

LIVING THINGS MADE  
RICH & STRANGE:  
TWO TREE POEMS BY AN  
EARLY ECO-POET  
ARTHUR SALE  
A MASTERS BY RESEARCH  
DISSERTATION  
UEA  
(REVISED AUGUST 2023)

Robert Rickard PGR

*To Helen Vendler: who saw something in Arthur Sale's poems*

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'Acts of kindness & love move me too easily to tears & there is of course the daily miracle of life itself that fills my own life :~ & objects. It can be harrowing, absurdly so: e.g. this morning I was stripping some spinach plants (for Nick Boyle...) & felt it was sacrilege to mutilate such fresh beauty. "For 'tis my faith that every flower / enjoys the air it breathes": Wordsworth isn't just being wide-eyed.

*from Sale's letter to John Constable, 18<sup>th</sup> May, 1994; not in SL*<sup>1</sup>

Full fadom five thy Father lies,  
Of his bones are Corral made :  
Those are pearles that were his eies,  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a Sea-change  
Into something rich, & strange:

*from The Tempest, First Folio*

like Alice            balancing hallucogens  
of infinite            and infinitesimal  
if iris thoughts      and shocks of sense

*from 'Birch Hats', ScP*

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<sup>1</sup> For abbreviations see table below p.5.

## Abstract

*A small sample of Arthur Sale's poems, drafts and letters, analysed here for the first time, begins to reveal an original – possibly remarkable? – English nature poet. He spent a largely uneventful life (1912-2000) developing his own verse and form, writing and re-writing hundreds of carefully-worked poems. From at least 1970, Sale devoted considerable time towards an articulation of the nature of, as he termed it, 'the living things I had always taken for granted'. The poems focussed on here have turned out to contain strong elements of late-twentieth-century eco-poetic thinking about nature; expressed in an idiosyncratic style, that combines a complex of Modernist and seventeenth-century verse techniques.*

*This preliminary study has begun to uncover the extent of Sale's interest in the complex mechanisms of 'nature' (using Raymond Williams's second definition of an omniscient system that subsumes humans); and specific characteristics of a highly-wrought poetic language he developed to express that complexity.<sup>2</sup> It concentrates on two late tree poems: about a garden Cypress and a Silver Birch: their drafts, and other, comparable poems. It seeks to explain their riddles, content and genesis (with specific reference to Van Hulle's theoretical work on drafting), in order to show how Sale observes, then refines, a depiction of the astounding behaviour of trees and the creatures living off them: the nature – and sheer bizarreness – of their self-contained interactions. It assesses them in relation to the vanguard of a loosely-defined movement now known as 'Eco-poetry'; and their distinctiveness in technique from other contemporary, as well as much older verse.*

*Intricate ecologies composed of complex, energetic yet effortlessly-organised, animal and plant forms – are described in appropriately-complex conceits, soundscapes, and typographies. Prolix imagery magnifies surreal implications Sale perceives in wildlife we take almost entirely for granted – yet often do not see, let alone comprehend. Virtuoso displays of Tits feeding on a Birch, Starlings living in a Cypress, Blackbirds tunnelling through Honeysuckle, are captured in wild, comic conceits, intensified by intricate and subtle sound effects. Sale particularly employs idiosyncratic layouts: graded spacings between words and phrases undressed in unpunctuated blank verse, the purpose of which is to suggest connections beyond strict prose- or sentence-sense. The poems are mimetically playful in tone; both conceit and soundscape turn them into embodiments of natural forces operating on their own terms – with seeming disregard for humans. There are elongated sentence-cadences, and verbal flourishes. Sale's mimetic and prosodic approaches attempt to celebrate, in extravagant detail, ecosystems as inexplicably anarchic in their functions, as they are spontaneous, totally self-regulating, as well as ugly – and beautiful.*

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, cited in *Green Voices*, by Terry Gifford: Chapter 1: 'The social construction of nature' *passim* - pp.1-25. Sale and Williams were also empathetic left-wing English Faculty colleagues. See also 'Nature' as Keith Thomas defines it (and us): 'the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings'; in *Man and the Natural World*.

*Pending fuller treatment of Sale's other hundred-plus nature poems, these two tree poems appear to bear strong affiliation with emerging late-twentieth-century Anglo-American 'eco-critical' philosophies of nature: as essentially non-anthropocentric. They may be early examples of a sub-branch of eco-criticism: 'Eco-poetry' – for example bearing strong resemblance in subject (if only passing parallels in form) to later poets such as Mary Oliver, Mark Goodwin, Andrew Crozier, Drew Milne – among others.*

*However, Sale's late tree poems combine such characteristics in a panoply of extravagant techniques, to form an 'un-homogenous' poetic language, far removed from that of other contemporaries. Helen Vendler, in the only previous assessment of his poetry, also observed that it 'rewards persistence': in their eclectic form and style, they are essentially 'celebratory'.<sup>3</sup>*

*Professionally, Sale ploughed his own furrow: poetically inventive, he worked mostly alone (despite remarkable literary connections). Over decades, he developed his subject: nature; and seems to have been developing a distinctive poetic language to express its anarchic majesty. He came to advocate 'swift, tranced reading', to allow both imagery and expression to bring the poem's subjects – fully – alive in the imagination; for the reader not to stumble or dwell over-literally on conceits and wording.<sup>4</sup> In style and form, they seem to raid the poetics of diverse traditions: seventeenth century, and Modernist (rather, for example, than anything remotely Postmodern).<sup>5</sup>*

*Sale seeks, in his own words, to make something of 'small & undistinguished & undistinctive...living things...that is... rich as well as strange'.<sup>6</sup>*

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*The study is divided into four chapters, with two Appendices and a Bibliography.*

*The first briefly contextualises Sale's life, the periods through which he wrote, and principal influences on the formal development of the verse. Early poems are influenced by T. S. Eliot (with whom, it emerges, he briefly corresponded before the Second World War). War-time poems express the dilemma of the Conscientious Objector, underscoring an independent streak that later led him on a mostly solitary, but self-sustained, poetic journey. His verse becomes something composed entirely for its own sake, with considerable care through many drafts; without thought of publication. Despite working in Cambridge for sixty years alongside well-known academics, writers and friends – such as F.R. & Q.D. Leavis, I.A.*

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<sup>3</sup> Foreword to **Arthur Sale: Selected Poems**, privately published by pupils in 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Nick Blyth 8<sup>th</sup> November, 1996 – see also Chapter 3, section on 'Cambridge opacity'.

<sup>5</sup> which Sale strongly resisted, feeling that it reduced poetry to poems about writing poems – cf. discussion on this in Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Compiled from letters to ex-pupils Andrew Cozens 31<sup>st</sup> October 1975, and novelist Isabel Wolff, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1986. See also: Chapters 1 & 4: *passim*.

*Richards, Wilfred Stone et al - his verse seems 'immunised' from local influences.<sup>7</sup> The chapter ends with a note on late professional recognition of Sale's verse, by Helen Vendler, Harvard Professor of Poetry.*

*The middle two chapters use a range of formally-appropriate techniques to help comprehend Sale's theme and poetic, in two late tree poems: "Three Uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa" (on birds and mammals living in a garden Cypress tree); and 'Birch Hats' (about a Silver Birch being fed on by small birds). The procedure adopted includes first readings to help gain footholds in Sale's complex – but precise – ideas and expression; genetic critiques (using Van Hulle's endogenetic model) of Sale's deliberately-preserved **Archive** drafts; and Practical Criticism exercises relating the poems to those of contemporaries, in order to isolate distinctive aspects of subject and form.*

*The final chapter undertakes more detailed comparative analyses, assessing the poems in relation to older poets Sale admired – and makes an unexpected discovery: the poetry as both seventeenth century (dense, prolix in imagery, blank versed, lyrical, neologistic etc.); but also broadly Modernist. Synoptic definitions of the main formal verse techniques is offered.*

***Appendix 1** contains extracts from Sale's extensive correspondence that defend his theories of poetry, as well as his emerging sense of nature as anarchic, yet omniscient. **Appendix 2** offers suggestions for further research, including exploration of Sale's (early) relationship to the 'Eco-poetry movement', and the nature of the metaphorical and prosodic development: including via Anglo-Saxon, Shakespearian, and Modernist verse forms. There is a **Bibliography** of Sale's writings, works about Sale – as well as those used for the whole study. The findings relate to three out-of-print poetry collections – two privately arranged by pupils; letters; obituaries/appreciations; and interviews undertaken with surviving relatives and friends. Unique access to a comprehensive **Archive** of poetry drafts gifted me by Sale's widow in 2004 has enabled detailed analysis of the creative processes adopted as each poem gestated – over years, or decades.*

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<sup>7</sup> Sale also corresponded with John Crowe Ransom. After the war, he taught John Mole (the London Laureate), Bamber Gascoigne, Benedict Nightingale, John Simpson, Alan Rusbridger, Monty Don, and others. The correspondence with Eliot and Ransom is in the Special Collection of Stanford University Library – not included in Eliot's *Collected Letters* for the period up to 1941 (not yet examined).

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## Abbreviations

|                |                                                                    |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Archive</b> | Arthur Sale's poems & papers held by me (description in Chapter 1) |
| <b>OED</b>     | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>                                   |
| <b>SL</b>      | <i>Arthur Sale Letters</i> (Cambridge: Magdalene College, 2000)    |
| <b>ScP</b>     | <i>Scrambled Particles</i> (Hobart, 1990)                          |
| <b>SP</b>      | <i>Selected Poems Arthur Sale</i> (Edinburgh: Pentland, 1999)      |
| <b>UW</b>      | <i>Under the War</i> (London: Hutchinson, 1975)                    |

## Illustrations

*NB individual scans of extracts from 'Birch Hats' and 'Three Uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa', as well as one from 'School of Nettles', and "'Quite overcanopied by luscious woodbine'", are not so itemised. All have been scanned from the respective poem drafts in the Archive.*

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**Appendix 1 Arthur Sale on poetry: letter extracts**

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# Chapter 1 – Poetic threads

**Personal reflections – Context – Norse Sale – Surrealist/Modernist Sale – Anti-war poet – ‘Driven Inwards’ – Archive – Genetic methodology – Life after Modernism... – Sale and Nature – Helen Vendler: a late advocate – Last poems: reconciling nature with verse**

## Personal reflections

Arthur Sale (1912-2000) first taught me as an eighteen-year-old undergraduate when he was 68. All universities have their share of charismatic lecturers, but he really was hugely popular, and 43 years on the ready responses of those he taught – where it has not been too late to ask them – make clear enough why. As a teacher he was refreshingly human, without any obvious side: but would gimlet-tease with a disarming directness. John Simpson reports much the same in his Foreword to *Arthur Sale: Letters (SL)*: a compilation of brief extracts in a memorial volume I co-edited for his old employer, Magdalene College, Cambridge, in 2006): and this was a gently-masochistic part of the pleasure of Sale’s intellectual company: always positive, yet somehow searingly truthful.<sup>8</sup> Of course this was also oddly reassuring and helpful to we entitled – under-confident – teenagers, dropped into a large academic whirlpool: his depictions of life and art were sincerely meant as well as offering sharp – simply funny – ways of beginning to try and understand incomprehensible subjects, like the world, poetry; or – as this study has shown me – Arthur’s other deep obsession: nature. A fairly remarkable number of grateful ex-pupils and surviving colleagues still more than willingly testify similar aspects of their relationship with him. There was no cult of personality. He didn’t so much teach, as explicate literature, with startling clarity. His essay and verbal comments were gentle, enquiring: brilliant – and effortlessly challenging. Much more to the point, he was kind. This is a time in recent history that is turning out to look like some halcyon moment of relatively-egalitarian, really well-funded, Higher Education; during up to three hours of ‘Supervision’, Arthur would of course feed each of us coffee and cake and straightforward advice. He liked – no, loved – his subject, he was a natural communicator, and was paid – albeit very little – to teach bright young individuals as well as subvert our dubious value-systems. And he saw no clear border between theory and life. After we left university, he then wrote to some of us – what became thousands of letters over sixty years: long witty letters cultivating friendships, based on mutual interests. Looking back, he was simply carrying on the conversation – especially, though never only, the bits he was interested in. He gave rare editions away; he taught students in hospital; and Nell, his first wife, even lodged one or two in need. He was persistent in cultivating multiple, cerebral friendships: relied on it for stimulus even. Even 22 years after he died, Helen

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Foreword to *SL*, & *passim*.

Vendler – who only had the chance to know him in the last five years of his life – recalled that it was hard not to be ‘charmed by him’.<sup>9</sup>

As Professor Geoffrey Ward observed in discussion on an earlier version of this study, a paradox here was how so impressive a communicator, mind and teacher – better loved than many of his peers – could be so ‘well-connected’ in the literary world– and yet seem to achieve so little in it, nor seemingly care less.<sup>10</sup> Career failure, as sketched here, may be one reason. Disestablishmentarianism another: as a serious Anarchist, he was treated as – then cultivated - outsider status with his then very traditional/ist employer, Magdalene College, Cambridge. This mattered – a surprising amount – to those who came to know him: even his obituaries, and in John Simpson’s homage to his old teacher – in, of all places, the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine* – discuss these point.

Just not to Arthur Sale. His explanation was, if anything, a desire for, as he put it, ‘slow fame: no puffs’. He simply left it to fate (though try googling him now). Perhaps, too, other, more immediate things mattered more: the thousands of letters, and the friendships abounding from them. And - as researching this study has obviously writ large – poems, verse drafts, all clearly worked on over a lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

Paradoxically again, the envelopes of these drafts – carefully compiled, numbered and labelled, though this partly at Penny, his second wife’s behest, were simply left to her to dispose of. It seemingly never occurred – or perhaps was beneath his dignity or anti-academic beliefs – to suggest they be archived somewhere, say, in academia. Yet tens of institutions would have welcomed his writing - simply out of the loyalty of friends and pupils, several of whom had or have their own archive collections.<sup>12</sup>

But then to whom would he then leave mainly ‘incomprehensible’ poems?<sup>13</sup> Penny, as her life moved on, passed them on to an individual who might do something with them – as opposed to consigning them to a dry shelf; perhaps also because I had expressed some interest in recording something of Arthur’s life and work. Twenty years slipped by till now, and the time came.

All this is also relates to the tricky question that mattered infinitely more to him: how this arcane poetry reads now, nearly a century after Sale started writing it. This first study, focussing on some brief literary

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<sup>9</sup> Email to me, September 2021. Constable recalled Sale’s generosity as a cause of complaint on Cambridge marking committees: ‘Arthur can find a redeeming feature in even the most palpably third-rate script’.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. this Chapter, *passim*; obituaries, appreciations etc. (see **Bibliography**). Prof. Ward’s comment made on the probationary report for this study, April 2023. Cf. also: handwritten note on a standard letter inviting dons to meet new alumni, from colleague Mark Billinge: ‘More of them will know you than know most of the rest of us.’ [On the back of a squirrel poem draft, 25<sup>th</sup> March 1988.]

