psychological condition manifests itself in violent fits and starts as the coherence or a world he once knew dissipates in front of him. 'Poetry and engagement with a Public' Fisher reminds the reader in *Complexity Manifold*, '[is] potentially involved with self-deception, or more often, active deceit' (251). In order to feel grounded, to feel stable, poems have to construct systems that 'cohere'.

But towards the poem's end point Fisher – or at least the poem's 'author' and therefore voice of authority and control – switches back on that Faraday Cage. Most importantly, a 'field of gravity' is seen to emerge 'beyond the garden wall' that has a 'simultaneity of direction'. This force is 'stronger than hail', and like the 'gravity' of Fisher's long poem itself it 'shapes' the poem into a predetermined form. The Informer, who had been in crisis only a short while previously, suddenly appears to be on the ascendancy. Instead of that almost Puritan fear of the image witnessed at the beginning of the poem, somehow the city has been transformed from its 'transcendent glow' into a commodified caricature of its former self:

The city's policy
whiteballed to ensure the Informer
runs into the right kind of people
Always a light flashing somewhere
Everybody is very tired
Earning a fortune (159)

Envisaged now as a place of frenetic capitalist activity the city becomes a closed entity where everybody is too predisposed to their place in the totalistic system that surrounds them. As a space this now conforms to everything the informer ever wanted. It is the 'city of corporations/ glassed in dreams and images' seen in Oppen's verse, and as such it resembles the 'wanting' or 'prevalourization' of the city Fisher has already described. It is fascinating, furthermore, how that image of a woman that began the poem is now perceived:

Desire and greed are matched
in a "she looks beautiful eugenics"
A chain of electro-chemical reactions
summarizes into
the will to keep up standards

An order to establish
An options exchange encourages favour (159)

The recalcitrant image of a woman that began the poem has now been framed, and hollowed-out, by the "she looks beautiful eugenics" of the presiding social order. This order, however, is nothing more than the chemical imprint of social mores in the brain activity of a small group of people. These are 'beautiful eugenics' because they both praise this woman's beauty, whilst effectively cutting her off from any more nuanced interpretation. Kept in place by the single narrative of the city – and that beloved by the Informer who has all interpretation 'whiteballed' or 'sewn up' – the potentially subversive image has been emptied of meaning by a logic of closure that drowns all other possibilities out. '[A]spirations' in such a climate concludes Fisher at the end of the poem, '[are] considered cohesion' (160).

To Fisher, aesthetics today are premised on precisely this situation. There are, indeed, inventive formal techniques to create the hope of an opening, but these are soon caught up within the repetitious cycle of closure. 'As she focuses', writes Fisher, 'the Photographer comes to something/ which to her is Beauty/ and stops there' (156). The constant desire to subsume place, and personality, into aesthetics means that the poem is the site of eternal battle between these two states of being. To Fisher the present moment is therefore perched between the smallest possibility for hope and a profound despair. 'The ludicrous concept', writes Fisher as part of a commentary on Gerard Richter in order to gesture to this situation, 'that we still think we can consider ways to get through another half century as a civic and social nexus is an optimism' ("Complexity Manifold" 251). If anything, poetic forms of representation are a particularly acute expression of these circumstances. As the poet continues during a passage from the introduction to a book which was initially due for publication in 2013:

There is a large dialectic undermining this book which perpetuates the appalling logic that has sustained the disgrace of western civilization for more than two and a half millennia, an appalling logic that is the necessary for the premise of this critique and its perpetuation. This is the kinds of nonsense that these texts, the texts in this book, will be unable to overcome because of the texts reliance on their readability and comprehension by those who will argue for the various fallacies they will discern from what is being proposed. There is nothing to be done about this, if the book is to venture into publication it must be reconciled to this ridiculous position and must stride out into the performance of its presentation ("Testing and Experimenting" 14).

What matters in this context is what Fisher calls 'the aesthetic swerve, or nerve to carry on' ("Complexity Manifold" 268-9). The brutal reality is that any erotic potential will always be subsumed under the terms of a 'self-deceiving' culture constantly working towards its annihilation. In sketching the fundamentals of any aesthetic system it is necessary to note with

Fisher how 'reliance [on] or even aspiration to coherence undermines the process of the proposal and activity' (268). The question becomes not only how to create a scientific system premised on an 'opening' of language, but how to avoid the absorption of this system into the general terms of a project like Olson's. The next chapter of this thesis, then, examines the poetry of Lisa Robertson as a writer who attempts to appropriate the materials of the city in a manner that circumnavigates the demands for the hardening of semantic content. 'The most pleasing civic object', she writes of this situation in her major work *The Office for Soft Architecture* (2003) 'would be erotic hope' (56).

Delusional City:

**Lisa Robertson's
Vancouver**

We wish to note also what these shacks exclude: The textile arts have no place in the ur-hut. Windows are never curtained and floors are not carpeted. It as if fabric would screen or muffle a shack's sincerity. Thoreau explains: "A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil". Was the evil mat hooked or braided or woven? Did it spell out WELCOME? (Robertson Office 181).

"Your cities do not exist. Perhaps they have never existed. It is sure they will never exist again. Why do you amuse yourself with consolatory fables? (Calvino 59)

'The books darkly confected scene is a speculative, temporally striated polis'(RobertsonNilling12)

Delusional City

'moot person in a moot place' (Robertson Debbie; An Epic 5)

In Allen Fisher's city discourse is perched somewhere between regressive modes of closure, and more fundamental attempts at an exposure to the world. In Lisa Robertson, however, additional to this desire is the author's gendered place at the limits of the poetic 'canon' coupled with tensions and anxieties that generate from the postcolonial space of Vancouver itself. With reference to Robertson's *Occasional Works And Seven Walks From The Office Of Soft Architecture* (2003) and her earlier work *The Weather* (2001), the aim of what follows is to position her writing as a genuine attempt to destroy the logic of the *necropolis* at a root theoretical level but also engage with an economy of writing caught up within an inherited focus on national identity from the marginal spaces of the city itself. The text – which was produced very gradually from five years of contributions to gallery catalogues in the Vancouver area – articulates a poetics beyond any sense of a 'closed city'. For Robertson the experience of Vancouver amounts to a positive exploration of absent essences and the subsequent poetic freedom this entails. Writing in a time of regeneration during the Winter Olympics, the poet articulates her 'problem of the city' in immediately recognizable terms:

The Office Of Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in a fluid called money. Buildings disappeared into newness. I tried to recall spaces, and what I remembered was surfaces. Here and there money had tarried. The result seemed emotional. I wanted to document this process. I began to research the history of surfaces. I included my own desires in this research. In this way I became multiple. I became money (*Occasional Works* 1).

'You might call this a politics at the core of which a dissidence slowly unspools', continues Robertson, 'but then, with utmost religiosity, I was a citizen' (1). For this poet positive

citizenship can be enacted completely separate to the organs of the state. This dissident poet exists in the city but at no point does she conform to the dominant socio-political categories of what that city is. What follows will examine Robertson's writing as what she calls 'delusional space'. Formed as part of the social conditions behind the Kootenay writing school I will posit Robertson's work – firstly in her text *The Weather* and then *The Office Of Soft Architecture* – as a consequence of being what she calls 'left alone in our mild coniferous rim, to form identifications and movements which have not respected the official identity package' ("A Report").

Robertson's term 'delusional space' comes from her essay *The Weather: A Report on Sincerity*. In this essay, which is meant to accompany *The Weather* itself, she tries to read meteorological discourse from a 'gendered' perspective in order to question some of the romantic assumptions that make the city a problem in the first place. The phrase itself is actually sourced by Robertson in the poet Stacy Doris where she writes: 'In terms of geographies and nationalities, the best bet for poetry is delusional space... any poetry that doesn't begin in the realm of wild fantasy is not worth the writing' ("A Report"). Almost immediately identifiable in Robertson's writing is that language of 'excess' noted at the beginning of this thesis. Whereas Fisher maintains a form of writing that assiduously works at exploding the traps of closure, Robertson's alternative is an 'illustriously useless poetics' formed from her own exclusion from the *polis* itself:

If, in the Greek *polis* and in the Roman city, citizenship was limited to male speakers of the master-language in a elimination of women, beasts and barbarous speakers from a linguistically

bordered *polity*, her *domus*, her *civis*, the commodious, illustrious and exilic vernacular, will shelter her for the rhythmic duration of a refusal. And the poem, with its provisional distributions and tentative relationships, its chaotic caesura, temporality gathers a received and spoken reciprocity, where the I and the *you* create one another for the pleasure of a shapely co-recognition. To maintain this urgent errancy, a disposition that is at the same time ethical and aesthetic, the vernacular needs the poem; where they confer, a citizen, beginning again and again with the pandemonium at hand in the present, rhythmically inverts her *domus*:
Illustriously useless poesis (*Nilling* 87)

Robertson's resistance differs from the type offered by Fisher in how she invades the poem with a vernacular language completely opposed to the perceived 'purity' of a common tongue. The poem isn't the means of approaching coherence, but a language strongly premised on a vernacular in conflict with that put forward in *Lyrical Ballads*. '[That] vernacular is not what other, supposedly more demotic folks speak', writes Robertson, '[but something] that loosely gathers whatever singular words and cadences move a given situation, a given meeting, as it is being lived by its speakers' (87). Just like the weather such language is vital to Robertson because it is an inexact science. 'If each forecast is a fiction', she writes, 'I prefer to add to that fiction alternative delusions – a delusional politics that describes conditions as it poses futurities' ("A Report"). Such a poetics proceeds 'not by a misappropriation of tradition or heritage as redemptive closure', she continues, 'but by wit, excess, plasticity, admixture, surge, caesura, the wildness of newly turned metaphor, polylinguality and inappropriateness' ("A Report").

I will get onto *The Weather*, and Robertson's questioning of romantic notions of nature and sincerity in more detail shortly. For the moment it is important to describe the exact aesthetic perspectives that promoted this questioning and how it is located in an alternative poetry scene

marginalized from the city and its networks of power and bureaucracy. The 'delusional' poetics propagated by Robertson came from both a reaction to attempts to create a purely 'Canadian' literature, and the marginalization of more avant-garde poetics from their previously secure space in the city. Robertson's obsession with urban space in her later work might be described as a direct result of the oppositional status of the school's writing in amongst the civic body. Such a project was not only an attempt to reorient the monolithic nationalism given predominance at this point in Canadian literary history, but what Steve MacCaffrey has rightly sourced in a very specific urban ecology in Vancouver itself. 'What I always admired in the Kootenay School was its strident internationalism', writes the poet and critic, 'and its urgent mandate to address issues of poetics within the context of a tangible and local urbanism' (*North Of 80*). The School was formed, in other words, as a consequence of political decisions formed at a citywide level. It's *raison d'être* comes from both a need to provide a correlative to what the state assumes is best literary practice, and a 'localised' reaction to top down urban renewal. The Kootenay School of Writing was an attempt to keep open a space for writing that had existed in Vancouver up until the David Thompson University Centre was closed by the authorities in 1984. 'The closure', as Calvin Wharton explains, 'brought loud protests from the institution as well as from the community and David Thompson University Supporters across Canada' ("Inside"). In order to counter this unwelcome decision the universities founders – Fred Wah and Colin Browne – began thinking about ways in which to keep the writing school open. Acquiring property in the West Broadway district of the city they were able to move in the same year as the closure. The school is described by Wharton as 'an attitude rather than an institution' ("Inside"). It is a space provided autonomously as a corrective to dominant modes

of identity and writing. Unlike a city which measures worth and value only in terms of capital accumulation, the Kootenay School of Writing is described by Wharton 'as there to serve the possibilities of writing' ("Inside").