<sup>11</sup> ‘no puffs’ = letter to Andy Brown, 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1975 (in **SL**) – regarding half-hearted publicity for **UW**.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Noel Grudgings (Nottingham); John Mole (Cambridge UL); Will Stone (Stanford).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. letter to Isabel Wolff, *ibid.* – and quoted later in this chapter, and in **Appendix 1**.

and biographical contextualising, just two late tree poems and their multiple drafts, followed by a range of poetic comparators back through time, will try and begin addressing this most obvious challenge.

## Context

Since his death in 2000, the poet, critic and teacher Arthur Sale has remained unknown to all but family, a few surviving friends, two or three older colleagues at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he supervised for five decades, and the undergraduates he supervised. His writings were sparse: he grew up then worked in worlds in which people wrote serious letters. He did too, but also carried on – clearly for his own reasons – and long after this stopped being fashionable: thousands of letters, over at least sixty years. This, alongside a small body of literary criticism and around 250 poems – a hundred of which include multiple drafts – forms his corpus.

As already noted, Sale formed a loyal following: at least sixty friends and ex-pupils attended a ‘Final Supervision’ – perhaps his only lecture? – in 1999. Even now, in the third decade following his death, his name conjured immediate responses.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps for related reasons, a sensitive man proud of being ‘the outsider’ in what he called a ‘non-career’, Sale was yet remarkably ‘well-connected’.<sup>15</sup> Researching this first attempt at analysing just a small portion of his work, has suggested the seriousness of his attention to poetry, as opposed to the world or worldly success. Meeting and/or corresponding – pre-war, with Herbert Read, T.S. Eliot, Henry Moore and F.R. Leavis; post-war, with John Crowe Ransom, I.A. Richards, Professor Wilfred Stone, the E.M. Forster expert – were far more about literary conversations, than publication or fame. Later, he taught Bamber Gascoigne (who became a writer and television presenter); John Mole (City of London Poet); John Simpson (BBC Foreign Correspondent); and Alan Rusbridger (Editor of *The Guardian*); later still he taught writers Monty Don, John Herdman, Richard Francis, Nick Drake and Isabel Wolff – among many others. Finally, he met Seamus Heaney, Nobel Laureate, and Helen Vendler, Harvard Professor of Poetry, who remains the only person to write seriously about his verse.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For a list of interviews conducted for this study, and also for a sample of personal testimonies – see **Bibliography**. The ‘final supervision’ is referred to in a Review of ‘Arthur Sale, *Selected Poems*’ in Magdalene College Magazine and Record No. 43 1998-99, p.72; and towards the end of Chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> As Professor Geoff Ward noted, in recent conversation.

<sup>16</sup> The Leavises he counted ‘slenderest’ friends – till he, like others, inadvertently offended them. There were influential – if always remote – literary figures such as I.A. Richards (long-standing Magdalene colleague, despite mainly climbing mountains, in China, or Harvard, Massachusetts); C.S. Lewis (Professor of Mediaeval and Renaissance Literature, reclusively-based at the College, who had rooms adjoining Sale’s first cubbyhole of an office); and even T.S. Eliot, appointed a Magdalene Honorary Fellow before the war – thanks to Richards, who in turn had been encouraged by Eliot to work at Harvard. He corrected George Steiner’s Shakespeare in Examiners’ meetings. He was deeply respected by younger colleagues: Eamon Duffy (later Professor of Church History, and Vatican Advisor); Nick Boyle (Professor of German, and Goethe authority). Much later, Sale enjoyed – or at least wrote mock-satirically about – poignant too-late meetings with William Empson (also ex-Harvard) and Seamus Heaney – both later made Honorary Fellows: the former via Richards, the latter via Eamon Duffy. And finally, there is the important late friendship with Helen Vendler – who came, partly because of the Heaney connection, but mainly again because

Put another way, Sale developed a quiet, genuinely-principled, modest and ‘rooted’ lifestyle. Some of this was doubtless self-enforced, much by circumstance, but also by aspects of character. He was, for example, deeply consistent in his attitudes over time; later, gradually, then decisively, excising academic practices he came to feel pointless. He clearly loved his craft, and maintained a huge correspondence with cultivated friends he cultivated well. Most survives from colleagues and ex-pupils after c.1956. Over decades, he received countless visitors at home and work. In between he worked – by his own account, ineffectually – on a huge garden in Girton, just outside Cambridge; and, quietly, at a slow-evolving verse and what he came to call its ‘objects’.



Fig.1 Sale at sixteen



He freely, even cheerfully, acknowledged to friends that his poems were often received as ‘incomprehensible’. Barely any of the verse was promoted, yet he persisted in re-drafting, working, worrying over, until each one was complete to his demanding satisfaction.<sup>17</sup> It is obviously written with consistent care, as his **Archive** – see section below – reveals: hand-written then hand-typed draft after draft, often over years or decades. If cheerfulness masked despair over the lack of publisher response, he came to mask it well – recent research shows he had tried pre-war, but at some point developed a growing sense – perhaps skin – that fate would decree. Just one professional collection, *Under*

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of Richards – who had given her her first major academic job: at Harvard. Cf. interviews with Nick Boyle, John Constable, John Mole, Penelope Robson – **Bibliography**.

Leavis Sale sought out because he’d admired *Scrutiny* while still at Nottingham; for this and the ‘falling-out’ cf. letter to me 8<sup>th</sup> April 1990 – **SL**. I recall him amusedly recounting being blanked on Ely station platform by Queenie. This was long after and the bewilderment still inferred; any pain at losing an interesting like-minded couple, long passed. For Eliot coming to Magdalene at the instigation of Richards cf. *Collected Letters*, Vol. 9, pp.165-6. Mole as an undergraduate remembered seeing Lewis forlorn in the Fellows’ Garden: and years later wrote a touching poem about it: ‘CSL’, in *Gestures & Counterpoints* (2017). Sale’s piece on Empson appeared in the *Magdalene Record* 1983-84.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Isabel Wolff, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, **SL** p.61.

*the War (UW)* was published, in 1975 – receiving a short, scathing review, by John Fuller in the *TLS*.<sup>18</sup>

*Fig.2 Sale at 70, in his teaching room (E4), First Court, Magdalene*

Two more slim collections were paid for privately: assembled and printed with small circulations by loyal pupils.<sup>19</sup> None remains in print. Yet obituaries appeared in *The Independent*, and *The Guardian*; and *The Times*, on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2000.

## Norse Sale

A key part of Sale's development had been an abiding interest in form(s): finding the right one for his own verse. After a Midlands' grammar school education, c. 1930 at the University of Nottingham he became friendly with a fellow undergraduate, Noel Grudgings. Together they developed an interest in alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse, which they translated together. After Grudgings's death, Sale arranged for his, by then extensive, collection of papers to be deposited there alongside the latter's specialist Norse library.<sup>20</sup> This included a poem to his friend. Sale returned to Anglo-Saxon from time to time throughout his life: in his eighties, he was talking to Seamus Heaney about scansion problems relating to *Beowulf*.<sup>21</sup> Long lines, wordplays, complex – Homeric, Folk – similes, ruggedness of verse *and* subject, suggest their influence in Sale's later poems – those analysed in Chapters two and three; Sale's use of Anglo-Saxon prosody doubtless deserves its own study – not only as a formative influence on his verse.<sup>22</sup>

Whether or not he wanted to pursue this sort of study further:

a heart condition resulting from rheumatic fever contracted whilst working as a schoolmaster for a year prevented him from pursuing a career as a university lecturer as he was expected to, and he moved to Cambridge in 1936, where he was able to teach correspondence courses for an educational trust, the University Correspondence College, and carry out the extensive 'hack editing', his own words, which he had undertaken for the trust's sister company, the University Tutorial Press.<sup>23</sup>

He was a lifelong, committed Anarchist; significantly so for his chosen life-choices, including attitudes to imperialism and its wars; to employers; Cambridge – including 'Cambridge English'; the 'industrialising'

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<sup>18</sup> *TLS*, 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1975, p.1327. See next note.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Cozens, while still an undergraduate, published a small hand-printed booklet, *Songs of Willow*, in 1975; Tony Whittome arranged for publication by Hutchinson of *UW* (also 1975); John Winter published *ScP* in Hobart (1990); Nick Blyth edited *SP* in Cambridge (1999).

<sup>20</sup> See **Bibliography** for link to this. Sale felt he had neglected his friend – cf. interview with Penny Sale; late correspondence with Alex Moffett.

<sup>21</sup> See final section of this chapter, for fuller accounts. Mentioned in an unpublished note to Penny explaining the prosody of an undergraduate imitation of an Anglo-Saxon riddle Sale had written, alongside a translation of 'The Waking of Angantyr'. Note, poem, typescripts all sent to Alex Moffett, 4<sup>th</sup> May 1998. All in Sale's **Archive**.

<sup>22</sup> He may have helped Grudgings with an original translation of an Icelandic poem, *The Wanderer*, for example. See **Appendix 2 Further Research**, including a link to Grudgings's collection.

<sup>23</sup> Title of Sale's M.A. being sourced at time of writing. (Again, I am grateful to Bevis Sale for suggesting this line of enquiring.)

of academia; ‘the Establishment’. He continued at heart to be a radical, pacifist-revolutionary – and not only when left-wing distinctions were deemed vital in liberal circles.<sup>24</sup>

## Surrealist/Modernist Sale

An obvious facet to Sale’s poetry lies in its arcane, flamboyant imagery. One early event may reflect why. Remarkably, after the curtailed university career, Sale was one of only eight poets whose verse appeared in the published programme for the 1937 *British Surrealist Objects and Poetry Exhibition* at the London Gallery - now Mayor Gallery, on Cork Street. He had just turned 25. Towards the end of his life – without sanctifying year or exhibition – Sale described how a middle-class boy from Nottingham could have gained such elite London exposure, without quite realising:

I saw an advert for a prospective anthology of social-realist verse and sent a few undergraduate verses to the lady in charge. The reply was a request from Herbert Read to use some of them in a catalogue for an exhibition of Surrealist art: I took surrealism to be an extensive of realism and was pleased to agree, and in due course I received an invitation to a pre celebration of the exhibition, which I had no desire to attend. When my wife and I did visit the gallery, we were shown round by the kindly lady...and Roland Penrose, who said that two people wished to see me. One was Dylan Thomas, but he had spent the night drunk in an alleyway and so was in no state to appear. The other was equally unknown to me, a Henry Moore, who would like us to go round to his studio.<sup>25</sup>

Sale’s perennial honesty shows in this short account, entitled *Memories of Moore*. Read was an influential Society academic, at that time writing polemical books like *Poetry & Anarchism* (1938). Though Sale’s younger son Bevis remembers his father mocking Read’s later form of ‘activism’: “*Sir* Herbert Read: *Anarchist*”, recent research has shown that his interest in Sale’s verse may have been genuine – and led to a remarkable early brush with the most influential Modernist poet of all: T.S. Eliot – which, typically, he does *not* record.<sup>26</sup>

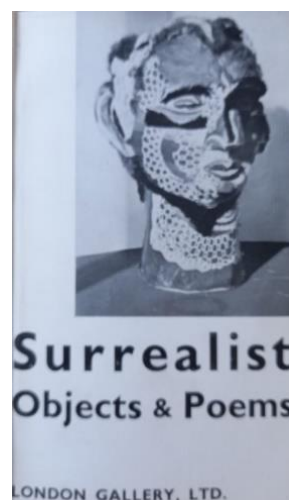


Fig.3 Programme for 1937 Surrealist Objects & Poems Exhibition

For now, aged 25, he already admired Modernist poets, particularly Eliot – whom he is obviously imitating in the exhibition programme’s ‘undergraduate poems’. This extract from the British Library copy is clearly

<sup>24</sup> Interview with John Constable – see **Appendix 1**. He recounted, in letters and conversation, how youthful ignorance meant that the less ideal consequences of Stalinism were still a long way from being understood in pre-war English liberal circles still squabbling over crazy procedural distinctions. He could see related reasons for his later falling out with Frank and Queenie Leavis etc. See also **Appendix 1**.

<sup>25</sup> In *Memories of Moore*, pp.1-2. Said to have been published in the *London Magazine* (not yet traced).

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Bevis Sale – **Bibliography**.

a lyrical exercise based on the last section of 'The Game of Chess' in *The Wasteland*, even if it is somewhat kinder to the protagonists:

**Chars.**

**One said Eggs is up a  
penny so I've eard.**

**One gasped : another swore :  
the thin one spoke no word.**

**But one lamented with lugubrious pride**

**E works when I aint able**

**I buys my eggs six at a time  
and four sits down to table.**

Sale's other verses in the programme feel similarly 'Eliot-ic'. He does not dabble in the Surrealists' more 'abstruse kinds of connection in which the expectation of resemblance is made explicitly difficult to grasp'; but something of their poetic freedom is evident in his own increasingly anarchic metaphors – with the visual, or other tangible semblance still adhering.<sup>27</sup>

Wild enough images in the early verse multiply as time goes by. Of hundreds that could be adduced, a random search from just one collection offers: birds like wild, disporting bathers in St. Tropez (fair enough...), birdsong depictions involve references to batons rapping podiums, and Little Gidding's catholic prayers. Also alluded to are: flick knives, emptied carts of stones, Molotov cocktails, ersatz orange groves, Saturn's closest moon (all these in 'Bare Ruined Choirs'; all simply on a thrush singing). Bridge piers look like white unicorns ('Third Anniversary'); nettle leaves like iron rods that hold old buildings up – or Roman shield formations, or flying buttresses, or pastry cutters, or gold leaf (all in 'Nettles'). Polled elms implicate woodlice on safari, the Titanic (made into 'cabers'), besom (brooms), bonds of Lilliput, encyclic cardiographs, galaxies like Vincent moons (Van Gogh's...), sealed barrows (as in 'graves?'), 'juggernauts' (admittedly carrying Dutch elm disease), 'thuggish daggers' (ditto – all these just in 'You See The Reach').<sup>28</sup> There are many more.

Again, to a self-willed, imaginative boy from Nottingham, such fashionable comparisons must have seemed audaciously rebellious – simply as oddly-appropriate ways of depicting life in an increasingly

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<sup>27</sup> Definition c/o Dr. Jeremy Noel-Tod.

<sup>28</sup> All poems in *ScP*, published in 1990.

‘surreal’ world.<sup>29</sup> Later trace-influence may again be inferred from contemporaneous letter to Moore, describing a walk through bombed streets:

I was already ½ tranced with walking, & didn’t notice anything much (not even St Pauls) until I suddenly found myself in a completely dead world, with all the buildings on each side down or derelict, as far as I could see. I cd.n’t believe it, at first (like those thoroughly dead backgrounds in Surrealist pictures!), & thought I must still be dreaming.<sup>30</sup>

Though Sale is already self-consciously distancing himself from Surrealist fashion – and rightly presumes Moore is too – he can’t help seeing the bomb-damaged streets through the extremes the style offers, however affected. What must have been a traumatic sight – the centre of world civilisation trashed – nevertheless also induced an anarchic sort of Modernist response, to try somehow to articulate surreally-beautiful conceits out of utterly-senseless destruction.