On an urban level, then, the KSW sprouted from the interstices of a 'parallel region' in Vancouver. Moreover, it was founded as a counter measure to attempts to manufacture a 'national' literature in direct competition with the United States. 'In its first brochure', writes Wharton, 'the KSW is described as a 'parallel gallery and a centre of scholarship open to the needs of its own constituency and alert to the possibilities of all disciplines that involve language' ("Inside"). This is opposed to a state funded Canadian Literature – or from herein 'CanLit' – that was being promoted at the time by the powers that be³⁴. It's founder George Woodcock aimed to assert his belief that Canada had its own unique literature even though in was – in the words of the Canadian Literature Journal's website at present – 'a concept doubted by some individuals in the literary community who questioned the existence of a national literature and predicted that the journal would run out of material after only a few issues'

³⁴ Whatever George Woodcock's original intentions "CanLit" has become something increasingly hard to define as any type of movement. The Journal, and website [situated at the University of British Columbia], are simply repositories for a vague 'place-orientated' kind of work that references the biodiversity and climate of the Canadian provinces. The website's latest recommended publication - *The Flicker Tree* by Nancy Holmes (2013) – asks the questions "how do we learn to be where we live"? and continues "Holmes connects the Okanagan landscape with our modern lives" ("Canadian Literature"). Even a publication that seeks to define the 'movement' on the website – "What is Canadian Literature"? – comes to the conclusion that CanLit itself is simply indefinable. 'Canadian literature [is] a shifting wilderness and a bewildering whirlwind', explain the author's of the website, 'there is no central idea, no easy essence, that binds Canadian literatures together'. The purpose of referencing this 'bewildering whirlwind' in this thesis is simply to gesture to the kind of cultural productions that proliferate in the context of nationalism and the state funding that follows in its wake.

("Canadian Literature"). This is a problem identified by Lisa Robertson herself in a review of Peter Culley's text *The Climax Forest*:

For 40 years the Canadian Council for the Arts, our federal cultural funding body, has fostered firmly institutionalised national aesthetic, partly in the response to the perceived need for a discernibly Canadian cultural products that could counter the omnivorous mass marketing of the American cultural industry. The result has been the foregrounding, and funding, of an aesthetic and cultural identity based on Canadian regional specificities and supported by an expressive fusion of subjective voice with lyric "natural" image. Such middle-of-the-road poetries differ from their American relations in Canada, packaged as "Can Lit" the pathos-packed nature lyric is explicitly aligned with nationalist identity paradigms, and plays an overt role in the dissemination of political values as high culture forms ("A Flock").

CanLit, then, is the re-emergence of romantic memes in an attempt to create a saleable cultural product to both the Canadian and American publics. 'These poetries', explains Jeff Derkson, 'attracted to nationalism and "traditional" uses of landscape images, have solidified to the sort of monologic imagism concerned with landscape that dominates most CanLit magazines' ("North Of"). These poems carry with them all of the political baggage that saturated British and German romanticism. Rather than being a progressive form of poetics such writing is retrogressive in the extreme. It represents a formal conservatism twinned with desire for a Canadian national identity in subject matter that simply repeats the problem of the city from the ground upwards.

Writing of Canadian literature directly Steve McCaffrey's text *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973 – 1986* draws on the rhizome model to explode such comfortable monologic certainties. 'Like capital', writes McCaffrey, 'grammar extends a law of value to new objects by a process of totalization, limiting the free play of fragments to the state of delimiting organized parts within an intended larger whole' (10). In order to counter this "totalization" it will be

necessary for poets to write outside of any such formal structures in thinking and writing. This is why the city is so important to the KSW and Robertson. It provides a pocket within a suffocating national discourse on aesthetics from within which alternative realities might emerge. In 1998 – when, this time, the Kootenay Writing School was about to have its funding withdrawn – Robertson wrote an impassioned plea for the recuperation of such spaces away from the nationalistic focus on CanLit. This limited understanding of “literature”, in other words, meant that the authorities were effectively unable to discern any value in the important work that the KSW carried out:

A city plays out its fantasy across a civic site and duration, a fantasy of power structures and gestures – architectural, sartorial, botanical, governmental, pedestrian. From a certain point of view polis is style... The rhetorical mode of the new right is achingly familiar. Cosy vocabulary items such as “community” implode into ideological caskets. Vancouver’s Non Partisan Association city government (NPA) wields a double-barrelled use of this term. NPA’s “community” seems to refer to immediate neighbourhood, a sort of grass-roots co-responsibility bounded by a specific site or district. But at the same time, community means those with purchasing power, social... visibility, expansionist potential. In the paper-rock-scissors game of civic politics, the second version persists were the first is marginal. Community had become a soft term for capital. Cash is style (“Visitations”).

‘The message here is clear’, explains Robertson, “community” means those who can pay’ (“Visitations”). Financial clout means not only personal comfort but also the ability to dictate the kind of social environment inhabited by everyone else. This is totalistic city planning played out directly in the realm of literature and its deemed social use. The importance of the KSW is how it maintains a root and branch resistance to the poetic environment that Vancouver’s equivalent of Donald Trump decides must exist. ‘The habitual avant-garde resistance to popular or populist cultural authentication’, wrote Robertson after the school’s place had finally been secured by a local benefactor, ‘will locate itself in less and less viable margins as somewhat

unwillingly but with secret thrills of pride we mirror the spectacular architecture of ziggurats, cast lilacs aside' ("Visitations").

In both *The Weather* and *Occasional Work*, then, Lisa Robertson is tending to a couple of problems at the same time. The two projects work to deconstruct the nature-writing language typical of emerging fads like CanLit whilst also providing a picture of Vancouver beyond the rhetoric of a single civic identity. The fact these two volumes coalesce in this way is gestured to by the poet herself with a simple blue insert in *The Weather* signed by the *Office Of Soft Architecture*. This imaginary body – which actually existed in galleries across Vancouver at this time – shows a link between the problematic uses of nature on a bare linguistic level and how this eventually translates into apperceptions of the city seen as a collective body. Other than the requisite amount of confusion, then, this sign posting of a bridge between the different stages of Robertson's work is of primary importance. What she is gesturing towards is the complicity of the logic worked out in this earlier volume as it pertains to the next. 'We think of the design and construction of weather descriptions as important decorative work', writes the poet during that 'insert', 'what shall our ornaments be? How shall we adorn mortality now? This is a serious political question'. By interfering with the language commonly used to describe environment and 'place', Robertson is engaged in constructing the kind of logic necessary to counteract the worn out repetitions of the *necropolis*. This is a process the poet had been involved with before the *Office For Soft Architecture* or *The Weather* emerged as actual projects. As early as *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), for example, Robertson detoured Olson's famous take on

his 'root city' to read 'moot person in a moot place' (5). Even earlier in *XEclogue* (1993), she made clear that the toxic residue of nation and nature was her primary target. Starting this text with a quote from Gertrude Stein ('Nature is not natural and that is natural enough'), the goal was to undermine the literary currents in CanLit that sought to dominate social space:

Ontology is the luxury of the landed. Let's pretend you 'had' a land. Then you lost it. Now fondly describe it. That is pastoral. Consider your homeland, like all utopias, obsolete. Your pining rhetoric points to obsolescence. The garden gate shuts firmly, yet liberty must remain throned in her posh gazebo. What can the poor lady do? Beauty, Pride, Envy, the Bounteous land, the Romance of citizenship: these mawkish principles flesh out the nation, feed its empty gaze. What if for your new suit you chose to parade obsolescence? Make a parallel nation, an anagram of the land' (7)

With a somewhat loaded Latinate diction Robertson paints the language of CanLit writers as 'obsolete' in any serious sense. Moreover, what she proposes is a way of writing that 'parades obsolescence' or draws attention to the deficiencies of a rooted romantic poetic. By burrowing beneath the pillars of accepted romantic orthodoxy, she aims to both topple and reorient the exclusionary practices at its base.

Always in the background, here, is Robertson's relationship to this tradition as that 'poor lady' or 'outsider'. This is not just in terms of gender, however, but also her indeterminate Canadian identity. The poet's colonial inheritance makes the desire for some kind of cratylistic American writing problematic. In that essay on *The Weather* she uses the term 'spy' to describe her particular standpoint. 'What I want to do is infiltrate society – not to dissolve it in sceptical critique, but to lift it from maudlin imprisonment', she explains, '[to] return it to the rhetoric of play and idiom, of scale, enjoy its identificatory intensities and climates as conditions and modifications that pass over the face. I am a spy' ("*A Report*"). All this talk of 'dissolving' and

'infiltration' suggests, firstly, a writer who is avowedly not 'at home' in the world and in language. Her somewhat detached perspective becomes a tool for prying open the clubhouse rules that have traditionally constituted the 'sincere' hyper masculine world of poetry and poetics, to suggest a path towards a more inclusive manner of writing. 'I... want to write through spaces that are utterly delusional', she proclaims, 'I want to move on. I want a viable climate' ("A Report"). In an email conversation with Steve McCaffrey she refers to the space of poetry as a 'ludic zone', or the physical site of a self-critical playfulness that will contribute to a deterritorialized understanding of poetics way beyond the realm of myth. For Robertson, the point isn't to occupy a position of subject or object but the interval between. Uncertainty, ontological doubt, removes the poet from any secure ground. She becomes, in this sense, the surveyor of this unexplored area. 'The interval, the space between us... is all that remains when there is no God', explains Nancy of this sensibility in poetic writing, '[t]he "death of God" signifies the opening of space and access to the inaccessible reality of "together" or "in common" as the reality of our being' (*Birth to Presence* 318). Robertson labels herself as 'a spy in sincerity', she is an interloper or catalyst that will break down the dogmatic belief in purity that maintains the distinction between proper and improper. Working at the base logic that determines all such definitions, the weather becomes synecdochic for the ridiculousness of the whole romantic enterprise. 'The weather becomes a flickering social prosody', writes Robertson in her essay, 'as it abstracts into rhythm it becomes commodified, universal. Really. It was a fireball, right through the front door and out the back' ("A Report").

Romantic poets 'tame' the weather, they 'universalize' it and make it somehow meaningful in a 'social' sense. Looked at objectively the weather is a natural occurrence that contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It is a 'fireball' that threatens to burst through the front door at Wordsworth's dwelling in Grasmere and shake its rustic pretensions to the very foundations. The weather actually has nothing to do with sincerity, and questioning this relationship would be the first step towards destroying the ground not only of a specifically 'Canadian' poetry but an eventual focus on the city that refuses to be tainted by all of the problems that have defined this study so far. The roots of this project lie in her experience across time zones in Cambridge University. During an interview for *The Chicago Review* she describes the origin of the project as stemming from how the weather was a genuine topic for small talk across the Atlantic. As a Canadian at a formal dinner she talks about her 'estrangement' from the cultural scene she was used to. Feeling 'culturally weird' as she puts it, the weather became an obsession simply because it seemed to be something inextricably tied up with an 'English' identity:

Geoff Gilbert told me that the shipping news was better than Olson. I just started following up whatever anybody told me. And when I explained what my project was becoming, that led me to the rare book room and reading a lot of meteorological texts. Many of these are in the Cambridge library. Cambridge was really the centre of early natural history, so first editions of all these texts are there. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, self-published texts by gentlemen meteorologists. I immersed myself. It wasn't a topic I'd previously enjoyed interest in, and I certainly wouldn't have become interested in meteorological texts [in the past]... but they became a kind of nexus for all of those ideas about site-specificity and my own cultural estrangement, and the idea of sincerity as it functions as a cultural trope (Fierle-Hedrick, 410).

What is vital about Robertson's process of research and composition is where she is located. She is writing, in other words, from the command centre in which these ideas about a 'natural language' emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also from a position of

defamiliarity and 'estrangement'. Unpicking the logic that lies at the root of the romantic tradition, Robertson sets to work bringing out the artificiality of this linguistic and social desire for a pure and natural form of expression. Not so much a cratylist, as a 'catalyst' or 'spy', she rummages through the dusty stacks in the vaults of Cambridge in order to suggest something else entirely.