### **Anti-war poet**

Whatever professional exposure or poetic ideas *Surrealist Objects and Poetry* may have given Sale, worldly advancement was not among them. The potential for a more ambitious, equally-serious poet was considerable; yet there appears to have been little poetic affiliation, exposure, publication etc., after the Exhibition. One clue may have been illness: already in 1936 following rheumatic fever of which he nearly died – one obituary has it that this was caught after being told to supervise ‘rugger’ at the Grammar School he taught in for a year after university – the Sales moved to Girton, then still a rural village three miles from Cambridge. They eventually finished and settled in a bungalow they had bought half-built with Nell’s family’s support, from bankrupt local builder brothers.<sup>31</sup>

He spent the next twenty years in the ‘hack editing’ and correspondence teaching, to pay for this. As late as 1956, even though Magdalene had just given him some teaching from home, he was still mock-complaining to Moore:

I am so preoccupied with the grim struggle for existence these days that I see all time in terms of pounds, shillings & pence (mostly pence) & am coming to the horrible state of feeling guilty at using up any time that has not its price ticket stuck on it bottom corner.<sup>32</sup>

Here he confesses to not getting to Moore’s latest exhibition, ‘despite good intentions’; but also makes sure to add:

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Memories of Moore* p.6.

<sup>30</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> September 1942, **SL** p.1.

<sup>31</sup> All this from interviews with sons Bevis 2021 and Jonathan (‘Jonty’) – see **Appendix 1**.

<sup>32</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> October 1956, *ibid.* p.3. The exhibition was probably ‘French and English Lithographs, Etchings [etc.]’ at the [Redfern Gallery](#), London 1956. The Catalogue listed works from 1-360 and 401-583 (exhibits 482-491 were Henry Moore’s).



London does appal me & even its hidden beauties can't make it appeal enough to fetch me there.

Yet there is then a characteristically surreal *and* somehow wistful compliment to his all-too-remote friend, and to the artistic world by then he clearly felt cut off from:

...but with enough to feel the pull of a different & better world moving at a distance of a few light years only.<sup>33</sup>

An earlier, obvious, clue to Sale's apparent lack of ambition was World War Two.

Sale as a lifetime pacifist had declared himself a Conscientious Objector – which emotional cost he recorded in verse – including poems recently shown to have been praised by none other than John Crowe Ransom.<sup>34</sup>

Like many others who so suffered, his poetry at the time shows the guilt of world events beginning in September 1939. Sale was serious when he wrote that Clare Bridge, an ornamental footbridge over the River Cam, 'kept me sane' during World War Two; he continued writing about it, in his *Bridge* sequence for decades – seemingly as an obscure, if effective, kind of 'art-meets-nature' therapy.<sup>35</sup> Much of *UW*, though published thirty years later, nevertheless deals with clearly related traumas; the *Archive* contains at least two long satirico-confessional verse narrative poems on the war.<sup>36</sup>

All this might have seemed inconceivable in 1936 when he had moved to Cambridge. According to what his parents later told their younger son Bevis, this was simply because it was a pretty city – and they came to live quietly beyond it in a small village beyond the throng: there were then no A45, A14 or M11 junctions half a mile away.<sup>37</sup> The Sales made it the conventional family home. Jonathan ('Jonty') was born in 1943: Sale wrote touchingly about this half a century later: 'Jonty came into being by a wordless agreement when Nell thought she had lost her younger brother in the war ('Missing: presumed killed.' [P.O.W., actually])'. Bevis, named after the boy in the eponymous novel by another literary, and nature-loving idol, just after the war, was born in 1948.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> That he was in full retreat from London artistic circles (let alone pre-war Surrealist ones) is borne out by the fact that he ends by acknowledging how he has looked at some of Moore's work in reproduction ('Vol. 2'): strikingly, 'even that without the care it requires'. This had not always been so: in *Memories of Moore*, he recalls him and Nell sitting on a settee in Moore's living room, having the two original *Shelter* sketch books placed in each lap. 'I think he was a little hurt by the depth of our feelings', so moved were they.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. unpublished 1948 airmail in the University of California Santa Cruz Special Collection (MS320), praising 'The Crack' and related imagery.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to Richard Verity, 1st September 1993 *SL*.

<sup>36</sup> The reference to Clare Bridge is in a letter to Isabel Wolff, 17<sup>th</sup> April 1986 *SL*. See *Archive* for narrative poems.

<sup>37</sup> Bevis recalled this in an interview with me, on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2021. I remember Arthur complaining of the vibrating, deafening noise of the dual carriageway when he crossed it on the footbridge from Girton into Cambridge, and of his walk to Madingley down Washpit Lane being cut off – by the A14 *and* M11. By then – early 80s – he was resigned to it – though in an *ScP* poem, nettles get some redress by taking over its verges.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Jefferies: *Bevis, Story of a Boy*. Jonty's origins: in a letter to me, 13<sup>th</sup> March 1990 *Archive*.

One poem of the time serves to illustrate other war-shocks – but also the kinds of poetic preoccupations and innovations, broadly Modernist, but also idiosyncratic, that gradually took hold post-war, finding expression in Sale’s later nature poems. “Neither Fear nor Courage Save Us” was an example of the earliest, most vividly autobiographical, expressions of the effect of war on a pacifist – as Helen Vendler points out half a century later in her introduction to **SP**. These starkest of poetic responses eventually appear in the first section, also entitled ‘Under the War’, in **UW**; and is one of only nine to make the cut to **SP**.

Most of the others deal in one way or another with the idea of what we now blithely call mental health issues: various ‘cracks’: physical and psychological, as well as forms of paralysis – especially in the lethargy of the afternoon, which theme occupies a third of the collection. Yet “Neither Fear...” also suggests the beginnings of a completely new poetic approach – one that eventually seems to take him in a very different direction to that of much other twentieth century English poetry.

Its source, Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’, a line from which Sale quotes for his title, bears a far more resigned air of satire about the effects of war, than the confessional – but clearly defiant – guilt he wrings from those same words. The former posits the abstract musings of ‘an old man in a dry month... a dull head among windy spaces’...; the latter forms the sharpest, saddest reflection on condemning pacifists for their perceived ‘cowardice’: not because courage sometimes turns out to be authorised recklessness, but because war kills *people*: ‘cowards’ and ‘courageous’ alike.

Equally tangibly, several other poems in Sale’s sequence refer to the home he and Nell had had completed at the very end of High Street, Girton. No. 2 was badly-built, perhaps because of its pre-war provenance: poems with titles such as ‘Renovation’, ‘The Snag’, ‘The Tell-Tale Crack’, use cracks or snags in the fabric of the bungalow to express more generalised forms of depression. Yet Sale’s narration in “Neither fear...” still feels particularly direct: again, personal.

It begins:

Is it enough for me to say that  
I am a coward

Sale, like so many other pacifists, could hardly fail to fear recrimination or official reprimand, or even the simple moral dilemmas posed by apparently innocent visitors, who appear later on in the poem, gathering scrap metal ‘for the war effort’. The guilt of letting society down in terms of all the normal rituals and services: postman, bread deliveries, charity collections – scrap or Spitfires.

and the  
harsh voice from the road the  
gate rocking the rubber footsteps on the concrete  
the dead knock on the shaking door

are but  
the casual visitor the baker's boy

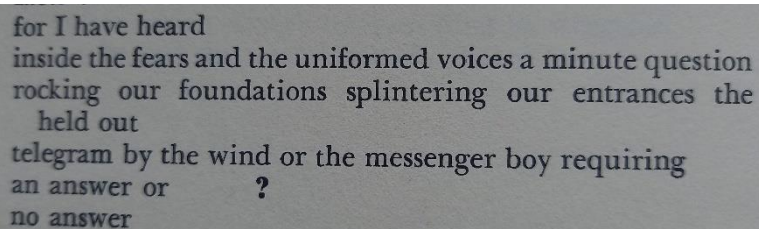
The five-barred gate at the end of the front garden at No. 2 led to a path skirting the large lawn and onto the concrete threshold: see previous photograph.

As well as fear and guilt, there is another feeling lurking here, which demonstrates – embodies, in an otherwise archly-confessional poem – Sale's consistency towards social pressure, let alone that of total war. The opening question of the poem allowed the larger implication that it is *war itself* that is unhinged, *not* those who reject its imperatives. By the end, the syntax of the poem, as well as the spacing of it on the page, just begins – perhaps not at all coincidentally, and for the very first time in Sale's work – to threaten to break apart.

The whole poem clearly still resonates with Eliot's influence: powerfully here, with that lyrical, somewhat sententious kind of Modernist-preacher 'voice'. But Sale places it: the poet's answer to glib 'solutions' comes in the last verse, as he alliteratively – somehow falteringly – replies:

It is not enough to declare these  
facts or these fancies

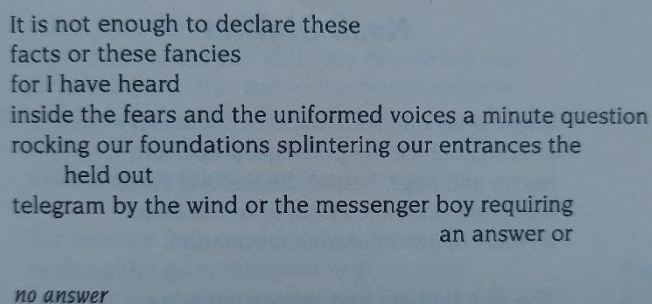
because beneath his paranoias all of his village is continuously threatened, not just by bombs but by the message judderingly conveyed in the final seven irregular, plangent lines



for I have heard  
inside the fears and the uniformed voices a minute question  
rocking our foundations splintering our entrances the  
held out  
telegram by the wind or the messenger boy requiring  
an answer or ?  
no answer

Fig.4 extract from "Neither Fear" in UW

– that bring the news of humans dying. Only the second last line is given an emphatic '?', leaving the silence hanging in the incomplete phrase after 'or' but it also cleverly means the final 'no answer' is unanswerably emphatic. The person receiving the news of a son's death will not need to give an answer, but there is also 'no answer' to the poet's polemical assertion that 'it is not enough' to assert the case for war, or against anyone who disagrees with war as a solution. Twenty-four years later, in **SP**, Sale takes out even the final question-mark, sends the previous line to the right:



It is not enough to declare these  
facts or these fancies  
for I have heard  
inside the fears and the uniformed voices a minute question  
rocking our foundations splintering our entrances the  
held out  
telegram by the wind or the messenger boy requiring  
an answer or  
*no answer*

Fig.5 extract from "Neither Fear" in SP

– and then italicises *no answer*.

One other poem, that didn't make the cut to **SP**, also conveys this touch of black, satirical defiance. The previous poem in **UW**, *The Challenges*, concludes with even more directness:

If it were only me cracked  
no matter; all you say  
would be correct .

The poet's reactions to war 'do not count', and 'nor does [his] verse': so he recants both. Unfortunately – as the poet tartly then retorts – '...your world's I can't.' But ““Neither Fear...”” stands out for those hints of later poetic innovations that reinforce the awful complex of emotions, written, as Sale later put it in *Memories of Moore*, 'in our most desperate time'.<sup>39</sup>

### **'Driven inwards'**

In some ways Sale still remained '*under* the war'. Though the first of his collections, *Under the War* (**UW**), was only published in 1975, it contains poems from the war onwards, and so offers hints of Sale's very slow-burn changes in approach and subject. Vendler thought the pacifist poems original of their kind; an astonishing depiction of pacifist guilt and defiance, ““Neither Fear nor Courage Save Us””, for example, may quote Eliot in 'Gerontion'; but for the first time in Sale's work it employs radical word spacings and typographic emphases to convey its double/ironic meanings.

Importantly perhaps, later verse included in **UW** – 'Pike' e.g. – consciously excises the focus on internal psychologies – even human feeling itself.

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The internal repercussions **UW** continues to express in 1975 were no doubt also fuelled by the lack of permanent employment, even when College work began. He was only a quarter-joking in telling Moore in 1956, that he more than ever measured everything in pence; and cracks in the bungalow powerfully represent the post-war state of mind, in a number of poems in the collection.

*Postscript: sold after he died, No.2 is now unrecognisable as a developer's cul-de-sac: a further apposite irony the verse actually foretold: life imitating Art.*

In practical terms, between c. 1936 and 1956 Sale continued mocking his own 'grim struggle for existence'.<sup>40</sup> As well as remote teaching, from 1938 he also edited editions of standard works for a branch

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.6.

<sup>40</sup> 16<sup>th</sup> October 1956, in **SL**.

of his employer, the University Tutorial Press, as well as book Reviews for *MLQ*, *English*, and the *Cambridge Journal*, *Review* and *Quarterly* periodicals.

‘Driven inwards’ – as he entitles a moving poem about being ‘forced’ to write poetry – that then makes up for everything – Sale painstakingly sought effective new ways of trying to begin to express something of the baffling effectiveness of nature as the life-force of the universe: ‘the daily miracle of life’, as he came to call it.

Over this long period, poetic subject and style gestate beyond satirical and confessional kinds of writing. Sale gradually loses the Eliotic lilt in his verse, in favour of his own, distinct voice – lyrical and abrasive by turns; he also begins to experiment with new technical effects which then develop much further over after what he called the ‘desperate time’ of war.

Driven inwards by post-war life, poetic insights essentially came from detailed, extended observation, over years, decades: only ever initially from any sort of spiritual epiphany.<sup>41</sup> He can be extraordinarily detailed in his biology of what he observed: say, on the futile mimicry by sparrows of tits expertly dissecting seed-heads, of mites living in the minute stem-hairs of nettles, of which species living in which trees, and why.

Overall, Sale kept to the same work and observation patterns over sixty years. He was avowedly ‘the most rooted of men’, writing thus to later pupil, ‘the least rooted’ of men, John Simpson: war correspondent. He walked most or all of the three miles to and from Girton to Cambridge – later on, to Magdalene – well into his seventies, only occasionally completing the run by bus. Later on, he offered students, friends and colleagues coffee and cakes on Saturdays; marking, attending annual College events. At home he wrote letters and gardened. In between, he tinkered with the poems, and – as this study will begin to suggest – very gradually evolving his complex form and his ‘living’ subject.<sup>42</sup>

In this, there is also the increasingly-focussed contemplation of what Sale saw: in or from his Girton garden. Certainly from the 1960s onwards, form and content move further away from a stark Modernist/Surrealist depiction of various forms of human existence, into a riddling – often startling – new expression: of the ‘living forms’ that could be seen from a window or doorstep.