Robertson's research leads her to recognition that the romantic focus on organic and 'common' speech is inextricably fused to the logic of the state. Looking at these early texts she notes that 'the public for the purified diction of Wordsworth and Coleridge was already established in the late 17th century' ("A Report"). 'Sincerity is a market, a decisive method, a nationalist politics, and an ethnic signifier', she continues, '*Lyrical Ballads* are ethnic weather – they wear a blue bonnet' ("A Report"). The conservatism enshrined within *Lyrical Ballads* represents a shift in register that began with what Robertson calls a 'rhetorical economy' in the seventeenth century. Rather than being just an innovative phenomenon in its own right, Wordsworth simply transposed to poetics what Robertson calls 'the history of sincerity as a rhetorical value' or the trend for a 'delimitation or purification of diction' that had preceded his own poetry by quite a few years. 'The purification of English diction was integral to the institutionalisation of scientific discourse', writes the poet, 'but also to the normalisation of rational conduct, distinguishing England, and the English [from Europe and its] rhetorical eloquence' ("A Report"). Chief amongst these early scientific figures was Thomas Sprat of The Royal Society. The Royal Society – its full name traditionally being the 'Royal Society for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge'

– paints a figure like Wordsworth not so much as an originator but a cog in a wider system of state intentions stretching back at least two hundred years. Sprat is interesting because as a pillar of the community and eventual Bishop of Rochester his writings are inextricably bound up with this distinct brand of bourgeois logic. As he writes in an early document of The Royal Society called *On The Language of the Members*, ‘plain speaking’ is something essential to the English character:

These qualities are so capricious and proper to our soil that... even the position of our climate, the air, the influence of the heaven, the composition of the human blood, as well as the embraces of the ocean seem to join with the labours of *The Royal Society* to render our country a land of experimental knowledge. And it is a good sign that nature will reveal more of its secrets to the English than to others, because it has already furnished them with a genius so well proportioned for the recurring and retaining of mysteries (Sprat 70).

The nature lyrics enshrined at the basis of CanLit, therefore, have more in common with the adventures of an emerging colonial power than the space of Canada itself. ‘Climate is blood’, writes Robertson, and in both the Canadian and English romantic traditions the focus is always on trying maintain this distinction. By imposing an inner landscape on the external world the originators of this organic dialect create a space for ‘closure’ in the strongest possible sense. That territory – whether England or Canada – becomes a mechanical system for the infinite reproduction of dominant modes of identity and belonging. Robertson as spy occupies this discourse with an ulterior motive.

Looking at this rhetorical scientific discourse – and the romantic inheritors it spawned in Wordsworth and Coleridge – Robertson notes a certain over determination that applies to both descriptions of the weather and romantic nature writing in itself. In terms of the weather, firstly,

the rhetoric of sincerity floundered immensely when coming into contact with natural occurrences like fog and clouds. At Cambridge it was Jeremy Prynne who drew Robertson's attention to Reverend Blomefield's treatise on 'low and creeping mists', but it is how Luke Howard 'invented clouds' in 1796 that immediately caught the poet's attention³⁵. 'If... the relation between objects and words should be equivalent, economical', explains the poet, 'the cloud challenged the propriety of this equivalence since its appearance as a thing was so ephemeral' ("A Report"). Clouds were not 'things', in other words, until Howard named them as such in order to pin them down into some sort of logical system of thinking. 'Howard's nomenclature provided a lens', writes Robertson, 'it entered public knowledge quite quickly – and the importance of this system can be somewhat gauged by its immediate use, not only by meteorologists, but within the literary and visual arts' ("A Report"). It is this central point, therefore, that is shared across disciplines:

What these natural histories of the sky share, in spite of stylistic modifications and developments in the rhetoric of descriptive sincerity – and the dogmas and transgressions of that rhetoric – is participation in a broad cultural project, the enlightenment project, to collectively describe and test the parameters of Truth. Even in the early Wordsworth, the methodological project, the experiments in diction and address, the romance of the perceiving subject, are aligned with a sceptical conservatism concerned with the description and promotion of static, enduring values. We see, in the history of clouds, the shift from description as ontological figuration, to description as notation of situational modification and change – the delimitation or formalization of cloud nomenclature permitted perception to begin to annotate patterns of temporality, rather than properties of objects. Clouds, in a sense were invented at the point when sincerity ceased being rhetoric, as in Sprat, and submerged itself in the cultural ontology of romanticism ("A Report").

³⁵ "Mr Prynne kindly directed me to the work of Reverend Blomefield, an early 19th century Cambridgeshire enthusiast of low and creeping mists', writes Robertson in the acknowledgements to *The Weather*, 'at the Rare Book Room in the UL, Blomefield led to Mr Well's *Essay on Dew*, Luke Howard's *Essay on the Modifications of Clouds*, Sprat's *history of the Royal Society*, Aitkin's *Essay on the Application of Natural History to Poetry*, and Thomas Forster's *Researches about Atmospheric Phenomena and Perennial Calendar*' (80).

What Robertson looks for in a poet like Wordsworth is the transgressions of this nomenclature. Just like the cloud cannot accurately be 'named' there is a tension in romantic poeticizing whereby an 'excess' of meaning erupts of its own accord. 'Coleridge... pointed out how Wordsworth's poetry consistently exceeds its own claims for a pure diction', writes Robertson, 'and the poetry's value lies in the particular textures of Wordsworth's transgressions of his own theory' ("A Report").

This is where Robertson finds a starting point for her own nature writing. Her own volume *The Weather* aims to exacerbate what she identified as Wordsworth's 'overflow' of rational intent. The 'delusional' in this poem consists in how it writes utterly beyond 'sense'. The structure of the poem – which runs from 'Sunday' to 'Saturday' with a final selection of short lyrics entitled 'Porchverse' at the end – is engaged in tearing apart the language of sincerity from the inside out. Her language, therefore, abandons 'clarity' and 'economy' and instead aims to give a more indeterminate account of place. Taking just the first section of the poem – 'Sunday' – there is a looseness of structure that is entirely absent from Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*:

About here. All along here. All along here. All the soft
coercions. Maybe black and shiny, wrinkled. A sky
marbled with failures. A patterned revision. And got here
about one o'clock. And got here wet to the skin. And here
are houses too, here and there. And luck, too, whenever.
And here gained the benefits. And here again wisps.
And here again gained knowledge. And here got into the
wild. And here, too. Arrived about two o'clock. Here

alone the length. There is a bed of chalk under this. The fresh water falls here. Clumps of lofty trees. Dictions of deficit. Maybe we bristle. Came at the fact here. Every – thing has been done here. Every system's torn and rough-ened. Every surface discontinuous (2)

The initial question might be simply 'where is this place'? 'Maybe, about, whenever', the pronouns describe a world that is indeterminate as far as the poet is concerned. The 'sky' doesn't reflect back something coherent, but becomes 'marbled with failures' instead. These failures are both a failure to describe things adequately, but also the realization that this landscape is permanently morphing and in flux. This 'patterned revision' is like Oppen's focus on the 're-reading' of objective phenomena. Robertson writes of her relationship with sincerity as dualistic in character. The poet both 'wants to be believed' but also sees space as utterly delusional. 'Sincerity says that identity is moral', she writes in her essay, 'I need it to be a tent, not a cave, a rhetoric, not a value' ("A report"). Sincerity is a poetic strategy for Robertson that will never be rooted in place. As an 'encampment' rather than a 'cave' it changes like the weather itself.

Robertson's meteorological description, then, rejects Spratt and Wordsworth for a formula that embraces the contingency of the written word. The sincerity she speaks of is malleable and distanced from the subject – it is a way of describing things only to recognise that those things will not remain that way forever. In her essay she introduces the figure of Thomas Ignatius Forster who had a somewhat different take on cloud formation than Howard. As she writes:

Forster, writing immediately after Howard, focussed at length on the cirrus formation. His attempts to precisely describe the cirrus cloud reflect the need to extend descriptive grammar toward rhythmically paratactic prolixity, when the object of description itself is in a state of constant transformation. Cirrus is the most formally variable of the modifications, and in traditional weather lore tends to be referred to using various animal and plant analogies – Mare’s tail, Mackerel’s back, the sea tree. Forster’s cirrus description, rather than carrying out Sprat’s economy of a word for each thing, refers to folkloric likeness, proceeding by a figurative logic of analogy and accretion, interleaved with a discordant geometrical diction (“A Report”).

The process of naming in Forster works by making constant reference to the natural world.

Looking at the sky in terms of ‘mackerels’ and ‘trees’ is initially a way of bringing those illusory objects back into a recognisable order of things. When Forster comes to describe the cirrus formations, however, he uses the most densely allusive language imaginable. ‘Comoid tufts, like brushes of hair’, Robertson describes his mellifluous sentence structure at one point, ‘angular flexure; streaks; rectangular intersections of them, which look like nets thrown over the firmament’ (“A Report”). This is the kind of lexical exuberance that Robertson takes on in her own poetry. Not as some form of parody, but as an attempt to display adjectives perched on the very cusp on intelligibility. These words provide the kind of ‘overflow’ of sense that touch only occasionally on recognisable topographical description. It is only by reaching for this liminal space between dissonance and coherence that a sincerity of the natural world will ever be attained. ‘Forster’s cloud-sentence proceeds by a series of phrasal modifications, mining the process of transmutation in the clouds themselves, even discernibly within the real time of those observed fluctuations’, writes Robertson, ‘in this instance sincerity accrues by ornament, expansion, its rhetoric stretched to the point of confusion, within the authenticating time frame of plain air descriptive sketch’ (“A Report”).

Forster's vocabulary, moreover, might be seen from within the purview of the 'proper name' that Nancy identified in Sarajevo. 'Inchoate and schotastic meaning', writes the philosopher, 'it is a mixture of syllables stirred on the brink of semantic identity that is both gently and obstinately deferred' ("Eulogy" 146). This is a situation Robertson doesn't reach by accident, but an intentional destination fostered by an 'excessive' diction that seeks to bring out these tensions. Taken as a whole *The Weather* is like the build towards a linguistic crescendo that never reaches its peak movement. 'We go backwards and forwards and there is no place', writes Robertson in 'Wednesday', 'no shape is for later'. It is obviously flawed, but it really isn't' (32). In Robertson's poetry there is no final end point. The sentences are structured to contain double clauses so as to deny the possibility of any referentiality. 'We flood upwards into the referent', she explains, 'it is a protestant warmth; we reverse it. It is an illusion. We aren't afraid' (31). That term 'obsolete' arises again here as Robertson foregrounds the inadequacy of her attempts at description. By practising an obsolete poetry she writes at the margins of accepted poetical orthodoxy. Her lexicon – like her 'delusional' and 'estranged' position in society – is peppered with the throwaway kind of language that people like Pound would have associated with the worst excesses of nineteenth century writing. 'Wednesday', again:

We are

watching ourselves being torn. It's gorgeous; we accept the

dispersal. It's just beginning; we establish an obsolescence.

It's petal-caked; flow implicates us. It's so still; ease of

movement is possible (33 – 34).

'Petal-caked' is the mellifluous remnant of an imaginary and 'delusional' language long since confined to the history books. But Robertson takes these linguistic left-overs to build a

composite sculpture – an opulent marker of excess – in defiance of both CanLit and the vein of logic sourced deep within Cambridge University. Hers is a poetry of absence, a ‘diction of deficit’ as she put it earlier on, and these ‘petal-caked’ anachronisms signify nothing except maybe the impossibility of pure signification itself. The ‘ludic zone’ she constructs from this playful vocabulary test the limits of writing by carving out a space for a delusional poetics completely devoid of the precision that has been the hall mark of poetry over the last two hundred years. This is a recycled lexicon stretched out to the very limits of comprehension and desperately foregrounding its oppositional status amongst the ‘sincerity’ of those Cambridge dons. ‘The issue is not to defamiliarize the language of weather, but to appropriate its naturalizing function to a history, an utterance, which is delusional in as far as it is gendered’, writes Robertson, ‘A wild dream of parity must have its own weather and that weather will always have as its structure an inexhaustible incommensurability’ (“A Report”).

Robertson’s language, then, works towards creating that ‘viable climate’ for the female poet. Her densely allusive words – or verbose style – are part of how she hopes to ‘infiltrate’ the closed shop of poetic norms. The poet’s words, and this is particularly clear when we examine Forster’s descriptions of the weather, are not only her own but an amalgamation of the various sources she became ensconced in at Cambridge. Moreover, the text stands out because of the manner in which its composition was achieved astride the accumulation of air miles and the impossibility of place. As she explains in her interview for the *Chicago Review*:

I didn't write that text in Cambridge. I wrote part of it there and that's all – *Wednesday*. Really, I spent the whole six months researching and transcribing. I took back to Canada notebooks full of everything, and then in Vancouver I figured out ways to take them apart, put them together and splice them' (Scappetone 41).

This is how place, for Robertson, became under question or 'moot'. But this bricolage – or 'splicing' – suggests something much more fundamental in her writing practice. These represented 'notebooks full of everything' – whether paraphrased, copied outright or generally absorbed at a stylistic level – make for the impossibility of a single authorial identity. This is what lies at the heart of her 'infiltration'. Robertson's luxurious diction slips and slides amongst her forebears to the tune that it becomes indistinguishable from the next. During the 'Tuesday' section of *The Weather* the text is interspersed with questions as to the whereabouts of various female figures. 'Where is Valerie', writes Robertson, 'where is Jane'. Although this is a definite reference to the absence of female figures in this romantic ontological thinking, it also works to question the status of any single figure in this cacophony of different voices and registers. As Sina Queyras has written in a review of the poem, this is because 'we cannot, must not take our eyes off the structure of the poetry; we are making ourselves as we speak' ("Lines Composed"). This is poetry that although adorned with a self-conscious verbosity, also realises itself as an unfinished project. Although the days of the week represent a linear movement through the poem, the reader can jump into the text at any point. Really what is presented here is Robertson's research on this topic carefully assembled into a vague linguistic netting of tones and registers. Fearing any objective observation, *The Weather* becomes Robertson's own 'cadastre' or 'geography'. 'It consists of nothing more than the task of measuring this area', writes Nancy, 'of locating and inscribing its bounds' (*Birth to Presence* 308). 'Where is Olympe', muses the poet in another question without a question mark, 'the *polis* crumbles open' (21).

'The polis crumbles open'. The classical ideal of human community opens itself from the inside out. We can see the calcifications dropping away from the vicious cycle of being together in the west to reveal a larval core in the early stages of metamorphosis. In a constant state of becoming these new conceptions of 'nature' and 'sincerity' burst open to encounter much wider socio-political questions. In between each day of the week in *The Weather* there is a short lyrical section that defies the collective pronouns of the previous sections. These occurrences in the text – always marked in the bottom left margin with the phrase "Residence at C" – both work to problematise any identification with the collective pronoun "we" in the prose sections, but also mark the text as a genuine attempt to measure the space inbetween each of these terms. 'Whatever pronoun a work is organised around you have to trouble it', writes Robertson in her interview with *The Chicago Review* (Fierle-Hedrick 45). The 'delusional' status of Robertson's poetics means that each section rubs against the next to create a friction that is best interpreted as a way in which to foreground the artificiality of such distinctions. The Lyrical sections, in particular, indulge in a playful seriousness that examines political questions by occupying the space of a language and identity that is utterly alien to the poet herself:

Sometimes I want a corset like
To harden me or garnish an
Outer ideal mode, I feel
The ideal moulding me the ideal
Is now my surface just so very
Perfect I know where to buy it and I

Take it off. I take it off (52).

'Residence at C' is clearly a reference to the poet's time at Cambridge University for those who have been previously informed of this, but the elision of the name itself points to the ubiquity of such an attitude at Grasmere and Gloucester as well. Here she inhabits the romantic lyric form not in order to destroy it, but as the result of a conscious decision to lose herself in the form itself. This 'outer ideal mode' is liberating because she is so readily able to step outside of its connotations as a woman and spy. Sincerity, for Robertson, is not a fixed category but a different set of clothes to wear dependant on the occasion. This ideal 'moulds' her and it is the process of the 'moulding' itself that creates the writing. 'I rustic ask: what is surface', writes Robertson in her new set of clothes, 'and respond/ only omniscience, the crumpling face' (53). This choice to be 'sincere' in her poetry is not a 'moral' one but something that arises from formal considerations. Form is not dictated by some inner experience but arises from the contingencies of the actual world. The language of nature description isn't anything to do with the 'right word', but a shop of interchangeable terms to pick and choose at random. The poet knows where to 'buy' them, and she equally knows how to 'take [them] off'. Her omnipotent God's face is crumpled – perhaps in faux seriousness or laughter – and it is hard not to imagine Robertson doing the same thing herself.

For Robertson sincerity is both fascinating and amusing in equal measure. 'We chuck gravitas' she writes at one point. The typical romantic poem is built from a language of interchangeable terms bought and sold on the male-dominated market. 'Shadow for hour. Tantrum for lyre', writes the poet in Wednesday, 'Live for light. Rapture for kaput' (41). This is a worn out poetic

terminology that is infinitely interesting for a poet like Robertson to play around with considering her *alterior* position. Whether in the form of a plural 'we' or singular 'I' the essential premise stays the same. 'Pronouns are always a problem', explains Robertson, 'and the first person can get pretty toxic. At first "we" seemed funny' (Fierle-Hedrick 43). In each case Robertson is writing 'outside' of a linguistic seriousness whilst appropriating traditional formal strategies for her own amusement. Her starting point during 'Thursday', for instance, is saturated with the kind of attempts at an 'evocative' tone that it is possible to imagine some budding Keats replicating in an A Level classroom today:

All around is a mould of distance. Come we now prefer –
ring. Nothing else is happening. Come we now walking.
Now also be here. Now bending, come we crawling. Now
crisp, come we falling. Now sparkle. Eating. Now swagger,
drinking. Now transmit, smelling. Now yellow, sucking.
when a mass come we avoiding. When by the margin,
come we now ignoring. When clouds go, come we now
tripping. When conditions of freedom come. When cor –
morants play. When corn comes. When dogs lick. When
newness and shame, come we now throwing. When glit –
tering, we're slapping (46).

This incantatory section renders a hypnotic tone even among the broken phrases of expression. Opposed to blocks of romantic blank verse, words are left hanging by an awkward enjambment that removes the poetry from the assured march of the pentameter. There is an anxiety registered here as this manufactured collective moves between the permanent and the

ephemeral. 'When a mass, come we avoiding' shows this collective pronoun as perched on the cusp of erasure amidst all of the tensions that have traditionally constituted the problem of the city. If by the 'margins' – such as previously in the 'naming' of clouds – this illusory body of citizens only 'ignore' their feelings of insecurity. Both 'glittering' and 'slapping' at the same time, however, they are somewhat defined by these contradictory realities. The conclusion to *The Weather* – 'Porchverse' – seeks to harness these tensions by the juxtaposition of a series of isolated lyrics. 'Gravity among/ the sociological', writes Robertson in one of them, 'is/ not honest' (74). Like Pound's *Drafts and Fragments* these concluding poems seem to pertain towards an almost zen-like clarity. But unlike the totality Pound's 'fragments' mourned, Robertson's own dissonance is an attempt to show that 'the socius/ of 'le texte'/ is bullshit' (75). 'What makes pronouns, problems', writes the poet, 'Pedestals' (75). To remove the author's ego, to remove that aspect of 'sincerity' that constantly refers to and believes in itself, is the first step towards truly socially orientated work.

The beauty of Robertson's work, then, is how this frame of reference is transposed to the city and a differing sense of civic identity. The *Office For Soft Architecture* works as a bridge between these two coterminous stages in the poet's *oeuvre*. The playful tone of *The Weather* – particularly its verbosity and language of excess – becomes the perfect linguistic strategy to encounter the metropolis of the present. Robertson's poem isn't called the *Office for Soft Architecture* for no reason. It is an attempt to situate her poetry within the 'Bigness' of Koolhaas' own *Office for Metropolitan Architecture*. That term 'soft' that the poet places next to

her own use of the word architecture, signals a connection to the kind of exuberant tone that defined her take on nature writing in *The Weather*. In some ways this is an echo of Koolhaas himself, but this is much more than the transposition of his theory to her poetry in a top down sense. For Koolhaas 'Bigness' breaks down the distractions between the classically ordered city and the enormous *disorganised* structures of the present. 'The "art" of architecture is useless in Bigness', he writes, 'where architecture reveals Bigness perplexes' (*SMLXL* 500 – 501). Like in Robertson's poetry Bigness privileges the marginal and indistinct. Perhaps 'privileges' would be the wrong word, because Bigness destroys completely the pedestal from which the ego is consummated in both poetry and planning. Moreover Robertson's use of the word 'soft' – what Steve McCaffrey calls a 'strategic' titular change – suggests an even further defamiliarized sense of location ("Emails"). Interestingly, in that exchange with McCaffrey she notes that her interest in architecture actually preceded that of poetics. Koolhaas, therefore, is credited with providing her with a new 'vocabulary' with which to describe the contingent urban environment.

'Architectural thought has been feeding me means for considering subjectivity as a flow across systems', she writes, 'an access and escape agency that absorbs, mimes, enfolds, rejects, becomes, severs, and transforms spaces and forms of the urban complex' ("Emails"). What Koolhaas offered the poet was a way of imagining urban space in the same way she had come to encounter the weather. That is, through Koolhaas, the city became a place where the 'accumulation of mysteries' was foregrounded. Instead of viewing the city through the purview of some planning 'ideology', it becomes the site of the kind of inconsistent environment observed in meteorological description. 'Through contamination rather than purity and quality', writes Koolhaas, 'only bigness can support genuinely new relationships between functional

entities that expand rather than limit their identities' (512). Instead of authenticity or sincerity the postmodern city affords new possibilities from within which social being can flourish without the need for a catalyst or spy. The urban environment isn't just something to 'mould' into shape, but the kind of place where Robertson can truly 'step outside' that focus on the self.

Indeed, this is where *The Office for Soft Architecture* becomes a useful tool for Robertson as writer as well. '[T]he *ad hoc* "office" formed itself obviously with a strong nod to Koolhaas' influence', explains Robertson, 'but also as an attempt to escape the author called "Lisa Robertson" ("Emails"). Just like when she occupied the moribund discourse of romantic nature poetry – subjecting it to its own 'overflow' or excess of meaning – *The Office for Soft Architecture* becomes a means of constructing a poem whilst ensconced within an unfamiliar 'corset' or 'garment'. It does not make claims to a particular geographical area of 'belonging', but instead allows for an almost Koolhaas-inspired manifesto on space:

And in becoming an "architect" I wanted to consider the rhetorical and descriptive practice of architecture – the history of the manifesto, the project proposal, site analysis, all that, as already an architecture. Since obviously architecture is discursive as much as it is hardware. So now I use the "office" when it seems appropriate – sometimes as the designer of texts – mostly "walks" and "essays" as spatial imaginaries – sometimes as an event organiser, sometimes as an archival researcher, thinking of all these daily urban linkages as their own architectures. And I've read enough purple prose about the poetry of architecture to want to play a little role reversal ("Emails")

So, once again, Robertson's text seeks to occupy a specific genre of writing. The object of 'infiltration', however, isn't architectural discourse as much as the hidden spaces of the city.

The poet, in stepping 'outside' of herself, would like to entirely invert poetic thinking as such.

'[P]art of the problem of discourses on the subject... is that they all too easily function in a social

vacuum', writes Robertson, 'as if subjectification were all interiority, no plication, and as if the process were not in constant flux' ("Emails"). It is possible to be envious of architectural discourse, however, because good architectural practice must take exteriority into constant consideration. Especially in a writer like Koolhaas the micro-political – the local – is something that has to be considered 'outside' of the planner or architect. 'So to bring in the dalliness, the provisional, local textures of becoming subject poetry needs to become a kind of urbanism or landscape art', writes Robertson, '[E]xtending the idea of corporeality to the city itself helps avoid some of the deplorable essentialism that clings to the corpus as merely human. Let's talk about the agencies of matter' ("Emails").

What I would like to do in this final section, however, is to go somewhat further and describe Robertson's own writing on the city as a form of 'scaffolding'. This is something she writes of herself during a poem called 'The History of Scaffolding'. 'The scaffold is a pause', writes the poet, 'an inflection of passage. It accommodates us in a shivering' (*Occasional Work* 162):

Scaffolding is analogue. It explains what a wall is without being a wall. Perhaps it describes by desiring the wall, which is the normal method of description. But also the scaffold wants to fall away from support. It's vertigo so lively. The state of fidelity of scaffolding is what we enjoy. It find's it's stabilities in the transitions between gestures... Now scaffolding floats, detached from the severity of an origin. It is a system, not an organism. It's repeating components follow the pattern of a drifting list. The list is the most rudimentary system. Rhythm is so elegant (163).