Technically, too, as the next three chapters will examine, Sale begins experimenting with more radical kinds of word-spacings, and a multiplicity of other verse techniques: unpunctuated sentences, looser versification, counterpointed, intricate enjambement, serial word-plays, multiple sound effects. While each of these obviously occurs in other poets of the period, few indulge in such almost ‘Baroque’ combinations

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. handwritten poem with this title – see **Archive**.

<sup>42</sup> Email from John Constable, July 2023; interview with Penny Robson – see **Bibliography**.

of these. Most importantly – and as the analysis to come may show – an endless prolixity of often baffling imagery is turned to the service of his new subject: life itself.

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For such an intense, communicative, bookish, man with such early prospects, war, then circumstances after war, had rendered Sale a career failure. He was in his forties when the chance meeting in the Cambridge University Library tea room in 1956 led to an offer of hourly-paid teaching for Magdalene: not in College. Unthinkable now, of course, but even then it was clear he was only brought in to ‘fill in’, as was painfully apparent to at least one early pupil.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, teaching gradually took over. Not given pension rights until 1975, Sale came to specialise in Shakespeare, Tragedy, American Literature and Practical Criticism – that form of analysis ‘invented’ (albeit for another purpose) by his nominal ‘senior’: I. A. Richards.<sup>44</sup> His breadth of reading became renowned.<sup>45</sup> He taught all four Tripos papers for four decades – and the present study reflects the influence of each of these on his verse.

And he wrote much less prose. By 1971 even reviewing stopped – bar the odd, occasional, piece for the *Magdalene College Record*. Had he not, he could have progressed further: in the early 1980s – i.e. long after it mattered – he told me, in answer to a question about his own ambitions, that he ‘could have been a professor’; this had seemed obvious even at to a self-absorbed undergraduate. He resisted – though he was also hardly clubbable – nor, later, corporate. Either way, as early as 1963, he wrote to another academic friend Bob Chamberlain – in general despair, rather than envy or schadenfreude:

Shd there not be a moratorium on literary criticism for a decade? [...] Research articles are of no use for teaching undergraduates, or for public illumination. There they are, the sole produce of the rat-race mill.<sup>46</sup>

What remained was a love of specialist teaching – and writing poems. Long-term, whatever the internal strain away from ‘the rat-race mill’, Sale found a badly-paid niche and made the most of it.

This was also a rich seam at a key point of societal change. Once established at Magdalene, Sale could carve out working practices that are unimaginably halcyon to any modern academic. The Sales may have been relatively impoverished, but student grants, less exclusive admissions’ processes – and Oxbridge wealth compared with other universities – meant he could pursue a life’s hobby in the prettiest of places,

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

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Practical Criticism*, ed. John Constable – introduction.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Times*’ obituary: ‘Possessed of an extraordinarily retentive memory he could astonish undergraduates by effortless quotation of verse, or detailed accounts of the plots of minor fiction he had read once when himself a student.’ Bamber Gascoigne quipped that he had ‘read everything twice.’ Colleagues as well as pupils – John Constable, Eamon Duffy and Nick Boyle – cited examples of his depth of reading – **Bibliography**.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 8<sup>th</sup> February 1963 **SL**. He goes on to draw a rough equivalence to eighteenth-century clerics required to publish sermons no one would ever read. For the mooting of a Fellowship, see my interview with Nick Boyle: several of us worried about Sale’s place in what even self-absorbed undergraduates must have realised a somewhat uncongenial workplace.

teaching and corresponding with increasingly-interested, bright, committed young individuals, during one-, two-, or even three-hour conversations ('Supervisions'): nearly all of them about verse-making.<sup>47</sup> Some examining and marking of course – but he didn't even have to publish or lecture. So the poetry production flourished.

### Archive

In all, Sale produced four slim volumes of poetry in the last quarter of his life. This might have suggested ambition yet all came through ex-students. The London poetry editor, Anthony Whittome, had read *History* at Magdalene, knew of Sale's reputation, got to know him much later through College connections, and offered to publish *UW* in 1975. In the same year, the hand-printed *Songs of Willow* was encouraged, edited and produced by Andrew Cozens, while still an undergraduate.



Fig.6 Sale's Archive

*Scrambled Particles (ScP)* was edited by academic and friend John Winter in 1990; *SP*, edited by ex-pupil, Nick Blyth, in 1999.<sup>48</sup>

Sale left behind a haphazardly-organised, shelf-length **Archive**. This consisted of plastic bags full of bundles of letters, papers, folders of assorted 'early' poetry c. 1928 to c.1945, Anglo-Saxon verse translations, exercise book and other handwritten 'collections' of thematic verse; and one hundred A4 re-used brown envelopes, each inscribed with the name of the set of a draft-numbered poem. These date from the war until he died in 2000. There are also verses and papers sent him by friends and pupils, a small sample of correspondence to poets, and originals and copies of other letters that have been donated already; to which I have added some of the correspondence originally brought together for *SL*. Finally, there are

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<sup>47</sup> Looking back to 1980 myself as an undergraduate, I can remember enjoying, but completely taking these things for granted; all while simultaneously panicking in the headlights of erudition. Student grants were means-tested, grammar schools greatly broadened the demographic pool, and, from the 1970s, political attention paid to Higher Education admissions to 'elite' universities, all had an impact. When Sale started at Magdalene, young men really were admitted on unashamed family or professional backgrounds, and academic staff too. (This was recalled in all my interviews with Sale's early undergraduates, and colleagues. Hunting, fishing, shooting – and drinking – really were the avowed cultural pastimes, even persisting, in eloquent corners, till my time there.) Times changed, and by 1982 there was a public boast about Cambridge student-intake hitting 50% state-educated. (Ironically enough, the same 'breakthrough' was repeated in the mid-90s: possibly because of the demise of grammar schools in between. But by then a generation of young people in comprehensive education had not been particularly well-supported to break through elite glass ceilings, and even now, student fees, a fragmented schools' system and a larger, aspirant middle class have tended to set things back.)

Salic supervisions ran as follows: the first hour punctuated by coffee; the second by tea; the third (admittedly much rarer), by College sherry - I recall it stored in the window seat of E4.

<sup>48</sup> Sale refers to Tony Whittome in his 'non-career' letter to John Mole, I was an undergraduate when the surprise presentation of *Ambages* happened, and Nick Blyth and Andrew Cozens were both interviewed for this study. John Winter's correspondence is in *SL*, though Sale refers to his 'antipodean' verse collection in several other letters.

annotated proofs and editions of most of his publications - including those ‘working copies’ – manuscripts of unpublished papers and typescripts, and other miscellanea.

Drafts in an **Archive** locked in a metal trunk under my desk, and – literally – read by no one else since he died in 2000, become key to understanding Sale’s poetic intentions – in such theoretical and pragmatic ways. The thing that matters most we are careful whom – and how – we tell. Worn down by life or not, what was written clearly mattered *in itself*: for meaning, as for formation, and then finished form. Particularly the latter: jokily criticising John Simpson for splitting an infinitive in Afghanistan, he far more seriously, critiqued an undergraduate essay in praise of Arthur Hugh Clough: indignantly noting how Yeats – unlike Clough – could ‘spend a day on eight words’.<sup>49</sup>

The verse drafts are composed in a generally neat, increasingly large, sometimes expansive or florid handwriting – some later organised and clearly-labelled by Penny; all in fountain (or, later, marker) pen, on all kinds of recycled paper. Draft after draft, often making what look like tiny changes: a single word, spacing, or re-ordering of a line. Every handwritten version, once it reaches a certain stage, is typed, but usually re-typed. Some go back to pen. As he made clear to Nick Blyth, explaining his indifference towards **SP**:

I scarcely write it for my own pleasure, though I like the satisfaction of completion, of feeling I have done all I can. But then I have finished. If a few friends & peers come across it & find it worth looking at, then I am pleased, it is now their poem & they may well see it differently, in interpretation and in effect & in centre: perfectly valid & acceptable.

And adds:

I don’t think of publishers & what they see as marketable.

Some poems, with clear deliberation, developed over decades. He wore this composing remarkably lightly – given the intensity of focus that lies beneath. In conversation Penny and both sons convey a sense of him at work on his poems: it barely impinged. Jonty remembered typing the odd verse for his father, even progressing to a word processor he had acquired – which impressed by speeding up the re-types. Various ex-pupils offered to copy and print versions.<sup>50</sup> Otherwise he never sacrificed people to poetry: he was sociable, witty, invariably pleased to have company. The poems might matter, but by no means dominated working or waking hours.<sup>51</sup> He may have written once about his favourite American poet, Emily Dickinson

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<sup>49</sup> This was Andrew Brown’s early 1960s’ essay – kindly given to the Sale **Archive** by Brown’s widow, Lorna, in September 2022. I remember it amusing Andy that Sale had encouraged him to study such writers as Clough in the first place – *cf.* conversation about production of **SL** c.2002. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>50</sup> John Constable, Robert Rickard and Richard Verity **SL**, **Archive** copies, and **Appendix 1**.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. also: conversations with Penelope Robson: 6<sup>th</sup> May 2022; and with Jonty and Bevis Sale: 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2021 & 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022. For more on Sale’s professed poetry writing habits: see letters to I.A. Richards, John Mole, Isabel Wolff (*et al*). **SL** & **Appendix 1**.



liking people more than her verse; perhaps he knew this of himself too: but, like her, hid – or learnt to hide – the poems away.<sup>52</sup>

Of fame, we glimpsed Sale earlier: writing to former pupil and Cambridge University Press publisher, Andy Brown, self-effacing about the local bookshop, Heffers, ‘failing’ to give much prominence to UW: ‘I wish to earn slow merit if any: no puffs.’<sup>53</sup> Even physically handling the drafts of one so seemingly insouciant about their products’ future, feels an unnerving sort of privilege, and not just for intimate insights into the most intricate workings of a modest, essentially private, poet’s mind, as the precise thought-processes behind his many alterations silently show themselves. They raise questions: most pertinently: why so treasure these drafts, and not simply destroy them on completion?

### Genetic Methodology

For someone who may one day come to be seen as ‘an experimental Modernist’ (see next section: **Life after Modernism**), Sale in his own observations makes clear both his view of who makes the text, and his drafts are ordered and numbered for the same reason: they aim towards a final ‘product’.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, Van Hulle’s theory of *exo*-genetic influences on the text *after* production, as opposed to *endo*- (=during), still has huge relevance, given Sale’s equal interest in, and occasional reversion to. previous readings.<sup>55</sup> Most importantly, as we will see below, he wrote about not ‘playing into the hands of the Structuralists’ by admitting of the mutability of textual intention, *not* because he wanted control of the text forever, but because he felt Structuralists (and by extension other Postmodern philosophers) tend to make all writing far too self-conscious, merely *about writing itself*. Or as Lyotard (often seen as a catalyst for Postmodernism) could therefore even still be rhetorically debating in 1982: ‘What then, is the Postmodern? What place does it or does it not occupy in the vertiginous work of the questions hurled at the rules of image and narration?’ – etcetera.<sup>56</sup>

There are today theoretical breakdowns of what is called ‘Genetic Criticism’ to seek to help explain the kinds of process Sale was explicitly interested in – not least in their preservation and ordering, especially to alert an enquiring reader of his draft work to unintended or alternative readings and interpretations – as well as to the rationale behind those deliberately avoided. Van Hulle, in particular, provides a taxonomic

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<sup>52</sup> Review of *Emily Dickinson* by Richard Chase, in *The Cambridge Review*, January 24, 1953, pp. 244-246.

<sup>53</sup> To Andrew Brown 8<sup>th</sup> August 1975 – **SL**.

<sup>54</sup> For the purposes of this study, ‘Postmodernism’ is defined according to the Norton description, adopting Lyotard and Foucault’s ideas of a world where an agreed idea of anything – including art – has become impossible): *ibid.* p.1609ff.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid* – *passim*.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Answering the Question: ‘What is Postmodernism?’’, in *Modernism / Postmodernism*, Brooker, p.148.

breakdown of the kinds of ‘reading’ Philip Larkin was among the first to celebrate: the ‘magical value’ of the manuscript, as against the ‘ultimate form and final meaning’ of a composition; and which finds genetic criticism asserting as its own literary sub-discipline. Manoeuvring round Postmodern debates as to whether the writer writes the text, or the text writes the writer, or just itself, Van Hulle – most charmingly perhaps – cites Hay’s depiction of the genetic critic as ‘a ferryman between the universe of the writer and that of the reader, trying to find out how the work was made’.<sup>57</sup>

And hence perhaps the reason Sale was also adamant that in the vast aeons beyond a poet’s ‘exo-genetic creativity’ (i.e. up until the ‘pass for press’ stage), each reading patently becomes the reader’s own; just as soon as he has done as much as possible to ‘finish’ – and then release – it in as interesting and internally consistent a form as possible.<sup>58</sup> And so on the one hand, the reason he resists even his far more eminent colleague I. A. Richards’ tendency to ‘play into the hands of the Structuralists’, is because of the tendency to delimit types of readings, and also not encourage the kinds of expansive imaginative, lateral or other ‘rich, strange’ writing he wants his readers to explore.<sup>59</sup>

First, however – and again, more pragmatically – the genetic analyses that follow in the next two Chapters offer immediate clarifications as to intended *literal* meanings more explicitly stated in early versions. This is particularly important given Sale’s general elliptic, even dangerously opaque, phrasing. Most of all these help offer what he calls a ‘thread’ through the labyrinth of Sale’s imagery: the complex linguistic landscape the draftwork refines, and intensifies, *into* the verse. Comparing drafts helps flesh out, simply confirms or elaborates the kinds of imaginative narrative we may begin to perceive in the poems as they develop through their ‘fascicles’.

In other words, as Van Hulle cites Ridley realising when he edited Keats’s manuscripts in 1963: ‘sometimes, when we are lucky, we can surprise him in the act of creation, seeing not only the finished statue but also the strokes of the chisel.’ Irrespective of the reverent tone, it depicts the sense of considerable craftsmanship Sale’s drafts reveal: *his* interest in each verbal chisel-stroke. Again, the interest was both ‘terminal’: ‘the finished sculpture’ or poem rendered as affective as possible; but *formative*, in leaving behind the marks of the process to which he had submitted, in the evidence trail of poetic gestation. Both suggest what Sale wrote of not publishing: it needed doing ‘for poetry’s sake alone’. Or as he wrote to ex-pupil and popular novelist Richard Francis in 1985: ‘If one doesn’t write for writing’s sake, the arts

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (pp.1960-1974); *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry & Poetics* (1974): pp.172ff; p.520 etc.

<sup>58</sup> See next quotation (& **Appendix 1**) for Sale on re-drafting his own poems – including their end points.

<sup>59</sup> **Appendix 1**: the section on ‘**Poetic solipsism & narcissism**’ arguing the danger of self-consciousness in Structuralism, in particular. See also next quotation.

are not being served'.<sup>60</sup> Again, I always tended to think such utterances as idealistic, or somehow theoretical. The draftwork left behind tends to show he simply meant it.

*NB Shortly after this project started, Sale's employer, Magdalene College, Cambridge kindly accepted safe deposition of Sale's **Archive** – which will be handed over following its completion.*<sup>61</sup>

### **Life after Modernism...**

The examples given so far strongly posit Eliot's early influence, but also how his writing gradually began to experiment beyond obvious Modernist techniques, though never exactly embracing the Postmodern – except perhaps in vivacious wildness of image-making.<sup>62</sup> Twenty years of correspondence teaching meant working almost in isolation, until the mid-1950s. Companionable poetry discussions generally came later – but only then with a very few former pupils such as John Mole, whom he rated as highly as any of his generation. And even in this case, though decades later he was proud to cry at a reading of one of his poems (see Chapter 3), he still gently distanced himself from Mole's 'short lines' and relatively conventional – if remarkably lucid, gentle – expression.<sup>63</sup>

Sale wrote of referring poetic undergraduates to their peers as the best critics; but more obviously Postmodernist peers increasingly held fewer attractions for him, as the narrative below will suggest.

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Much more generally, again, Postmodernism – and particularly its critical and methodological offshoot, Structuralism – had been gradually drip-fed into Cambridge via benign thinkers who lectured we undergraduates of the 1970s and 1980s – such as Kermode and Williams. As such, we were simply not generally exposed to seemingly more pugnacious French theorists, such as Foucault, Barthes, and – literally – Jacques Derrida: whom some of us (in 1983) were all the more agog to hear speak – thinking him satisfyingly 'anti-establishment' (if publicly-funded), and complex (nebulously-understood).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Letter to Jo & Richard Francis, 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1985, **SL** p.59. Van Hulle – *ibid*.

<sup>61</sup> I am very grateful to Jeremy Noel-Tod and John Mole for prompting this idea; but – most of all – to Dr. Jane Hughes of Magdalene College Cambridge, for accepting these papers into the state-of-the-art New Library Archive at the College.

<sup>62</sup> Further research on the pre-war verse may possibly suggest other Modernist influences – *cf.* the Ransom correspondence, alluded to (but not yet seen at the time of writing), at Stanford University.

<sup>63</sup> In a letter to Mole: 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986 **SL**. See **Appendix 1** for full quotation, and discussion in section on *Loose blank verse*, Chapter 2.

<sup>64</sup> I palpably recall the rather forced excitement of Derrida coming; he was a. near-inaudible and b. incomprehensible (accent, and meaning). The largest lecture theatre on the Arts' Faculty site, Lady Margaret Hall, was so packed we had to stand at doorways for the first hour, aisles for the second, and seats for the third. None of this diminished the political importance of the event – somehow a rebuke to the English Faculty, University, staid academia etc. I remember Sale benignly enough enjoying the feedback.

Yet Postmodernism was also attractive to us, simply because it seemed on the surface to encourage a loosening-up of literary approaches and responses. On the one hand, it could be defined by Scholes, in 1974, as allowing for texts being read as ‘a matter of personal judgment [with] no single “right” reading’; can also be type-cast (in Jameson’s well-articulated definitions of 2001) type-cast therefore as a reaction to previous cultures (e.g. Modernist); as pastiche – rather than parodic, or simply funny; c. effacing ‘boundaries’ – between ‘high culture and so-called mass...culture’; and d. denying the autonomy or even existence of the ‘Subject’ or individual, and, therefore, even of the possibility of new styles or worlds: since ‘they’ve already been invented’. So there is both uncertainty in how now ‘to read’ a text; but that text can itself consist of all kinds of reactions to earlier forms and mantras – or none at all.<sup>65</sup>

Sale did not disagree with much of this, but his drafts show him wrestling with the final and most challenging aspect: in practice, rather than endlessly debating it all, in theory. He wrote that he felt to do otherwise was to give in to ‘the paucity of the language of the age’: that he had to try – like Yeats; or, say, Hopkins, in his ‘anti-Victorian’ sound effects – to try and invent his own poetic language, rather than simply ‘theorising’:

The danger (I discussed this with I.A. Richards, who in his humility as a poet, as against his confidence as a critic, felt that words chose him, not vice versa) that one plays into the hands of the structuralists, who make one at the mercy of words: one writes about writing. And Thomas himself says “will you choose me, you English words, Sometimes?”... But this is writing as a practitioner, as a painter with his palette, ignoring the resultant, which is the reader’s concern.

And hence the *real* reasons for such extensive, intricate draft work.<sup>66</sup> The question for this and future studies is whether Sale’s late tree poems succeed in communicating their new, finished forms of expression.

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Paradoxically – whatever the accidents of literary fashion, politics or life events – in later years Sale failed to meet many like-minded experimentalists. Over half a lifetime, academic fashions clearly changed, and he had begun writing earlier than many of his poetic Cambridge colleagues were born; they – or he – were on a different trajectory. Later contemporaries writing equally complex – though often, in his terms, more self-conscious or self-referential, sometimes Postmodern verse – might tempt comparison. J. H. Prynne, for sheer opacity, tempts the analysis that follows in Chapter 3; or more tantalising, for her mix of sensitivity

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<sup>65</sup> Scholes: *cf. Structuralism in Literature*, p.144; Jameson: synoptic essay in the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2001 ed. pp.1960-1974.

<sup>66</sup> *Cf. again, Norton ibid & previous n.* But again, these terms were not widely accepted: at the very time Sale was becoming most experimental, a definitive guide such as the *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry & Poetics* (1974) barely touches on Postmodernism, other than early Barthes (p.520), tangentially debating ‘value-judgments’ in *Criticism* (p.172ff.), touching on Sartre’s Existentialism, and Blanchot’s ‘surrealist’ idea of poetry as ‘failing... to define human existence by means of poetic language’ (p.520). At the time, hardly establishment thinking, but, as noted, Sale’s criticism of its emanation in the new cult of Structuralism in particular, was precise: *its* delimiting of the power of poetic utterance – rather than (say) as an attack on an ‘Establishment’ of which as an Anarchist he tended, of course, to approve.

and garrulity, was Prynne's pupil the late Veronica Forrest-Thomson, with whom Sale once appeared in print.

He was published in an American journal *The Windless Orchard*, alongside other 'Cambridge poets' in 1975 – including Forrest-Thomson, about whose untimely death a few months earlier he undoubtedly would have heard. The gesture was a favour to his pupil, Andrew Cozens – who had been orphaned just a year earlier – and who edited the compilation on behalf of the American University that published it. Though Sale and Nell looked after Cozens in ways for which the latter is still to this day grateful, Sale was nonetheless openly sceptical about the mostly 'solipsistic' verse in *The Windless Orchard*.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, Forrest-Thomson potentially makes a more interesting comparator than other contemporaries, both for explorative verse style, but also theoretical pursuit of a return to more elaborate forms of poetic artifice – of the type this study will suggest Sale fully recognised. Though she obviously died too young to develop either verse-form or idea, I suspect he would have relished her sharing his kind of search — the flavour, if not the meanings in her artificially-reductive models: 'naturalisation', 'image-complexes', 'non-semantic language'; the exuberant perception in praising Ashbery over Hughes, and more general 'irreverence... exhilarating and engaging, formal interpretations'.<sup>68</sup> Though her poems, in his terms, hardly escape his idea of 'solipsism', they are witty ('Not Pastoral Enough'; 'Hyphen'; 'Literary Historian'; 'Ducks & Rabbits'), or both ('According to the Script'; 'Cordelia'; 'Through the Looking Glass'; 'Sonnet'). Almost all are *felt* – even the exercises or occasional verse – because they so freely explore linguistic territory well beyond the merely self-referential or meta-linguistic: or solipsistic.<sup>69</sup>

One suggestion has been made that perhaps Sale unconsciously adopted the 'highly-pictorial, abundantly metaphorical styles' of the English 'Martians'. Poets such as Craig Raine may not appear dissimilar in complexity of metaphor to Sale. David G. Williams, via Andrew Motion, makes a strong case for Elizabeth Bishop as the 'clear(er) eyed', 'more feeling' original here, and certainly the freedom to compare a night-city to a surreal volcano, a seascape to a catholic shrine, the writer's desk to an entire impoverished country, suggests 'the sensitive few' – Sale's own phrase for artists and their appreciators in each generation – exploring such fecund poetics. But again subject matter – and often line length – bear little resemblance.<sup>70</sup>

By 1995, Sale was only half-joking when he told Seamus Heaney about not reading modern verse – including Heaney's – or his own. He simply never found 'the authentic shiver' in fellow local poets. Not only was he older than most, but, wilfully or simply because of the overwhelming demands of imagery and

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<sup>67</sup> cf. letter to Cozens, October 1975: relevant section quoted in **Appendix 1**.

<sup>68</sup> *Poetic Artifice*, ed. Farmer, pp.12-13, p.60-61, p.212ff. – and *passim*.

<sup>69</sup> *Collected Poems and Translations*.

<sup>70</sup> *Art. cit.* – see **Bibliography**.

sound-play that rendered his work baffling to almost everyone he showed it to – continuing to plough on alone.<sup>71</sup>

Above all, then, his drafts show him relentlessly, precisely, perhaps obsessively, working and re-working and *un*-working images, words, phrases, punctuation, spacings, until a version forms, with which he – and invariably only he – is comfortable. This tended towards a style heaving with images, as well as word- and sound-plays: Modernist/Poundian in the range of reference and comparisons hoicked-in to express a feeling or idea; but also more than a shade ‘Baroque’ – as Chapter 4 will suggest – in the deliberate, precise choosing of multiple earlier tropes.

### **Sale and Nature**

There is one theme that this research has shown Sale’s poetry directing itself towards – and by extension, probably how it is expressed. His determined furrow heads away from more a self-conscious poetic in its very specific seeding of ideas about Nature itself.

He was moving away from people (in his verse) and towards ‘things...living things I had always taken for granted...: such “public” objects as bindweed & thistles.’ This he wrote to ex-pupil and novelist Isabel Wolff in 1986, directly describing what had become a specific pre-occupation with nature and its extraordinary mechanisms – from at the latest 1975, according to the account.<sup>72</sup>

Analysis, to come, of his late-tree poem drafts clearly reflects that this was what came to obsess – for reasons more intensely perceived than those who knew him even realised. Reading Sale on nettles, or on fallen trees, for the first time forty years ago – he would share occasional carbon copies with some of his students or friends – one would imagine pathetic fallacy, or a symbolic affiliation with the societal reprobate; or simply note a homage to Edward Thomas’s ‘Tall Nettles’ or ‘Ash Grove’ We pupils knew he liked Thomas – ‘School of Nettles’ even makes a trope out of it – and certainly no one since appears to have divined the rationale behind his close attention to such anonymous ‘public figures’ as weeds.<sup>73</sup> Even the letter extracts I gathered together with Richard Verity after he died for **SL**, were simply intended to be representative of the sorts of topic Sale seemed interested in, but with hindsight reflect this emerging consistency of attention. His later verse simply has an awful lot to say about ‘living things’ in a suburban garden.

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<sup>71</sup> See again, letter to Mole: *ibid.*; other comments in **Appendix 1** on solipsism; and in conversation at the time.

<sup>72</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> September 1986, in **SL**.

<sup>73</sup> For nettles, *cf.* **ScP**, pp.43-48; for trees, **SP**, pp.36-7.

A glance through the **Archive** defines this somewhat better as a specific preoccupation with *wild life*: simply so many naturally-occurring subjects, and over a long period. Not always obvious from more arcane titles, but there turn out to be poems about: Bindweed, Birches, Blackbirds, Brambles, Cows, Cowslips, Cypressess, Elms, the colour green in fields, and fields generally, Hawthorn, Hedges, Hedgehogs, Hedge sparrows, Holly, Honeysuckle, Horses, Ivy, Jackdaws, Moss, Nettles, Old Man's Beard, Pike, Privet, Rooks, Sheep (white and brown), Starlings, Teasels, Thistles, Thrushes, Tits, Great Tits, Toadflax, the series on the story of his front garden's Weeping Willow – and *many* more, including bit-part entries by other creatures and plants.<sup>74</sup>

What does Sale seem to be doing with this new topic? Where the others are artists perfecting their faithful – profound – depiction of a single preoccupying part of nature, Sale seems absorbed by riddling out the fecund, yet unruly, variety of it all. Sale's 'nature verse' became more and more about wild English flora and fauna – especially his more 'public bodies': trees, weeds proliferating in hedges and compost heaps, or decorating dual carriageways; the birds flying above it all.

Even the important series on Clare Bridge that opens **SP**, though it relates to the earlier impetus of war-related breakdown, yet still begins with the interaction of moving objects of nature: ducks, river, light; sun-shows that 'resonate' the stone on the bridge into something 'alive' – ultimately against the horrors of war. The loose-limbed, lyrical start of the 'Bridge' sequence is all about light bouncing off a river onto a bridge, that makes it seem, itself, to *move*:

The bridge is always moving moving un-  
der arches over levels bevels in  
the sunlight from and over itself sliding.  
Sometimes the flow pleats to a crest, slants, slats  
down like an unwilling Venetian blind,  
but mostly as in a print by Hokusai  
lazy easy corrugation of flame.<sup>75</sup>

The voice seems to have the consciously-natural inflections he liked in Thomas. Perhaps there is a trace at the end of Eliot, but Sale's 'easy corrugation of flame' is an accurately-depicted *image*, rather than

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<sup>74</sup> Trawling all this for the very first time oddly reminded me – perhaps not entirely oddly, for Sale admired their art – of Constable's endless bark and cloud sketches; and Moore's multiple sheep drawings – which latter he knew from the sheep themselves, on his and Nell's frequent visits to Perry Green. Sale also liked teaching – and teasing – Constable's direct descendant: also John, student then colleague. For Perry Green sheep recollections, see *Memories of Moore – passim*.

<sup>75</sup> 'Bridge in Motion' p.3, **SP**.

aesthetically-generalised *symbol*; Sale's is a delicate, precise, depiction of the beauty of river-wavelets projected onto stone – not of abstract spiritual redemption.<sup>76</sup>

Forty years after he'd begun 'Bridge', Sale shared hand-typed carbon copies of specifically nature-focussed drafts – 'Birch Hats', for example – to the 'half dozen' students and colleagues he mentioned to John Mole. These are clearly the sorts of verses with which he now feels happier. By the time of the 1975 'non-career' letter, he even sees a barometer of his lack of ambition in his own indifference to publishing – importantly, only the nature poems of the early 1970s onwards, 'those like Pike & Arable Birds' [in **UW**], would now make the cut.<sup>77</sup> Where this contained few natural subjects, *Scrambled Particles* (hereafter, **ScP**), published in 1990, is full of them. Ditto *Selected Poems* (**SP**) in 1999, which incidentally includes the two tree poems which form the focus of the next two chapters: 'Three Uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa', and 'Birch Hats'. A third poem, "Quite overcanopied", the intense honeysuckle poem 'extorted' from him by density/of scent was finished too late for any collection. It was certainly being composed at the same time, and there accordingly an extended discussion in Chapter 4.<sup>78</sup>

### **Helen Vendler: a late advocate**

Sale's late friendship with perhaps the foremost poetry critic of the western world, was a quirkily-spectacular postscript to a poetic 'non-career'. Importantly – for this study at least – it casts strong glimmers of light on the nature, and possible validity, of his explorations; specifically too on the threads leading towards an eco-poetic reading of his verse.