Scaffolding seems the best description of Robertson's poetics because they are a temporary structure that seems to hug and 'desire' the building's form, whilst being strangely 'rickety' and independent of the building itself. This isn't about creation, but support. The Scaffold isn't the system someone like Allen Fisher feared would promote closure earlier, but a transient

structure always in the process of movement. The scaffold determines, and identifies, a world before being torn down and hastily erected elsewhere. Robertson's various manifesto passages are remarkable because they explore the hidden spaces of the city and then move on quickly to another location. 'A scaffold is almost a catastrophe', continues Robertson, 'its topography cathects with the desire to release identity and dissolve into material, which is the kind of resistance we prefer' (*Occasional Work* 165).

When applied to the city this knowledge allows Robertson to unpick the logic that creates the problem in the first place. In an appearance on Cross Cultural Poetics with Leonard Schwartz, for example, the poet labels her 'theory of space' as not 'abstract' but 'rooted in bodily pleasure'. What she means by this is that the great rupture in aesthetics that Kant noted in his *Critique of Judgement* needn't be a problem it always has. Her aim, in fact, is given as 'activating' the 'figure of the flaneur' from the perspective of a 'gendered subject'. Rather than approach the city from the purview of some rational subject, she occupies a position that is fundamentally 'delusional' and therefore accepts something sensual and abstract at the same time. To Robertson the experience of the city is the experience of crossing thresholds; it is the experience of occupying a junction where the constitution of the social world around her is always contested. This is particularly clear in a poem called 'Spatial Synthetics: A Theory'. Here urban social being is encountered not as a problem, but something to dive straight into. 'Although some of us love its common and at times accidental beauty', writes Robertson during this section, 'we're truly exhausted by identity' (*Occasional Work* 78). The obsession with purity

is no longer possible if the city is experienced progressively as a variegated entity that resists totality:

Now the entire aim of our speculative cognition amplifies the synthetic principle. Everything glimmers, delights, fades, goes. We drift through the cognition with exceptional grace. Attached as we are to the senses, we manifest the sheer porousness of boutiques. The boutiques are categories. We have plenty of time. The problem is not how to stop the flow of items and surfaces in order to stabilise space, but how to articulate the politics of their passage. Every culture is the terrible gush of its splendid outward forms (78).

Of course the 'violent stimulants' of the city are confusing, but this doesn't mean that the solution is to shut them out. Robertson's city is formed from 'speculative cognition' rather than any systematic knowledge of purity. 'Suppose we no longer call it identity', explains Robertson, 'we propose a theoretical device that amplifies the cognition of thresholds' (79). Moulded by the city, rather than searching for a principle of unity within it, Robertson's spatial synthetics thrive on the region of exteriority generated by coexistence itself. This is an aesthetics that takes as its starting point not the experiencing subject but the 'terrible gush' of culture in the widest possible sense of that word.

But this reference to 'boutiques' is equally vital. Robertson's Vancouver doesn't present itself as a utopian environment, but a site of pure 'surface' amidst the throwaway culture of a consumer society. This isn't a city founded on authenticity, but one that is transient and ephemeral. In the 'Pure Surface' section of *The Office*, for example, the only vestige of Rousseau is a singer 'croon[ing]... we are born innocent' in 'whining vibrato' on the 'taxi cab radio' (*Occasional Work* 19). Blending into the din of the city with everyone else, his Romantic protestations are now rendered as an irritating abstraction somehow completely out of place. The 'suburbs',

moreover, are praised not for their articulation of Rousseauistic paradigms of dwelling, but their entirely contradictory character. 'Like one's own childhood, the suburb is both inescapable and inescapably difficult to believe in', writes Robertson, 'and as such intolerably represents an elegance specific to our economy' (28). All absolute ideas are questioned to the tune that 'elegance' now corresponds with the impossibility of the ideal. In 'Value Village Lyric' Robertson latches onto her favourite thrift store – Value Village – in order to explore this contradictory situation further. In this thrift store the detritus of Canadian culture becomes a positive analogy for the new kinds of 'values' that might operate in the city:

It's a kind of arcade: A catalogue of garbage, the degradation that doesn't work, what's bad or unrecognized. Trashed things. *Macrame*. *Loiterers*. Departmentalized shame. The daydream of Baudelaire's jacket, all ripped and frayed... each garment describes differently the collapse of the ideal. In long wide isles ideal for contemplative promenade, red-smocked workers rank shabby disjecta by gender, age, reproductive status and, size, colour, object and garment type (*Occasional Work* 215 – 216).

The failure to create utopia becomes the point from which Robertson can engage with the city on her own terms. Not resplendent or shimmering, but frayed and worn out, the ideal city is lost amongst the rejected adornments of previous identities. 'Here eroticism is liberated from gravitas', writes the poet, 'all difference is equivalently accessible because it has been rejected – by failure, boredom, death and time' (216). No longer the dream of the *polis*, Value Village represents the second-hand categories out of which social being must constantly redefine itself. The glittering arcades of Paris, in other words, are replaced with a haberdashery of rejected concepts and unfashionable ways of being.

In one sense these are the perfect conditions for the emergence of Robertson's scaffolding. Like in Koolhaas' Bigness, the 'art' of 'architecture' is broken down and displayed in fragmented pockets that deny coherence. But to Robertson this aesthetic climate is even more vital because it creates the circumstances by which both poetry and the city become possible. On Cross Cultural Poetics she challenges Baudelaire's assertion that 'boredom is the worst monster of them all'. The proliferation of choice, the din of the city, rather than being the source of an anxiety is instead 'the active ground of lyric and desire' ("Soft Architecture"). The banal conditions at Value Village, rather than something to regret, become almost a working microcosm of life in Vancouver itself:

It's signage is banal and its hours are liberal. Shoppers are anyone, such as architects and queens. Most work as solitaries; some as pairs. Underpaid scarlet clinicians of abjection are ready to assist. We enter with the undirected potential of boredom. The house of V addresses desire, not taste. Here boredom is useful. There is too much surface. All intention is pointless and must be abandoned. Selection direction in the system without aiming at ends. It begins with passivity. We submit to louche textiles. We feel disgust, timidity, and glee. It proceeds by disassociation and division. We observe the simultaneous proliferation and cancellation of origins (*Occasional Work* 217).

This is at once 'democratic' space, and a site for the destruction of rational intent. Boredom is 'useful' here because it breaks down the self and proposes alternative modes of social being that proceed by 'disassociation' and 'division'. The consumable dresses on display at Value Village have nothing to do with universal appreciations of taste. The shoppers congregate there because of an unarticulated desire for something they haven't yet encountered in any concrete sense. This is a space without a timescale of 'origins' and it becomes the continual regurgitation of worn out conceits instead. To Robertson boredom is 'necessary' because it creates the conditions where ontological certainties are questioned. 'Boredom might be monstrous', she tells Schwartz, 'but maybe monstrosity is useful' ("Soft Architecture"). 'At the House of V we

luxuriate in the marginality of our desires and identities’, she writes in ‘Value Village Lyric’, ‘in the tedium of failure we glimpse the new. It is neither style or content, but a stance’ (218). As an affectation – or a different set of clothes to wear – the city becomes the very means by which identity is dissolved and fragmented.

‘There is no place but a stance’, continues Robertson during ‘Value Village Lyric’, ‘[i]t accepts all that is defunct such as Europe and America. It drifts and plays and enunciates and returns, unheroic’ (218). At the end of *The Office For Soft Architecture* – as part of a section that mimics the famous ‘walks’ of Rousseau – Robertson comes back to a notion of finding value in a city that is almost entirely premised on money. To the poet ‘recognizing a city’ in these circumstances will always be a ‘struggle’:

.....some of this struggle was named “the heart”. But we wanted the heart to mean something other than this interminable roman metronome of failed Eros and placation, something more like the surging modifications of the inventive sky. So we attempted to notice economies that could not appear in money: vast aluminium light sliding over the sea-like lake; the stacks of disposable portable buildings labelled Women and Men; decayed orchards gone oblique between parking lots and the complex grainy scent that pervaded the street (*Occasional Work* 250).

Robertson’s city emerges in ‘orchards’ between ‘parking lots’ and is necessarily opposed to the deathly ‘metronome’ clicking at the heart of the *necropolis*. These are unquantifiable spaces. They are the kind of territories that can never be actively rendered using language in the same way as Forster’s clouds. Descriptions can be imposed, certainly, but somehow these are always inadequate when compared to the ‘surging modifications of the inventive sky’. ‘The inevitability of failure became our most dependable incentive’, continues Robertson, ‘were we inside or outside the diorama?’ (239).

In more recent work the manner in which the *necropolis* might be subverted is given in the figure of 'noise'. 'I want[...] the present to be an ideal library. Infinity, plenum, chaos, dust', writes Robertson,' I wanted it to be an agora – total availability of the entire thick history of linguistic conviviality and the potential to be completely lost in the chaos of identity' (*Nilling* 57).

Indeed, to Robertson:

Noise is and isn't composed; the listener can isolate within its environment individual sounds of various origins, identifiable or not, but no intention or unity structures their overall combination even though that combination has been conditioned by various natural and social factors. Noise is the unwilling surplus produced by the temporal indetermination of conditions and practice in co-movement. Noise has an inchoate shape as weather does – we may measure it, but its movements extend beyond any identifiable cause. Noise exceeds its own identity. It is the extreme of difference. Noise is the non-knowledge of meaning, the by-product of economies (57)

Noise interests Robertson because it is a permanent feature of the city, and something that exceeds the historical present. Moreover, the concept of 'noise pollution' that is an intrinsic part of the urban environment today gestures to some kind of 'natural balance' of sound associated with *necropolitical* understandings of what is included and excluded within the bounds of the *polis*. 'The concept of noise pollution suggested that the city had a... natural sonic state', writes Robertson, 'and this balance would refer nostalgically to a previous stage or era of civic economy' (*Nilling* 66).

Robertson even travels to Paris, armed with a tape recorder, in order to test this thesis further.

Following the route of the nineteenth century photographer Eugene Atget, she attempts to record sounds at the precise site of his original photographs. The point of Atget's photographs

is that they are physical attempts to document the changes wrought by Haussmann's attempts at urbanism in the Napoleonic city. There is a connection, therefore, between Vancouver dissolving in a 'fluid' called 'money' in her own time, and a similar process in the hidden spaces of Paris around the same time as Wordsworth's preface. As Robertson explains:

Wearing my headphone monitors with coiled wire leading to my shoulder bag, microphone in one hand, pocket volume of Atget in the other, I begin to feel like a wandering perceiving organ that belongs to the city, rather than any autobiography. I find the site, take my stance, press record, begin to count to 30 and I replace myself with intricate design of the cities noise. I become plenum, no longer individual. Atget's images led me to the indiscriminate edges of sound (*Nilling* 60).

This audio-temporal rendering of space, allows Robertson to sculpt the noise of the city into some kind of familiarity in reference to the images themselves. But this isn't the reconstruction of Atget's city – the inert restitution of some nostalgia – as much as the recognition of the impossibility of any such rendering. Nevertheless, Robertson is situated at the borders of identification. 'The temporal unit is sprung on the refusal of the regularization of time', writes Robertson, 'which must remain situated in the body, as the body's specificity, its revolt. The prosody of noise returns discordance to time' (61). Time is no longer linear, or dominated by the subjection of place to a single cultural interpretation, but variegated and troubled beyond subjective interpretation. 'One becomes a subject in the barest sense', writes Robertson, 'a contingent point of coordinated perception of a response to temporal specificity' (61). This 'arrhythmia' is all a poet can hope for in the city, the manifestation of what amounts to a 'discordant temporality' completely removed from thoughts of purity.