In June 1995, he had an unexpected encounter, aged 82: with Vendler, accompanied by Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney.<sup>79</sup> A poetic friendship developed, spanning the last five years of his life. It was as though

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<sup>76</sup> *Cf.*, say:           And all shall be well and  
                          All manner of thing shall be well  
                          When the tongues of flames are in-folded  
                          Into the crowned knot of fire  
                          And the fire and the rose are one. (*Four Quartets*)

For Sale on Thomas's tone, *cf.* letter to John Mole, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1987, Nick Blyth (date unknown), Nick Drake (no date), but all in **SL**.

<sup>77</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> November 1975 **SL**.

<sup>78</sup> Version 2 of 'Quite overcanopied' is written on the back of a circular dated 21st October 1996, but Sale also referred to it in a letter of 1995, and – though Honeysuckles obviously last more than one season, possibly conflating timescales – in 1998, to Bevis: '...I felt it upon me as the kind of duty I owed you that I felt last summer to the honeysuckle tapestry on the backdoor trellis Nell had erected to block the long empty vista between front and back gardens. (4.IX.'98 – poem, not letter, in **SL**.)

<sup>79</sup> No coincidence: she had been originally taught by I. A. Richards at Harvard, which then led on to a successful career culminating in being made Professor of Poetry. Eamon Duffy, Cambridge Professor of Church History, who as a younger don had first got to know Sale at the latter's Saturday coffee mornings and liked him as a cultural oasis in a still rather boorish College



a lifetime of Sale's small generousities suddenly began to bear late fruit.<sup>80</sup> In critical terms it may yet matter, because of what she went on to write about the verse, but as always by now, Sale's antipathy to worldly fame gave him comic material for letters otherwise delighting in such a random meeting. It was a few months before Heaney's Nobel Prize-giving, and I recall being all the more taken aback by Sale matter-of-factly telling me that this might do Heaney's 'writing no good at all'. When they met, Sale also made clear that he didn't read modern poetry – including Heaney's – nor Arthur Sale's. After that, they “got along fine”, sharing prosodic issues in Anglo-Saxon poetry. Sale had of course read Heaney and knew full-well he was in the process of translating *Beowulf*.

Whatever the causes/causation, Vendler turned out to like Sale very much; even twenty-two years after his death, in a detailed email reply to an unsolicited enquiry for this study, she responded at once, professing to have been 'charmed by him. Who could not be?'<sup>81</sup> And the charm was poetic as well as personal. He, in turn, had been impressed by *her* genuine enthusiasm for poetry, including – to his bemused surprise, after a lifetime of reader-incomprehension – *his* poetry:

She lives for poetry: she gives me two of her books on modern U.S. poets & was quite unperturbed when told I didn't read criticism any more & never did read modern American poetry. Mr. Heaney was equally appreciative when I extended my dislike to Modern Irish poetry :~ & to English (including my own).<sup>82</sup>

Most remarkably, she went on to write what remains the only serious assessment of Sale's verse: her 1999 *Foreword* to **SP**. Sale – cryptically, or facetiously – in the same letter claims that this was also 'extorted...' from her. In fact, Eamon Duffy confirms she simply volunteered to support the venture.<sup>83</sup> Though satirical, he was touched by – and completely understood the potential significance of – a Vendler appraisal:

Well, despite my (& several publishers') discouragement, he [*Blyth*] has achieved this [*publication of SP*] & put me on the defensive. I tell him (& his few assistants) that it is not my greatness but

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– “He was interested in poetry, for a start!” – suggested Vendler come to Magdalene in 1994, as Parnell Visiting Fellow, and naturally introduced them. She was there to write a book about Seamus Heaney – another Irishman, of course, whom Eamon Duffy recommended for an Honorary Fellowship. Nevertheless, of all the *eminences grasses* in the college Vendler could have chosen to talk to after Heaney's ceremony, she sought out Sale. He casually described the meeting to Bevis: ‘We saw her [Helen Vendler] yesterday making genial discussion with Seamus Heaney, who is a nice guy & laughed when I told him I didn't like modern poetry, mine & his included.’ (2<sup>nd</sup> June 1995 – not in **SL**; cf. letter to me, 27<sup>th</sup> June 1995 – also not in **SL** – and again on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1995, **SL**, p.90.) This story he was clearly pleased to repeat, in conversation and other letters – such as one quoted later in this section.

Heaney's Nobel speech took place on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1995: [Seamus Heaney - Nobel Lecture: Crediting Poetry \(nobelprize.org\)](https://nobelprize.org/awards-and-prizes/prize-researchers/laureates/1995/seamus-heaney-lecture.html).

<sup>80</sup> See last. John Constable, whom Sale had helped in several ways, including to find work at the University of Kyoto, met Vendler during a Japanese lecture tour, liked her enthusiasm for poetry and sang Sale's human as well as professional praises. Seamus Heaney too, who once borrowed John's office to write a lecture.

Eamon Duffy said he immediately respected Sale's kind humour, his poetry, and his hospitality. Cf. Interviews & **Bibliography**.

<sup>81</sup> Email to me, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2021.

<sup>82</sup> Letter to me, *ibid*.

<sup>83</sup> Typically enough, though obviously proud, Sale seems barely to have bragged about her contribution. Nick Blyth could not recall how Vendler became involved; neither could Penny, nor Prof. Nick Boyle (Sale's colleague for thirty years, including this period). Eamon Duffy, who still knows her best, suggests she may simply have offered. Interviews: cf. **Appendix 1**.

Helen Vendler's Introduction that has done the trick (A friend asked the Stanford librarian if he would be interested, and he replied, "Anything Ms. Vendler writes is of interest to us").<sup>84</sup>

The letter adds that the Foreword was 'much truncated', though the longer version is so far undiscovered, the published version still runs to eight pages: no ghost-written formality, in other words. Whether or not abridged, it remains the sole analysis of Sale's writing, and a sensitive as well as perceptive appraisal of its challenges, as well as merits including hints at the subject focus of the present study.<sup>85</sup>

Vendler spends most time on the two main sequences in **SP**: Clare Bridge in Cambridge and the Willow in Sale's front garden. Other lines of enquiry, presented by Sale under the nonchalant heading 'Miscellaneous', are acknowledged: breakdown (wartime/afternoon), Einstein, relationships (avian/human), and death (human/vegetable).

Packing a serious precis, guide and assessment of Sale's verse-making into a little space, Vendler specifically alludes to Sale's feeling for nature. While not having access to the sheer extent of Sale's oeuvre or drafts, nor with space to discuss his invented poetic language for expressing this, she more than nods at his growing preoccupation with the 'living things I had always taken for granted'.<sup>86</sup> Both Clare Bridge and Willow lead to sequences of 'local piety', praising both art *and* nature: Clare Bridge is a thing of 'solace and symbol', but she also notes the 'the sheer organic power of natural growth' emerging through 'The Willow' series.

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<sup>84</sup> Letter to Keith Wilson, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1999 **SL**. See also Duffy's recorded recollections on how Sale reacted to the Foreword – *ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> In these terms, and though the only mainstream critique, John Fuller's scathing *TLS* misreading of **UW** barely counts.

<sup>86</sup> 1986 letter to Isabel Wolff (quoted above); all others from **SP**: Foreword.

Finally, and perhaps not uncoincidentally, the dustjacket is filled front and back with a colour photograph of Clare Bridge completely surrounded by water and trees – an image presumably approved by Sale, since Blyth was as deferential as other volunteer-editors in consulting Sale on every aspect of production.<sup>87</sup>

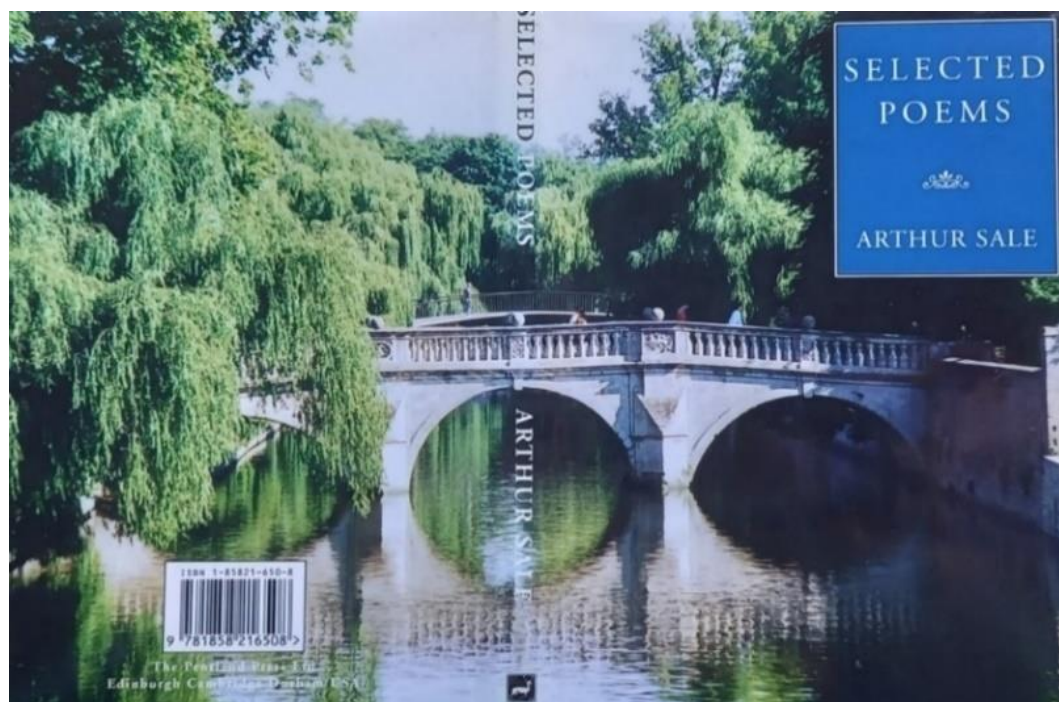


fig.7 dustjacket of *SP*.

### Last poems: reconciling nature with verse

Sale's late themes knot together in what he called 'The last poem I shall ever write': 'Darby & Joan'.<sup>88</sup> This includes the striking image of a boy casually holding a leaf-skeleton up against the stars, and was gifted to Dr. Jane Hughes, the first female don at Magdalene – who by then had become the persona Sale called 'our boss'.<sup>89</sup> It is the first of two contributions to her *Figures of Speech* anthology which came out in 2000 – also including an essay on 'Anthologies', by Helen Vendler.

The Preface includes Hughes's own, rather special, reference to the poem and the poet:

As this book was being prepared for press, we heard of the death of one of the College's most remarkable poets and teachers, Arthur Sale. Not only is his work (*Daedalus* in prose, and *Darby & Joan* in verse) an important element of the book, but many of the poets and prose writers who represent the latter half of the literary history of Magdalene had been his pupils during a long teaching career and there were numerous occasions during the preparation of this volume when Arthur would direct us with an equal measure of pride and objectivity towards their best writings. If Magdalene is a College where the written word is prized for its ruggedness, its intellectual challenge and its power to move as much as for its function as a tool of academe, it is in great part down to Arthur.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Interview – see **Appendix 1**.

<sup>88</sup> To Keith Wilson, 30<sup>th</sup> December 1999. In **SL**.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Figures of Speech*, x. As well as the first officer in the long history of a traditionally single-sex Cambridge College, she went on to become President, as well as several other senior posts there.

Wholehearted recognition – if, in a very obvious sense, too late – but more importantly, Sale might well have noted, the last section of this ‘last poem’ attempts to reconcile art with nature:

In dreams the child strolls unperturbed between Marvellian  
marvels stacked on every side  
stops on unfallen grass meditatively  
to pick up a mere silver skeleton  
of leaf pondering its infinite pattern  
Was it  
a glimmer lighted skyscape glimpsed from far  
or full of faces as a sheet of cork  
or since this is a child a perforation  
held up to every star galaxy cluster  
to find its instant mount and destined place<sup>91</sup>

Unlike Frost, the dying Sale may have been frightened of looking at stars but imaginatively – as sometimes humans do in art – he found this loose-limbed way of so doing; *embodying* – in the exquisite conceit – the essential relationship between all-embracing nature and the entirely vulnerable – yet *larger*-embracing – innocent imagination.<sup>92</sup>

Wordsworth may have been in his mind here: ‘The external world is fitted to the mind’, in *Home at Grasmere*. This is quoted at the beginning of Terry Gifford’s seminal collection of essays on contemporary Nature poetry, which had been published by 1995.<sup>93</sup> And there is certainly a general resonance of such ideas with the later ‘eco-poetic’ trend: the mind *fitted to* the external world, perhaps?

Again, humans find themselves, in Sale’s verse, an especially *unimportant* part of nature. Thus, ‘Joan and Darby’, the third part of his ‘Darby & Joan’ trilogy, echoes the final extended metaphor of Sale’s own ‘Birch Hats’, in which the poet is whizzed off to heaven with the Tits – or possibly becomes an incandescent-Birch-leaf. Or, more simply, is carried away by the beauty of their harmony with a Birch tree – all of which Chapter 3 will explore.

One way or another, this is all quite simply *true*. Our atoms really are transformed into organic matter that creates new life-forms – such as Birch trees, Cypresses – or even, no less fancifully, into stars.

Sale read and used the ‘Darby & Joan’ Trilogy to illustrate the process of writing a poem, at his own memorable ‘Final Supervision’ – alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. This was on 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1999

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<sup>91</sup> Verse extract (‘Joan and Darby’) from a typescript of ‘Joan?’ handed out at the ‘Final Supervision’, and published, with photographs of Bevis Sale’s sculptures that prompted the Triptych, on pp.46-50, in *Figures of Speech*.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. his reaction to Yosemite in Chapter X. I am grateful to John Constable for suggesting the poetic contrast with Robert Frost’s ‘Desert Places’.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in *Green Voices, Understanding contemporary nature poetry*, by Terry Gifford, v., MUP, 1995 (first edition).

in Benson Hall at the College. He talked for nearly two hours, in an almost inaudible, but entirely fluent, unscripted voice, to some sixty ex-pupils and friends, as his contribution to the launch of **SP**, which took place earlier that afternoon without him, in the main Cambridge bookshop, *Heffers*. It was his last public outing. It was, he explained, his attempt to repay the debt he felt to family, friends and colleagues who had helped him give any kind of breath and audience to his poetry. Specifically, he attempted to explain “how one comes to write a poem”, and so, literally, metaphorically *and* analytically – it was hard *not* to feel it was also to bid his craft, friends – nature itself perhaps – farewell.