The city becomes a cacophonous hymn to the impossibility of any kind of subjective rendering of space. Seen in this way the sounds that it generates – labelled by the state as ‘pollution’ – continually work to problematize the conceptually moribund idea of *polis* itself. ‘I wanted to represent the city as digressional, not causal; as ephemeral, not monumental’, writes the poet, ‘as commodious, not commodity. I wanted a record of the dissolution of exchangeability, propriety and borders I heard acting within noise. I would record what was already there. Cacophony” (*Nilling* 69). This is the impulse that has always undergirded Robertson’s writings on the city. From the initial theorizing on language that informed the weather, to the isolation of a trash-utopia at Value Village, the city is important to her work because it physically revels in the euphoria of absent origins. As she writes at the beginning of *The Office for Soft Architecture*, the importance of the city lies not in its ability to engender linguistic certainties, but its capacity to provide the conditions where attempts at enclosure seem ultimately ridiculous:

The city is a florescence of surface... Under the pavement, pavement. Hoaxes, failures, porches, archaeological strata spread out on a continually thin plane; softness and speed, echoes, spores, tropes, fonts; not identity, but incident and the accumulation of air miles; unmarked solitude absorbing time, bloating to become an environment, indexical euphorias, the unravelling of laughter; a brief history of escalators; memory manifest, brindled, loosening; a crumpling of automotive glass; the pornographic, the wrapped, Helvetica’s black dust: All doctrine is foreign to us (*Occasional Work* 15).

Robertson destroys the possibility of roots, she playfully enacts a reversal of the logic of the *polis* by viewing the space of the city as discordantly constituted. In such a poetics the problem of the city is surmounted only from within an obsessive focus on a world generated at the margins of enclosure. ‘There is no language’, writes Calvino, ‘without deceit’ (48). The urban poem to Robertson is therefore the necessary site of active attempts to display the pure fallacy

of a poem that searches for coherence in the city. 'What if there is no "space"', writes the poet, 'only a permanent, slow-motion mystic takeover, an implausibly careening awning'? (*Occasional Work* 17). There can be no urban ideal in such a perspective and Robertson's 'linguistic scaffolding' is the very means by which contradictory elements are placed in juxtaposition. 'Nothing is utopian', she continues, everything wants to be. Soft architects face the reaching middle' (17).

Conclusion: City of Panic

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'the pathological regression of the City, in which the cosmopolis, the open city of the past gives way to the claustropolis' (Virilio 8)

In Paul Virilio's *City of Panic* (2005) he writes of the contemporary metropolis as a cruel inversion of any cosmopolitan ideal. In Virilio's pessimistic perspective the city has moved from an era in which it represents any kind of 'opening' towards a region where urban space has turned in on itself in a claustrophobic reaction to the Bigness that surrounds it. The roots of Virilio's 'claustropolis' sprout from the confines of a city in which urban social being must terrorize itself against the threat of incursions to its conceptual purity³⁶. This 'city of panic' is, at least in part, a recognizable phenomenon. As has been reiterated throughout this thesis the urban poem must also 'terrorize' itself into being. In order to resist a semantic closure operating at the heart of aesthetic sensibilities in the west, urban writing must try and rid itself of the totalitarian pretensions that have come to define it. From Williams to Olson, from Wordsworth to Sinclair, the problem of the city has privileged the rejection of urban experience for a landscape prefigured in the imagination of the author. It has been my intention to posit writing on the city as 'perilous' in this regard, whereby anti-closural practice must function in the poem as a conscious strategy towards an 'opening' independent of the author's claims of possession. In each case articulated in this thesis writing on the city has become an attempt to circumnavigate the bare linguistic closure that typifies the negation of place into the terms of an aesthetic system. 'Urban anxieties', moreover, become manifest in a constant battle to do justice to the raw site of the city even as it morphs and shifts beyond the control of the writing

³⁶ To Setha M Low the city post 9/11 has become a 'fortress city' obsessed with manufacturing the control of its population through a palpable sense of fear. In "Urban Fear: Building the Fortress City" (2008) Low refers to a landscape of 'gated communities' in America as responsible for 'encod[ing] fear... materially... [or]... producing [it as] a literal landscape' in the city (8).

itself. As an intrinsic part of this 'panicked' city the urban poem becomes an active force in reconfiguring the terms of social space.

Without this intervention the city is simply the repository for a dead language, a closed space of predetermined discourse stretched out as a 'sharing' between an imaginary populace. To call this ideal civic body 'imaginary' isn't an exaggeration either. 'A pure idiolect would be *idiotic*', writes Nancy during *Eulogy for the Melee*, 'utterly deprived of relations and, therefore, of identity' (154). Despite its conceptual stupidity the *necropolis* remains the most immediate reflection of state power. In David Barison's film *The Ister* (2004), cities like Budapest in Hungary are portrayed as the necessary byproduct of an historical desire for origins epitomized in the source of the Danube River and the mythology that sustains it. The assumption that a river can be followed back to its source – rather than become the 'distribution of ideas' it did for Allen Fisher – leads to the 'damning up' of any real sense of possibility. The cities along the banks of the Danube, then, remain caught up in a destructive logic of closure permeating the foundations of the buildings themselves. This becomes a reoccurring crisis for any sense of urbanity that doesn't fit into these preordained categories. Budapest, in the contemporary, finds itself engaged in a battle with resurgent fascism that is a reoccurring symptom of the logic that undergirds the space of the city itself. If Budapest rejects its 'spilt' nature, if it denies a sense of melee, then it becomes easy prey to a revanchist propensity for closure that pits the idea of an 'open' city against the purely Manichean capabilities of the state³⁷. That 'vertical

³⁷ Budapest is chosen as an example for this conclusion because of both its resurgent – and nakedly anti Semitic – propensity for Fascism, but also how its streets carry the 'reoccurring' marks of previous conflicts seemingly

energy' Sinclair divined in East London torments the cobbles of Budapest for the second time in less than one hundred years. As if historical memory has abandoned conurbations like this entirely, the Danube becomes a physical reminder of the retrogressive ideological currents undergirding western conceptions of urban space.

Bill Griffiths wrote of this when he examined the geographical site of Hungary in juxtaposition to the insidious capacity for myth making in the hands of the Hungarian state during *Nomad Sense* (1998). 'A city of vertical buildings' like Budapest, Griffiths explains in the poem 'HUNGARY', is merely '[a] fossil... at the foot of a Kaiser or Tsar' (91). No matter what the urban ideal any notion of 'city' immediately congeals when it comes into contact with the requirements of the state. To Griffiths both 'Kaiser' and 'Tsar' – 'Austria' and 'Russia' as the two different nation states that have occupied this site in recent history – have shown nothing but the innate ability to convert meaningful social space into an ossified parody of itself. The crown of St Stephen – the patron saint of the nation, whose bones are still viewable on the Budapest tourist trail today – is described as:

The crown of the proto-martyr
no stones
but shimmering *vacci annuli* of gold

ignored by the population themselves. The popular party Jobbik is currently engaged in 'protecting' city dwellers in Budapest from the 'threat' of Roma Gypsies. Patrolling the streets in black paramilitary style uniforms, the connotations in a city that suffered terribly from the Arrow Cross Party during the Second World War are almost too much to bear. 'Are Europeans going to kick off a repeat' writes Ivor Mosley (the grandson of the would be fascist ruler of England Oswald Mosley) on the reappearance of these 'black shirts' on the streets of Budapest, 'of the grotesque, murderous and monstrous tragedy that obliterated civilization in Europe during the mid-twentieth century'? (Mosley "Black Shirts"). This is particularly tragic for a city that was originally split into two halves – Buda and Pest – at either sides of the Danube two hundred years previously. The symbolism of the Danube holds particular weight in this socio-political context. Nevermind the word play inherent in the terms 'split' and 'spilt' Griffiths identified in the introduction.

[...]

Structured by strange speech

A motto of a word

An abstract as a deposit in a New York bank (90).

The relic of Saint Stephen burns itself into the national consciousness as a purely shimmering confection devoid of the 'stones' that would validate its 'natural' claims to the possession of this territory. Whispering seductive incantations into futurity, this 'proto martyr' squats at the centre of a *polis* where the problem of the city threatens to repeat itself in the same violent tendencies that defined the historical past. This 'strange speech' is a self-justifying discourse, heavy with the layers of myth that brought it into being. To Griffiths such a linguistic phenomenon is a mere 'motto', or the kind of hollow 'abstraction' that might prompt misty-eyed donations from Hungarian expats in New York. The complicated urban topography of Budapest is once again abandoned for the state historical version. This is a linguistic order born from division and exclusion, rather than the conflicting energies much more fundamental to its creation.

In the contemporary city 'spilt' can become 'split' in an instant. The forces of reaction are always waiting in the wings to establish the city as part and parcel of a larger whole. 'The norm is wrong', wrote Griffiths during *Spilt Cities*, amidst 'the ice cream stuck classic ice exteriors' that make up the façade (7). 'We want an impure image that contradicts fixity', declares Robertson instead during 'Value Village Lyric', 'something deliciously insecure: the sheath of a nerve' (*Occasional Work* 213). This isn't an imaginary urban public, then, but one that emerges through a process of active listening on the part of the writer herself. For Robertson, this dialect,

or idiom, is something that emerges through the sensitivity to a vernacular that can only exist in earnest in the cacophony of a city:

Within semantic intensities we can begin to hear a poetics, and a prosody, of the citizen. Unlawlike and exceptional, across household and city alike, a vernacular's dispersed mediality gestures and folds into and throughout the semantic field of the collective. This continuous language of collective formations is the commons... The vernacular is the movement for which language is not the state, but the condition of emergence of the subject to and for others. It is grammarless rhythm, a mobile, patterned regime of compromise: something infinitely vulnerable (*Nilling* 82 – 83)

The city, for the first time in history, is perceived as something not to free herself from in the hope of establishing a regime of linguistic purity, but the only site an understanding of urban social being can be generated in the first place. 'Noise is a moving survival', writes Robertson, '[i]t shapes the collective body as replete historical potential, signifying for nothing' (70). The writer should 'breach the city's principal at every moment', writes the poet during her 'Fourth Walk', 'and in the quasi-randomness of our route' (*Occasional Work* 249).

Shifting through various modes of aesthetic possibility, the conclusions of this thesis gather around the same desire to 'breach the city's principal'. If the poem is envisaged as Fisher's 'trap' – opening and shutting at random as a consequence of the reader's craving for coherence and the author's flight from it – the concept of the city needs to be equally fluid if it is to facilitate an opening. This thesis has appropriated Nancy's description of a 'problem of the city', because of how it pitched a circulatory crisis in conceptions of being together conceived as anything less than an 'exposure to the world'. It is worth restating Nancy's premise now that this 'reoccurring' crisis has been sufficiently mapped in terms of both poetics and the city:

The city is not primarily “community” any more than it is primarily “public space”. The city is at least as much the bringing to light of being-in-common *as the dis-position* (dispersal and disparity) of the community represented as founded in interiority and transcendence. It is “community” without common origin. That being the case, and as long as philosophy is an appeal to the origin, the city, far from being philosophy’s subject or space, is its problem, its aporia (23)

If a poem is engaged in a search for ‘harmony’, ‘coherence’ or ‘purity’ then the writer – of necessity – becomes obsessed with the city as a narcissistic reflection of the ego. As with a writer like William Carlos Williams, the potential for violence is total as the need for affirmation spirals out of control. The poem subjects itself to greater levels of stress, as the writing becomes a form of urbicide in and of itself. Following on from this conclusion, therefore, is a brief explication of a poem by Francis Crot – *Hax* (2011) – that works successfully towards an ‘opening’ under the most testing of conditions. Rather than interpret the ‘city of panic’ in terms of an immense negativity like Virilio, the dystopian space of the city becomes the site of resistance acting consciously on the author’s desire for ‘control’. Harnessing the ‘panic’ of the city into unique formal arrangements, Crot envisages a London where the juxtaposing of tensions creates new possibilities for transcending the logic of closure at the heart of this study.

Appendix: Cities of WARR (Francis Crot)

If you see a brother..... SALUT!

If you see a Fed..... SHOOT!

(Anonymous communiqué via Blackberry Messenger, August 8, 2011)

“Suspended over the abyss, the life of Octavia’s inhabitants is less uncertain than in other cities. They know the net will last only so long” (Calvino 75)

They can make any excuse under the sun. They say they can't get a job and that they come from poor backgrounds. So did I! I grew up in a single-parent family, mum was always on benefits and I left home at 15 - but I'm not sitting around on the dole. I've made something of myself.