*Arthur Sale died a year later, on 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2000. His ashes were scattered under Bevis Sale’s Green Man sculpture; hidden now behind the Magdalene New Library – home, when this project is over, to Sale’s Archive.*

## Chapter 2: ‘Three Uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa’

This chapter and the next focus on two examples of Sale’s late nature verse: a poem about a large Cypress and a small Birch, both in Sale’s garden in Girton. Each chapter offers context, a first, ‘blind’, reading, then comparisons as well as technical clues already alluded to, as to Sale’s emerging ‘poetic’. Imagery, prosody and other soundscape will be explored in some detail as the means by which the poet responds to each tree, the ‘living forms’ inhabiting each tree, and as expressions of a larger preoccupation with nature, in all its recondite glory.

### Context

The rationale for beginning with ‘Three Uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa’ is that it is one of Sale’s last poems, and easily contextualised. He wrote to friends during its composition: witnesses remember the black squirrels cavorting at the Cypress’s base, exactly as the poem describes them. Bevis Sale recently reminded me of local university interest in this subspecies, which turns out to be peculiar to this part of England.<sup>94</sup> Comprehensive numbered drafts have survived, that include exhaustive clues as to the poet’s creative intentions – even, for example, down to printers’ instructions about spacings between words. And the poem is something of a benchmark for what Chapter 1 indicates as Sale’s lifelong – but by then radical – interest in what Shakespeare calls ‘Great Creating Nature’.

Sale’s sense of ‘nature’ will be no nostalgic Georgian, or even Edwardian-Georgian, Poets’ ‘pastoralism’ – more on this what follows, but in terms of specific definitions, in Chapter 4. He still loved and was teaching *The Winter’s Tale*; and this strand too will be returned to there. For now, Shakespeare Sale quotes – only as usual jokingly against himself – in a contemporaneous letter to John Winter:

A Buddhist friend of ours had reinvigorated my feelings for (one has to use clichés) the inherent wonders in nature...But then my fascination shifted to the underside of the wonders – Great Destructive Nature, as against Great Creating Nature (these clichés)...<sup>95</sup>

He was also writing to Bevis, admiring and simultaneously mocking Coleridge, for seeing a painting of Peel Castle in a storm – then incorporating destruction into his view of nature.<sup>96</sup>

We have already seen how much of Sale’s late verse treats aspects of nature: benevolent; malevolent; beautiful – and plain *complex* – seemingly all of it in, or near, his garden in Girton. This had begun with the burgeoning growth and story of his front lawn Willow. After its VE Day planting – a token of peace,

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<sup>94</sup> Email 27<sup>th</sup> February 2023. The research into black squirrels was conducted by Anglia Ruskin University, and reported in the journal *FEBS Letters*, in 2014.

<sup>95</sup> To John Winter, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1988 **SL**.

<sup>96</sup> He was also consoling his son, who was excavating there, in his first career as an archaeologist, in ‘tempests’. (Email to me, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023.)



rather than victory – it went on to dominate the view from his study’s French windows, then threaten both view and windows.<sup>97</sup> For Sale, it moved from a kind of Cold War verse ‘totem’ – to an example of nature’s bizarre majesty at work: as such it dominates the first section of *SP*.<sup>98</sup> Eventually its grandeur below ground proved fatal to both tree, then bungalow – as these ‘before and after’ photographs hint:



*Figs. 8 / 9 Penny Sale / RR photo*

Though superficially sound in the second photograph, the house’s one-inch cracks had made it irreparable.<sup>99</sup> He had described it decades before – in that psycho-poetic phase he later recanted – as a ‘house / inveterately divided against itself’, but by 1988, ‘Great Destructive Nature’ is more gleefully seen as the cause of its impending dereliction.<sup>100</sup> This more that nods at the major theme, well-developed by then, which continued thereafter to be embodied in the striking example of nature’s slow-breathing at work under his very floorboards. His second wife, Penny, can even now contrast her fear of the cracks with Sale’s sanguine response: “They open up in summer, and close again in winter”.<sup>101</sup>

So trees more generally however, evoked awe in Sale: usually in scale, as well as static, or ‘stoic’, resilience, then irresistible, infinitely slow-moving energy. The Cypress was the largest dominating the back view from 2 High Street, and is visible behind the house in the second photograph. It similarly evoked combinations of love and hate: the latter at his – and probably most people’s idea – of a version of suburban-villainous *Leylandii* gradually blocking out light and sun. Less like most people, Sale describes feeling

<sup>97</sup> See late letter to Alex Moffett – not in *SL*.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Down by the Sally Garden’ (first handprinted and privately published in 1976, in *Songs of Willow*) ironically commemorates the Willow’s ‘VE Day’ peace-planting, while (prophetically enough) fantasising about its future victims: ‘Next meal the house/[...]What will the triffid / do touch a tender trunk tip on it, lob it/ or sling it high and hard with a young gowk’s heaved irritation’. In the end, effectively, insurance issues rendered the bungalow unsellable (trees are blamed for most modern subsidence), so in that sense the Willow ‘won’. ‘January Spring’ in *ScP*, about premature mating Jackdaws, is subtitled ‘Four Minute Warning’.

<sup>99</sup> In fact, an amusing (or mock-*Day of the Triffids*) symbolic narrative unfolded in Sale’s mind about the Weeping Willow. Planted to celebrate the end of war, growing enormous, it then ironically envelops the life forms about it. It killed six of the neighbour’s seven Birches, then undermined the foundations of No. 2 High Street. Cut down to size, roots chopped off to arrest its attack on Sale himself, his honeysuckle burgeons (mockingly or in protest, he muses), but at least the Cypress at the back has replaced it to become the (far more habitable) skyscraper for his garden birds. And so on: apparently trivial narratives, and many more, developing out of the most ‘ordinary living things’.

<sup>100</sup> From ‘The Mist’, in *UW*. Letter to friend and novelist John Winter on New Year’s Day’s letter, in *SL*. For inability to write poems like this (i.e. in *UW*) any more cf. extract of letter to Isabel Wolff in **Appendix 1**.

<sup>101</sup> Interview – *ibid*. I remember Penny showing me one spectacular one-inch vertical crack all down the wall next to the front door. And they’d been there a very long time – cf. ‘The Tell-Tale Crack’, in *UW*, published in 1975 – but obviously including verse written in the 1940s.

incapable of *not* delighting in how this now thick-pelted tree housed a plethora of wildlife, at all its different levels – including the small family of rare squirrels:

The cypresses, on the other hand, house their, & all kinds of, houses, as the squirrels Know. Sometimes the litter of eggshells suggests that Cypresses are flowering trees.<sup>102</sup>

He composed ‘Three Uses’ from *c.*1993 to *c.*1997. He had carried on teaching well past formal retirement age, but teaching had long subsided and he typecast himself as ‘a kind of College mascot’. Ex-pupils continued to visit him in College, but also Girton, and correspondents told about this latest subject. In one, he summarises what appeared from the kitchen:

We have a cypress which has a different household on each of its many storeys, starlings on high-, then several varieties of doves and pigeons, then two black squirrels, not to speak of grey ones, and one or two small birds in the cellar. Over the hedge is a pair of crows, for whom this cypress is a handy supermarket, & there are occasional raids from out-of-bounds customers like magpies, to keep the tree population within reasonable limits. The squirrels make many holes in the lawn & the pigeon folk eat the broccoli & lettuce, but it is well worth it, particularly when two great underwing-white doves or pigeons sail majestically onto the birds’ water bowl/ basin.<sup>103</sup>

This is typical of the poetic genetics in his work: what Van Hulle terms a now rather unusual form of ‘endogenesis’ in which Sale’s correspondence bounces poetic ideas off others, while simply articulating them in writing *to* others; all in order to help him with a poem he is working on: working out ways of expressing what he has seen, seeking to comprehend the complexity of natural behaviours, testing ways of expressing that complexity.<sup>104</sup> How else can one comprehend the fact as well as pleasure of witnessing one of nature’s more extraordinary pieces of sociology, as it is going on, out in the garden? Sounding out friends - mainly only after the 1960s the surviving correspondence *may* suggest – Sale frequently articulates the idea behind each inventive conceit.

Even an initial reading of a poem shows this process in play.

### First reading<sup>105</sup>

From the start, there is something emphatic and riddling in describing what is going on in the garden tree:

*Now* real estate for lesser animals  
Is desperately as for human kind

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<sup>102</sup> Letter to me, 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1992 (**Archive**; not in **SL**). The contrast is with the willow awaiting ‘beheading rather than a general dismembering’.

<sup>103</sup> Undated letter to Robert Rickard, **SL** p.95. Wrote again on 2 June 1993, with a more generalised account of the same amusing conurbation.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p.14ff.

<sup>105</sup> Text used throughout is in **SP**, p.68; as well as the drafts gifted me by Sale’s widow, Penny.



Though he is simply setting the scene, as in other late verse Sale waxes mock-declamatory, more apostrophic, yet more teasingly elliptical, than the newsy letter version shows. Something ritualistic in the transformation about to be enacted is hinted at – but jokily, as he also posits a topical environmental theme: overcrowding, to the riddle. It is as though we readers are to be privileged witnesses to an instance of ecological pressure on avian living space, taking place somewhere in suburban Cambridgeshire.<sup>107</sup> The opening makes the Cypress mimic a sky scraper. Sale was appalled and amused by the American logic of the high-rise; as he was of other U.S. inventions, including literary ones. Now in his eighties, he had actually seen skyscrapers on his first trip to New York in 1989, and hammed up his feelings when writing home to his young grand-daughter:

It seemed already like being in heaven... The next stage in evolution will be when New Yorkers grow wings & enter through the windows like Tinker Bell. <sup>108</sup>

Such surreally-playful or exaggerated phenomena he saw as archetypally American, and, more importantly, their embodiment in quixotically-literal conceits. They figure in his early criticism of Melville, Dickinson, and others; they enter this late verse, as in Harpo Marx's starring role at the opening of 'Birch Hats' – see Chapter 3. <sup>109</sup>

The Cypress poem continues:

|                        |                      |              |
|------------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| Space Ship             | Cupressus Macrocarpa | aimed        |
| Up from the good earth | all ready            | at the stars |
| Long colonising arrow  | Noah's neo           | Ark          |

The image morphs rapidly and flippantly into another American icon: the tree turns prophetic 'Space Ship', riddling a future in which Girton fauna colonise places other than Earth: Sale parodying *actual* long-term NASA policy, perhaps? The metaphor elaborates itself as 'Noah's neo Ark': Cypress becoming 'ship' rather than spaceship. A running conceit is set up that recurs throughout the poem, as the inhabitants of Sale's garden tree are depicted in societal relation to each other – and their imagined Future - or Doom.

<sup>106</sup> My *italics*. NB unusual gaps are Sale's required spacings – as throughout. (See also Chapter 4 for general explanations of/for these.)

<sup>107</sup> For other examples of his verse waxing declamatory, cf. 'Say [I have ever taken your name in vain]' ('Towards Amends', **SP** p.95)); 'Half gone thirds gone fractions what can they tell' ('No Numbers Please', **CP** p.88)); 'The worst bridge in the world...' ('The Bridge Rebuilding', **SP** p.17) etc.

<sup>108</sup> Jessica Sale, Jonty's daughter, in **SL**, 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1989.

<sup>109</sup> Bevis told me his father recounted Marx brother gags: 'From a child, Arthur would describe bits out of the Marx brothers films. As we had no TV, and cinemas did not run old films, I only saw them much later as an adult.' (Email: 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023.) Examples of American conceits include Melville's 'Chimney' of the eponymous story (also referred to by Bevis, and quoted later on in the poem), the recurring 'Glass Ship' metaphor (cf. eponymous article by Sale in *MLQ*, June 1956); or his idea of *White-Jacket* (contrasted with the glass ship) as a more comic symbol for American self-sufficiency (it has a miniature store room full of pockets for worldly possessions: the eponymous hero nearly drowns twice, because it is not waterproofed, and so well padded against cold, it soaks up sea); In undergraduate lessons, he praised the tender, awful gilded, but glass-cracked fake, central conceit of *The Golden Bowl*; or (ditto) Gatsby's silk shirts; or Emily Dickinson's left-behind gifts of flowers or verse when agoraphobia prevented her meeting the very friends she had invited. (Cf. review of Dickinson's *Collected Letters* in the *Cambridge Review*, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1959; **SL** p.84 etc.).

As the tree's inhabitants reveal themselves, the tone is drolly satirical to match, in this and subsequent extracts, *all pasted here from scans of Sale's own final typescript in the Archive*:

Steerage though in the nose a susurrus  
of starlings stacked up like that ocean cabin  
bursting with Marxes and with half the crew  
contented sweeper caste for consolation  
rehearsing gospel songs too light to over—  
—balance the show too high for nuisance to  
pigeons burly constabulary below

The *sotto voce* starlings turn into a famous Marx Brothers movie scene illustrated later in the chapter, as they mock-bicker at the very top of the tree, then turn into 'gospel' choirs. Pigeons become 'indifferent' fat, comedy police, and are:

indifferent <sup>Democrat</sup> as Lucretian deities  
to keeping peace amongst peace keeping doves  
computerised by income and by colour  
from gentle grey to blatant nouveau riche  
the idle singers of an empty day

Pompous as ancient gods, the pigeons redundantly patrol 'peace keeping doves' already exotically doing so. All gently warble away, while the poet uses an elaborate Nottingham-tram analogy – to be discussed as an example of Sale's opacity in Chapter 3 – to help comprehend *who* exactly gets to choose exactly *which* dawn chorus gets sung each day:

whose leit motif the first awake selects  
as shut or open decreed for that day  
windows inexorably of earliest trams  
a choice of love notes only

Most importantly though, their song is 'a choice of love notes only'.

Meanwhile...: doves with

swift wings

dazzlingly white do undertake patrols

‘of dreys of squirrels’, on the ground below. And two black squirrels fly round below:

two all black beauties pièces de résistance  
who wear black offspring round their necks like mufflers  
bound higher than their longest pace and lead  
streakers in fun and games dodgers N times  
accelerated as on film that put  
small fry miscellaneous out of joint  
in skirts of hovercraft that few trees own  
preferring skins and toes go bare go bare  
ground staff gregarious each its trade badge  
of medieval colour hopping ready  
for the friendly pint

The squirrels streak – in both senses – in and out the boughs, wearing their own ‘black offspring round their necks like mufflers’ – nothing else, naturally. Speeded up ‘N times’ as in a slapstick comedy scene, they annoy the other birdlife – ‘small fry’ – displaced, first onto the ground – *as* ‘ground staff’; then, later on, into another tree, or ‘suburb’<sup>110</sup>; thence to a bird bath. Below, comically ‘trade badge’-coloured birds – tits, presumably as in ‘Birch Hats’ (see Chapter 3), hop about, pecking titbits – ‘the friendly pint’ – thrown from the low-skirted – ‘hovercraft’ – tree.