When I wrote 'Looters Are Scum' on my top, I don't really know what was going through my mind. On Twitter there were lots of people using the phrase, I just took that and used it. As soon as I stepped outside I thought it was a bit harsh, but at the same time it's the only word you could use to describe them. What they did is unforgivable (Miller “I Helped Clean Up the London Riots”)

Cities of Warr: Francis Crot

'Gentle refugee, quintuple-take at these vicissitudes of association' – (Crot 30)

It is the task of the poet to negotiate the levels of panic in the contemporary city, whilst maintaining that it is necessarily a process under which all urban writing must struggle. This final appendix is an attempt to display the conscious exposition of a poetics that seeks to tackle these 'urban anxieties' as something enshrined within its very procedure. In present day London, for example, the 'noise' that Robertson had to search for with a tape recorder in Vancouver is physically manifest in an urban landscape where conflict and dissonance have become the norm. Indeed, to the poet Sean Bonney the tensions in London have become so inflamed that the only adequate aesthetic response comes in an austere 'silence':

It's going very slowly – hard to concentrate what with all the police raids, the punishment beatings, the retaliatory fires. It'd be too much to say the city's geometry has changed, but it's getting into some fairly wild buckling. It's gained in dimension, certain things are impossible to recognize, others are all too clear. I wish I knew more about maths or algebra, so I could explain to you exactly what I mean (*Four Letters* 9).

What is at stake can no longer be adumbrated within the bounds of the *polis*, but neither is it easily articulated within the formal properties of the poem. The noise of the city has reached a suitably deafening pitch, as 'police raids' and retaliatory 'fires' signify a spatial region where Robertson's 'discord' and 'cacophony' is manifest in quite literal terms. Whereas inhabiting linguistic blur allowed Robertson to circumvent the discursive practices and exclusionary rhetoric of Vancouver, Bonney dwells in a city that resembles a pitched battle between two differing ideas of what that city is. 'There is no prosody, there is only a scraped wound [we] live

inside... like fossilized, vivisected mice', explains the poet, '[t]urned inside out, tormented beyond recognition' (10)

In their 2005 text – *The Coming Insurrection – The Invisible Committee* (an anonymous group of libertarian socialists) refer to the *metropolis*, as a 'TERRAIN OF CONSTANT LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT' (37). 'For a long time', they write, 'the city was a place for the military to avoid, or if anything to besiege; but the metropolis is perfectly compatible with war' (37). Whether in the slums of Chiapas or Brazil, the state is involved in what the committee call 'security operation[s]' that are 'always already' at work. The urban scene is one of a perpetual battle between the forces of 'order' and those who would seek to undermine them. 'War is no longer a distinct event in time', they continue, 'but instead diffracts into a series of micro-operations, by both military and police, to ensure security' (37). From the *Invisible Committee's* neo-marxist position, this is ultimately reflected in the aesthetics of the city itself, where 'transparency', 'neutrality' and 'uniformity' work together to create the most sanitized, and commodified, public space imaginable:

From up close or from afar, what surrounds us.... Is one single urban cloth, without form or order, a bleak zone, endless and undefined, a global continuum of museum-like city centres and natural parks, of enormous suburban housing developments, and massive agricultural projects, industrial zone, and subdivisions, country inns and trendy bars: the Metropolis. Certainly the ancient city existed, as did the cities of medieval and modern times. But there is no such thing as a metropolitan city. All territory is synthesized within the Metropolis. Everything occupies the same space, if not geographically then through the intermeshing of its networks (34).

For this loose grouping of anonymous individuals the professed goal is to 'Find each other'.

Outside of the restrictions of *polis*, some form of being together needs to reconstitute itself.

'Control has a wonderful way of integrating itself into the commodity landscape', they explain,

'showing its authoritarian face to anyone who wants to see it' (35). Instead of places of communication today's metropolis renders all forms of interaction impossible under the pernicious rubric of the money relation. Exchange value stands in for real community, and the dollar sign is a cipher for a pattern of domination and control undergirding the streets themselves. 'The old historic centres, once hotbeds of revolutionary sedition', as the 'Committee' puts it, 'are now wisely integrated into the organizational diagram of the [m]etropolis' (34).

But to a poet like Sean Bonney such a situation also provides opportunities because it exists so precariously on a war footing in this way. 'Hackney declares WARR on the city', declares the poet during his volume *Blackwater* (2006). Urbanism constitutes a battle between the forces of *polis* and those on the peripheries themselves. To Bonney regeneration during the Olympics simply affirms that developers would like to make Hackney the same as everywhere else. The intention is for 'a smooth-surface post modern city', or a place that was only ever meant to be inhabited by the privileged or 'faux bohemian yuppies' (*Baudelaire* 86). What interests Bonney is the 'abject spots', or 'gaps in the safely constructed social text' where a bare kind of existence was still possible. Indeed, just before the riots happened in the Summer of 2011 Bonney was seriously considering the aesthetics of 'riot' as a genuine way in which to interrupt the logic of the *polis*:

The city gets hotter and deeper as the pressure soars. Electrons get squeezed out of atoms to produce a substance never seen on Earth. Under such extreme conditions, hydrogen behaves like liquid metal, conducting electricity as well as heat. If none of that happens, its a waste of time. Perhaps you think that doesn't apply to you. What inexhaustible reserves we possess of

darkness, ignorance and savagery. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms, in the nightmare of their lives as slaves to the rich (20).

For Bonney, the language of the city must necessarily be oppositional and violently opposed to these increased attempts at the domination of social space. '[Bonney's poems] tear at language', writes Esther Leslie, '[and] splurt it out in new, urgent, and socially communicative rhythms' ("recycling"244). To Leslie this is 'waste as poetic booty' (238). 'Marginal figures, outsider poets', she continues, 'they recycle detritus as lyric and [this] in turn becomes a critically commentary on what is valued and unvalued socially and economically' (241). The abandoned culture in places like Hackney becomes a place at once dominated and resistive at the same time. 'Wrecked and delinquent parts of town... are the occult secret at the heart of society's discourse about itself', writes Bonney, 'the 'invisible is the street that you live on' (88).

This final excursion into the problem of the city, however, begins with Francis Crot because he locates his poem *Hax* at precisely this point of crisis. The logic of the *polis*, and its exclusionary discourses, are seen working at a higher pitch than normal as the suburb prepares itself for a makeover in line with the dictates of 'London 2012'. Crot uses Sean Bonney's phrase 'WARR' to source his poem in the rift between two conflicting understandings of urbanity at a time of rising social tensions that have been bubbling under the surface since at least the student demonstrations at the end of 2010. Published literally on the cusp of the summer riots in 2011, however, the poem engenders all of the tensions that would eventually spill over into the worst social disorder that city has seen for decades. This is reflected, of course, within the formatting of the text itself. *Hax's* publisher, Richard Owens, has described its method as an

‘overdetermined instance of overcrowding’, or ‘a composite of conventionally set type against scanned images, type written passages, drawings, handwritten notes and missives, heavily annotated spreadsheets and documents’ (“Hasty Notes”). The methodology reflects a particular suburb of London as it exists beyond the harmony of *polis* and a common language. In the poem any ordered space is drowned beneath an influx of information, the surplus product of what passes for a public realm in the chaotic din that we call out of instinct ‘city’. Moreover, the text has a corresponding web blog, or Tumblr, that is intermittently updated with further quotations, images, and news stories as if to gesture to the writing as a constant work ‘in process’³⁸. This is key to the works denial of a language of closure, or its refusal to be co-opted into the exclusionary rhetoric of the state. To Crot this is a city enervated by its own socio-linguistic tensions – one ‘liv[ing] on its nerves’ – that provides new opportunities for the portrayal of urban social being for those ‘outside’ the singular, and monolithic, requirements of *polis*.

But this is also an ‘unstable’ urban poetry, which attempts to destabilize any idea of modernist ‘coherence’. ‘Francis Crot’ is a fiction, or pseudonym, for a poet usually called Jow Lindsay, which is another pseudonym for someone apparently called Joseph Churches Lindsay Walton. These pseudonyms exist, in the words of another nom de plume ‘Helen Bridwell’, ‘to control

³⁸ The contributions to this Tumblr range from links to the You Tube videos of local hip hop artists First and Last’s song *Swine*, to the photo-shopped image of Sleeping Beauty being pepper-sprayed in the face by an American cop (last seen pepper-spraying students during a sit down protest at the University of California).

the reader's knowledge of the poet' ("Interview" 8)³⁹. But this isn't the kind of aesthetic practice associated with the 'death of the author', as much as an attempt to direct reader responses to the material. Bridwell calls herself a 'perfectionist', and 'totalizer' who insists on maintaining this control. But this is always a self-conscious direction, or one that as Bridwell's interviewer suggests consciously "'controls" her readers' in the same way 'American politicians control Iraqi cities – by steadfastly saying that you control them' ("Hank Sotto" 10). In this exercise of power it is possible to devise an alternative poetics where reader and writer are fully implicated in, and share joint responsibility for, the inevitable 'totalizing' that goes on. Take Bridwell's words in an interview, for example, where 'she' describes her relationship to the city with all the tongue-in-cheek humour of a drag performance:

Justin, as I've told you, I did my postgraduate at Princeton in the States. The Fulbright Commission are very picky about that sort of thing. Apart from that, and several holidays in locations such as France, it's been London. First Chelsea, growing up as if a girl, then later in the East End and now in Stoke Newington. I have no great love for the place, it's just where I live. Londoners sound very treacherous ("Interview" 6).

The author is not only removed from the poetry here, but knowingly posited as part of the problem. Privileged, aloof, Bridwell claims no authenticity or superior perception. Just like the reader, the writer is immediately culpable when it comes to making wild assumptions about the city. This is a deliberate strategy to distinguish 'herself' from 'poststructuralism-influenced poetics', where the stated aim is always to 'free the reader' ("Hank Soto" 1). 'This hothouse freedom turns up mysteriously on her doorstep'; she explains in another interview, 'her emancipation occurs at a purely theoretical level, whilst her incarceration as a compulsory

³⁹ These 'avatars, heteronyms or personae' include: 'Hank Breadmore, Kyle Storm Beste-Chetwynde, Dorothy Flash, Axl Prose, N P Snow, Hank Sotto, Marianne Munk, Lara Buckerton, Colin Barrel, Jamelia Wigmore, Karen Eliot, Jane Scott, Immanence, Triptychnician, Benjamin NunsPriest, Syndrome and of course Jow Lindsay' ("Hank Sotto" 10).

consumer of capitalist reality holds fast' ("Interview" 5). By simply 'disappearing' from the poem altogether, there is always the danger subtler and more dishonest attempts at dominance will slip in by the back door. Bridwell, meanwhile, makes the reader question the author's intentions and background, whilst simultaneously removing that author as the *locus* of any sort of identification.

This is why Bonney's take on Hackney is so fundamental to Crot's poem. To Crot the first thing that should be tackled in urban poetry is the capitalist reality that creates the brutal conditions in the first place. The author isn't present in name, but at the same time the poem needs to be directed towards a specific political ends. There needs to be 'controls', checks and balances to power, or the poet abandons himself to the whims of the system. In a similar sense Crot's poem is built firmly on the need for revolutionary action. 'And finally, most futilely', writes Bridwell in one of those interviews when asked about the function of her poetry, 'by trying to change the world itself through political action' ("Interview" 1). Or, this time in the guise of Kyle Storm Best Chetwynde, what concerns the poet is 'our terrible failure to actually *do* anything about the shit we live in, or the impossibility of fixed reference' ("Interview" 1). 'I think all my stuff has failed', he writes, '[it] hasn't worked so it's nonsense'. His poems – as he writes again as Bridwell – are an attempt to 'make art disappear up its own arse'. 'It's grazing around', continues this confected pseudonym, 'it just needs a gentle shove' ("Hank Sotto" 8).

It is this notion of 'failure' that resonates throughout *Hax*. Both 'failure' in the sense of the inability to formulate an adequate poetic response to the space of Hackney, and a failure to do anything about the political situation on the streets themselves. But browsing through the various documents that exist on the internet pertaining to the poem it is possible to determine that aesthetic 'failure' may be more of a strategy that keeps the poem emphatically 'open'. Striving for control of the materials remains an endless task, a physically impossible gesture, reaping only fragments of clarity, which – unlike Pound's 'great acorn of light in the Cantos – remain utterly partial. Once again, under the stage name of Helen Bridwell, this mysterious poet gives an evocative answer to the age old question "what is art"?:

Yes. I think of art as a mist-clogged garden, convoluted with stone paths. Such short formulae are like vantage points in the garden, but afford too much scenery beyond the fence. There is no perch which exhibits everything in the garden and *nothing more*, but that's not surprising, it would be surprising if there were one. What is surprising is that you still meet seemingly intelligent pilgrims questing for such a perch ("Interview" 11).

Failure, to Bridwell, is the natural result of what 'she' calls a 'baffled consciousness'. Just because there is no 'perch' from which the poet can view a totality, doesn't mean that that poet can stop striving for something better.' I mean when you experiment in the bedroom', as Kyle Storm Best-Chetwynde puts it, 'you don't always have control' ("Interview" 1). Such a poetics is based on the spontaneous generation of singular moments, and it sometimes requires the relinquishing of control.

In *Hax*, then, this 'mist-clogged garden' is seen as an opportunity. Images, documents of any sort, are strategically placed on Crot's blog in order situate the raw materials of the poem in the

context of an ever-evolving reality. The poet carefully chooses these documents, but they also leave the realms of authorial control when they enter a world of general post-riot analysis after the writing of the poem itself. Take the picture on the next page, for example, which was posted in Crot's blog in the weeks immediately following the riots (Fig 1). As such, it epitomizes the character of the 'clean up', when local residents – including the Lord Mayor – decided to take it on themselves to brush away the broken glass and wipe down the scorch marks from the worst riots seen in that conurbation since Brixton in the Eighties. At the time it was a tedious scene, a manufactured and reactive response to the invasion of sacrosanct territory by the government's favourite new verb and noun collocation: 'feral youth'. But this picture tells another story. It reveals the disconnect between the 'rioters' who generally moved into the centre to loot and steal from the peripheral urban zones around the edges, and the largely wealthy dwellers of the inner sanctum whose hastily etched slogans reveal an almost willful ignorance of the socio-political factors that were the material conditions for these violent confrontations in the first place. She doesn't realize it but this anonymous woman has written a poem symptomatic of our times. It is closure, the state response, and is as such symbolic of the last moribund gasping of the possibility for any kind of effective political space. For the purposes of Crot's poem she is *the* image, if not one of the most brutal manifestations, of 'the problem of the city' writ large.



Fig. 1. Hayley Miller. Photograph by Lee Thompson, 9 August 2011, from Lee Thompson Photography, 10 August 2011. <http://leethompsonphotography.co.uk/blog/?p=10>

That image serves this study only to make a very specific point about the urgency of an urban poetics that transcends beyond the repetitious logic of her all too familiar response, whilst at the same time adding associative levels of depth into the semantic structure of the poetry only accessible by the foraging reader. Originally, this was a self-congratulatory image that spoke most vividly to the tub-thumping post riot analysis of the *Daily Mail*. As a mysterious document

that appeared after the riots in *Mute Magazine* called *RiotPolitEcon* (purportedly written by the 'Chelsea Ives Youth Centre' and the 'Khalid Quereshi Memorial Foundation') attests, her reaction to these events is more like a desperate recuperation of her idea of 'community' at a time when alternative ideals of being together are erupting on the streets themselves⁴⁰:

On Peckham High Street on 8 August, as the riots moved up the road towards Camberwell, kids were pulling motorcyclists from their bikes. When one rider stood up and staggered in a daze back towards his vehicle, five or six men knocked him back over and kicked him in. As his ribs were broken the streets were festive. Anyone who didn't object was *in*: solidarity was not limited to gang members but anyone who would by virtue of their presence underwrite the necessity of the action. The burning of shops might be 'nihilistic' or it might be a way of destroying CCTV ("RiotPolitEcon" 2).

What stood out about the events in London was a brutality that immediately defies the media coverage that seeks to name it. This is a city truly alienated from itself, and London – as *polis* – effectively disintegrates amidst the consequences of a week of hostility and tension uniquely frightening in character. 'The riots opened up the panorama of a London which conceals itself just off the main road', states the document, '[to a] certain gap between reality and the miasma of the public sphere' (1). Although these emerging solidarities are wholly violent, they are the only response to a system that largely ignores them. Suburbs such as Hackney become the battleground for the dispersal of unfocused rage at the peripheries of the city itself, a phenomenon common in recent Parisian history but which the United Kingdom has effectively escaped from in the past.

⁴⁰ On Jow's Wikipedia page it is possible to find this document when following a link to the 'Index of Jow'. Along with previous writings by the poet, and various MP3s, there are political writings by other poets such as Keston Sutherland, as well as recordings of the poet in conversation. This particular document is a particularly urgent response to the failure of 'the left' in the UK to make any substantial political capital from the riots. The fake authors "The Chelsea Ives Youth Centre", and the "Khalid Kureshi Memorial Foundation" must be seen as a mocking take on the failure of the kind of vacuous response to the riots that will inevitably will emerge from research bodies such as The Joseph Roundtree Foundation in the future.

But there is also what this document calls a ‘flipside’ to this process, which is immediately related to the image of the anonymous woman. The post-riot clean up of which this woman is an integral part was actually a Twitter and Facebook event created by a group called the ‘riot wombles’. As opposed to the ‘rioters’ themselves, this is a conscious attempt to defend the *status quo* or to create an alternative form of ‘solidarity’ based on the resurrection of their own imagined social space. In this picture the London of the Olympics, the London defined by the *City* within a city on Threadneedle street, is asserting itself once more against the hordes that came to do it both symbolic and actual violence the night before. As is quite obvious however, and as the *Riot Polit-Econ* document makes perfectly clear, there was much more to these smiling faces than the initial sense of *polis* they would like to project:

If [the previous nights violence] is sometimes ‘coercive’ solidarity, the flip side were the strained smiles on the faces of the #riotwombles, as they held aloft their disgusting sterilized dustpans for the massed photographers. The smiles that meant to signify that everyone was affably having a good time, like good citizens, there for the *community*, but in fact it didn’t require facial recognition software to notice that everyone looked humiliated, half-aware of the bourgeois frieze of the grotesques for which they were modeling; half aware that the whole spectacle was about reiterating the sanctity of personal property rights against those permanently excluded from them (1).

There is an undeniable ‘smugness’ to such scenes, but more importantly the recognition of an ‘anxiety’ at the heart of urban social being in London that is contested between those who are ‘excluded’ and those who are not. ‘The city liv[ing] on its nerves’ is nowhere more evident than in the strained smiles and voices of that ‘frieze of grotesques’ waving their dustpans in the street. There is something fundamentally wrong with such a tense display of ‘civic-mindedness’.

London is represented as a place of conflicting solidarities, and the city finds itself in direct opposition to those ‘suburbs’ at its edges.

The common language that is said to exist in London is something from which the majority of ‘Londoners’ are excluded. Rather than something to aspire to it has come to represent a means of maintaining the status quo. Crot gestures to a perpetual conflagration between the lives epitomized by the ‘riot wombles’ and those who eke out an existence in the outer ring. Indeed, a simple Google search for ‘Jow Lindsay’ reveals an unfinished document by a shady body called The City Alliance. Marked as a draft ‘Private and Confidential UK Constitution’, its bullet-pointed, and austere formatting, makes their suggestions for the punishment of rioters ranging from ‘throw[ing] ticks on them’ to ‘mak[ing] them shit on the streets and drink quicklime’ all the more cynical. In the City Alliance’s distinction community is something very easily defined, and those who step outside of its bounds must be dealt with appropriately:

Yes, businesses want to engage with the community. Your average decent, honest, hard-working employee feels fortunate to live in this beautiful country & wants to give something back. Yet he has no real communities to engage with! A community by definition is something with common standards, common values – if not all exactly the same at least in some kind of harmony – and where all the stakeholders can gain a voice. Our *populations* – you can’t call them *communities* – are diverse, fragmented, at war with themselves, overrun with immigrants, both from overseas and the homegrown immigrant mentality of the... (“City Alliance” 3)

The City Alliance’s response to the rioters is also one of incompleteness and failure. They represent the manic scribbling of a post-riot rhetoric not so much ‘invented’ as plucked from the air pregnant with what passes for a ‘common sense analysis’. ‘Why don’t they have the decency to feel fear’?, write the Alliance, ‘I am sickened by the hold they have over me via my

taxes' (5). In writing of 'common values' and 'common standards' this fictional body are the inheritors, and preservationists, of the 'common language' that undergirds the *polis*. But this 'community' is one ordained by capital and endlessly disseminated through the popular press. At that level, it is a threatening discourse that operates as background noise. It is a discourse that seeks to engender fear in the populous, but also fuse them together as a bleating, monosyllabic, conduit of the state.

This is where 'control' becomes important in the poem as well. The control that the various *nom de plumes* exert over the material is opposed directly to the language of domination that exists under the surface. Indeed, *Hax* begins with a warning against the 'fantasy' of 'total control' that has undergirded visions of the city. To Crot, as for Bonney, the city isn't a harmonious space at all. The city is at war. Not 'war' in the sense of two opposing sides going through the motions of an organized battle, but total war. War where there are no sides, no uniforms, no insignia, just the general acknowledgement that we are following each other blindly somewhere, guided by the intermittent bleep of Blackberry handsets, and the sound of smashing glass in the distance. There can be no direction, because *we* are directionless. Poetry, too, exists in this vague hinterland of opposing and opposable forces. To write of the city must be to negotiate these tensions, to bring them to life. In *Hax*, of course, Crot uses Bonney's term 'WARR' to describe this confluence of forces. There is an account in the poem of London literally organized into two opposing teams:

The city alliance comprises, materially, the City, Westminster, Chelsea, Kensington, Fulham, Islington, Camden, Barnet, Brent, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Richmond, Kingston,

Greenwich, Southwark, Elephant & Castle, Canary Wharf, --- --- --- --- ---, Bromley, Barking and Dagenham. For Hackney Alliance basically you need Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Newham, Waltham Forest, Enfield, Haringay, Redbridge, Havering, Lewisham, Beckenham, Lambeth, Camberwell, Wandsworth, Merton, Sutton, one or two other spinneys and hovels (*Hax* 30).

The 'fantasy' of 'total control' that has inflected the whims of planners since the *polis* has fractured into countless 'warring' principalities. Scratch the surface and beneath the 'harmonious' vision of urban space enacted by the riot wombles, lurks the continual threat of violence. The city is the image of discord and contradiction, it is the precise opposite of the 'common bond' that would usually be associated with the western ideal. The role of the poem, then, is to somehow bring out these features using aesthetic devices that enhance, rather than dull, the constant flux and jarring that makes up this urban scene. Dystopian as it might be, this vision of urban space in London is at least one that purports to reflect some semblance of reality.

Crot's poem delivers a vision of London *in extremis*, where habitual violence has become the norm. This is social space not only afflicted with anxiety, but where any idea of 'enclosure' must be maintained with force. 'The armed forces don't simply adapt themselves to the metropolis', wrote *The Invisible Committee*, 'they produce it' (38). This is a battle over contested social space, at a time when it is uniquely raw in the public consciousness. In *HAX* the brute logic of the *polis* is laid bare, and through the turmoil of recent events what really drives western conceptions of urban social being reveals itself to the world. 'In the event of victory & subject to no other conditionalities', it warns at the end of the City Alliance's draft constitution, 'the full contents of this document will be enacted in full' (8). When property interests are threatened,

and the careful branding of London 2012 starts to come unstuck, the violence comes crashing through the thin social veneer. At a time when it is genuinely mooted in Parliament that 'businesses' should be given the vote, *The City Alliance's* pronouncement that 'Markets are the closest thing to God on earth' takes on an added dimension. 'How can we share this fear, this fear that shapes us and allows us to love?', write *The Alliance*, 'It is a good fear. Like the fear of God once was' (5). Utterly revanchist, and atavistic, in *Hax* the logic of the *polis* is exposed in all of its brutality. In a moment of what, literally, seems like warfare, the exclusionary rhetoric of the state lurks behind the passive aggressive smirks of those riot wombles. The 'blitz spirit' that is pumped out through all the organs of the media rings hollow in amongst the genuine fears and worries of those who inhabit the outer ring.

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