So far, then, an elaborate realising of straightforward literal observation, facetiously metamorphosed into some U.S. cartoon comedy: the poem gradually uncovers a peaceful commune of birdlife – completely out of human control. Sale may, as narrator, muse in breathless, compressed syntax about who *on earth* made such a space/ship/craft:

whoever over all  
not without mayhem sits at what controls  
unknown but better viewed though not without  
Babel sideglances roundly and not squeezed

<sup>110</sup> Suggested in an authorial note: cf. SP – AS’s note on p.114.

But the craft flies on regardless: the craft is ‘not without mayhem’, with ‘controls/unknown’. And it is also ‘Babel’, taking ‘sideglances roundly’, as though knowing exactly what it is about. The Salic over-ellipsis means the *exact* sense remains obscure for now – see note below. Again, the enthusiastic sense of ‘order-in-anarchy’ suffices. The Cypress dwellers are now living in a tower of ‘Babel’ and/or speak in many tongues – or perhaps squawks – as they peer out from the egg-shaped tower – hence ‘roundly’ perhaps: see too below; but they are

not squeezed

as from a tube by overcrowding ever-  
 spilling on unfashionable rters  
 second class citizens waiting their turn  
 at the bird bath towelling off meekly  
 short of the fifth rung of the garden gate  
 but with the procreant mass of Melville's chimney  
 firm and unquestioned as the crowded tower  
 of boyhood comics Tiger Tim I think

In other words, the population may be overcrowded, but it distributes itself ‘roundly’, across the generous girth of the dense tree foliage: a Cypress unpruned turns out to have an efficient shape for packing in other ‘living forms’, rent-free. Why, is not questioned here – though it is in ‘Birch Hats’ – again, in Chapter 3. Even the birds ‘overspilling...and not squeezed / as from a tube’, ‘wait their turn / at the bird bath meekly’.

The allusions become ever more technicoloured, and even surreal, into the last section. On first reading they are again quirky, if not plain obscure; but, taken lightly enough, the whole begins to piece itself together. A Cypress may not house everybody, ‘but... the procreant mass of Melville’s chimney’, a symbol of resilient life-force in his eponymous comic short story, remains ‘firm and unquestioned as the crowded tower / of boyhood comics’. The narrator may claim not to recall exactly which comic – ‘Tiger Tim *I think*’ – but we are lured there by puns: ‘the name *beaming* his penthouse window’s breadth’, and whether the ‘beaming’ is the nameplate above the frame, or a self-assured smile, the comparisons unfold towards the finale:

the name beaming his penthouse window's breadth  
 each aperture below a different snout  
 Bruin and Brock Jacko and Henny Penny

Is this then some Toon Town ‘equal-ops’ habitat? The other comic book occupants live in the flats below Tiger Tim, and a garden Cypress is made crazily to subsume everything from Sale’s boyhood cartoon heroes, via a U.S. Naturalist’s memoir, to soaring condors:

and fascination    which I later found  
in Prescott's Andes    coloured as highly    by  
his blindness    also with a different world  
at each degree    of height and heat    at base  
bare Indian brave    to braver furs    in cloud  
and    seven miles high    the condor    on plane wings

From the riddling and allusive start, the reader has been led into a wilder, Andean stratospheric conceit: a mountain world where cartoon creatures live peaceably at the different altitudes and temperatures of the places the blind naturalist Prescott once somehow witnessed at first hand, and had somehow recorded – in brilliant colour illustrations.<sup>111</sup>

Yet the tone gently mocks the old poet recalling such remembered scenes that ‘fascinated’ the younger child in him. He lures us – effortlessly in mock-dotage – into comical childlike comparisons: cartoon characters peering out of the Cypress, Keystone Kop pigeons ineffectually patrolling the basement. At the same time, all these images become bizarrely apposite too: nature, like a zany ‘Toon Town’ or Marx brothers sketch, equally effortlessly creates its own perfectly unregulated, yet perfectly *self-regulating* order: even in a garden tree.

These comparisons may seem at first simply *too* diffuse or obscure, preventing a first reading from fully capturing the scene. Sale explicitly realised the reader may start to fear incomplete absorption of the images *into* the subject itself. He acknowledged that careful, sometimes even ‘frustrated’, re-reading may be required to test the analogies for their deeper appositeness. In an important letter to John Mole more than a decade earlier than ‘Cupressus’, Sale readily acknowledged the danger of losing the reader in ‘the thickets of metaphor and image’:

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<sup>111</sup> Again, Bevis Sale has insider knowledge here: ‘“Each degree of height and heat”. Arthur will have read Humboldt, who invented the idea of ecological zones, and the interrelated nature of the species therein. And isn't Prescott a contemporary of Humboldt? [*Yes, and both travelled widely in the Americas.*] Arthur gave me Prescott's *Conquest of Peru* when I went there, and there I read it, enjoying P's siding with the residents against the Spaniards, whom he presumably equated to the British in his part of America...’ Email, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

I think poetry is not statement though it usually embodies statement. We look for the clew of statement to guide us through the thickets of metaphor & image & perhaps are too relieved to come across an occasional recognisable stretch of twine.<sup>112</sup>

Even a first reading begins to suggest what, later in this chapter, his re-drafts will demonstrate: apparent incongruities in 'metaphor & image' as deliberate attempts at precise, comic expression of the wider implications the poet senses in his scene.<sup>113</sup> For example, at least one idea still seems to invite more teasing-out: if there *is* some crazily-effortless order, the question still arises: 'whoever...sits at what controls'? Who *does* call, let alone 'control', the bedlam? Why *should* such random wildlife so randomly take over a completely other form of life?

Whoever over all  
not without mayhem sits at what controls  
unknown but better viewed though not without  
Babel sideglances roundly and not squeezed  
as from a tube by overcrowding over-  
spilling on unfashionable quarters  
second class citizens waiting their turn  
at the bird bath towelling off meekly  
short of the fifth rung of the garden gate  
but with the procreant mass of Melville's chimney  
firm and unquestioned as the crowded tower  
of boyhood comics Tiger Tim I think

-3-

the name beaming his penthouse window's breadth  
each aperture below a different snout  
Bruin and Brock Jacko and Henny Penny

<sup>112</sup> Part-cited in **SL**. Letter dated 3rd September 1986; cf. a fuller version lent by John Mole is now in Sale's **Archive**. (John Constable offers the interesting surmise that the 'thicket' metaphor is Sale's recollection of an idea of Richards, in the latter's 1926 *Science and Poetry*. Email, July 2023).

<sup>113</sup> Again, see Chapter 4 – correspondence with Nick Blyth.

Such back-garden shenanigans may be taken for granted by most of us, until the poetry reminds us, via such questions and *inappropriate* comparisons: comparisons perhaps only a child instinctively might make or ‘get’. In these some the maddest order is effortlessly achieved – in ways inconceivable to the sensible, reasoning modern brain: that is, until the sight of these strange creatures living in close-packed proximity mesmerises the narrator into childlike articulation of childish refrains.

The second section of the poem seems now to test the same idea via yet wilder analogy. The narrator is made pointedly to cast around for apt metaphors from the subconscious – childish ones or not – as though to know what makes the cartoon scene *so* anarchic and yet *so* ordered. The whole phrasing invites us to imagine some sort of divine comedy as clues to an answer. A cosmic landlord, ‘Tiger Tim’ – a cartoon character invented in 1904 – accepts lifeforms spilling out on all sides of their habitat, house or Cypress – as in a childhood cartoon. Each personality, bird, patiently waits their turn for lodging or birdbath, yet still no ghettos of human overcrowding, despair or filth appear in this gentle, whacky conceit.

Seen thus, the question for a reader baulking at such extravagant conceits, might begin to find response in the wording of one of Sale’s final poems, on the wonders of a honeysuckle: ‘how *better* be expressed’? Whether the Cypress conceits work, they are consistent and strain to express, or share, the qualities Sale perceives in the ‘human-free’ nature about him.

The surreal, anarchic elegance of a garden Cypress solves planetary overcrowding in its own, immediate, completely unpremeditated way. And if such conceits communicate at all, might they also raise a different question that then becomes the meaning of the rest? After all, no fantasy spaceship of politicians, NASA, nor popular culture will help we humans flee a dying planet...<sup>114</sup>

Elsewhere, about a decade earlier, Sale explored analogous material, and more bleakly. In ‘January Spring’ – subtitled ‘Four Minute Warning’ – he wonders whether Jackdaws prematurely mating in winter are a result of

doomsday fungus    through the active air  
blowing before the blossom due    in spring’.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> To take just one very recent example, *Don’t Look Up* (2021), a mainstream American film stars Meryl Streep as the stupid, delusional President, and Mark Rylance as the clever, delusional scientist, planning an elite trip to another planet. Sale would have approved the grim joke.

<sup>115</sup> **ScP**, so pre-1990. Drafts of ‘January Spring’ are undated, nor are they conveniently written on the backs of dated College circulars. But the handwriting is large and mature, and the envelope they are bundled in postmarked ‘1981’. Chernobyl took place in 1986, hence that likely dating, when the news reported even Welsh sheep registering radiation from the explosion in Ukraine.

In ‘Cupressus’, nature’s temporary solution is seemingly pure improvisation to make overcrowding manageable, even in global adversity: a garden tree may be colonised by random animals and birds, living together – presumably as Cambridgeshire agri-tech denies living space elsewhere – yet with none of the human constructs: rules, policing, or even entertainment. Boisterous chases and songs are enjoyed in the strangest possible dynamic equilibrium: all living with comic disregard for the observer just feet away – and the observer’s baffled gaze and bemused poeticising.

For the finale, it is worth again noting how Sale assiduously avoids the slightest tinge of pastoral sentimentality. The creatures in the Cypress are living but also dying – by the end. He adds an essential sting in the tail to harmonious tree-society. In a five-line section carefully spaced apart from the main body of the poem, with casual counterpoint he reminds himself and the reader of the third use of his second-favourite tree: it is a culling ground for two crows that

flap over the the hedge lazily  
to their own supermarket so close at hand  
so many shelves so variously stocked  
and reach down casually a special fancy

The tone is still droll, but the ‘as-though-afterthought’ finale, offers a casual – stark – reminder of the brutal *inelegance* of nature’s anarchic harmony.

Does this somehow temper the celebration? Yes, and no. The ‘playful’ denouement also returns us from Prescott’s condors, as without warning they are transformed back into crows, lazily and insouciantly flapping over the hedge – and straight into the tree for their ‘special fancy’. The Cypress may have spent a whole poem pretending to be a Ship or Space Ship charting new forms of comic life; now it is simply

[...] their own supermarket so close at hand  
so many shelves so variously stocked

– with small, temptingly-edible, prey.

In other words, again, the ruthlessness of Nature here turns out to be the final reverse-metaphorical ‘joke’ of the poem, tempering any human superiority at the behaviour of ‘silly’ wildlife. It decisively returns to the truth of Nature’s strangely-designed perfection: a complex in which life, death and play cohabit, with seamless, innovative precision – all operating with utter disregard for the failing humans, in the ‘room’ next door: ‘Great Destructive Nature’ in action.

Such a poetic sleight of hand also helps makes sense of Tiger Tim and Sale’s other anarchic cartoon references. Only humans in our silly inadequacies, bound by endless trite conceits, routinely miss the far



more literally magnificent ‘mad-but-fully-functioning’ ecology, around us; eco-systems literally – let alone astoundingly – inventing ways of living, playing and dying, in our very own backyard.

### Some emerging techniques

Arthur Sale’s later verse techniques are nothing like that of other modern poets, as Vendler was the only critic to note before he died. A number of these techniques emerge, even on this initial reading:

#### *‘anarchic’ metaphors*

‘Cupressus’ was gestating throughout the early 1990s.<sup>116</sup> By this late point in Sale’s life, particular kinds of imagery had become central to his poetic thinking.<sup>117</sup> Critically already, domestic metaphors jolt the mindset – even to frustration. Yet as Chapter 1 and this analysis suggest, this is not about Sale’s dabbling in Surrealism, nor somehow satirically to shock Society’s senses. Nor is it remotely gratuitous. It is as though there is something he is conveying – toiling hard to convey – about the essentially *ineffable* qualities of his subject: not humanity, but Nature.

It is for this reason that nature is viewed and described *so* anarchically, so comically yet brutally in ‘Cupressus’. The bathetic mocking of the convenience-store mentality of humans: ‘*so* close at hand / *so* many shelves *so* variously stocked’, can never translate into the vast, natural food chain nature established a million years before. So on one level the comedic conceit is aptly completed: Cypress as skyscraper, rescue ship, space ship – and lastly supermarket. Though the final effect might even seem for now a bit of a ‘gothic flourish’: purely playful sign-off, on another level, the imagery returns us gently – but firmly – to the fine contrast with much more ludicrous human quandaries.

From its opening, the satirical ‘real estate’ of the Cypress’s inhabitants infers our human spatial acquisitiveness, and the throwaway ‘worse’ in line 3 is telling: of the dangers of deluding ourselves with fanciful escape-routes such as rockets to other planets.<sup>118</sup> The ironic tale told by this anarchic comedy is of wildlife finding better solutions than humans – yet the lesson is ignored. Is this also the punchline to the slapstick cartoon analogies later on? For example, the Marx Brothers’ gag of starlings packing in and out of the nosecone of the space craft/tree:

steerage            though in the nose      a susurrus

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<sup>116</sup> ‘Cupressus’ didn’t make **ScP** in 1990; some drafting took place after 1988 (dated from College circulars they were written on), and Sale wrote to me about the black squirrels playing, on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1993 (not in **SL**).

<sup>117</sup> **SL** – *passim*; but see section on imagery in **Appendix 1**.

<sup>118</sup> Indeed, this was not his only venture in this field: elsewhere, for example, Sale touches on human living space ‘alternatives’: suburban gardens (*passim*); industrially-efficient agri-tech, or the hated dual carriageway built while he lived in Girton (the A14), which he peoples with redeeming – if human-hated – nettles: *cf.* eponymous poems on this in **ScP**.

of starlings    stacked up    like that ocean cabin

bursting with Marxes

Here Sale re-visits his own delight in the then famous pre-war film scene of a gradually overflowing of human detritus in an ocean liner cabin:



*Fig.10 Still from A Night at the Opera, 1935* <sup>119</sup>

Here, all social classes meld as one. The anarchic/Anarchist's joke is in the gradual subversion of all social spacing – physical, but also class-bound – as more and more crew and passengers are nonsensically lured into a cabin – in deadpan, bemused, acceptance. Pre-war, this was hilariously shocking – subverting all urban-physical as well as societal taboos. Metaphorically, in 'Cupressus' the starlings' ludicrously-human behaviour – in this case sibilant gospel snatches sung in happy acceptance of overcrowding at the top of the tree – offers telling contrast to mid-century human versions: ghettos; tower blocks; from 'Lebensraum' to property boom and bust. In Sale's literal sensing of a 'natural order', the starlings' anarchic self-regulation – rather like the Marx Brothers' – feels far more seamlessly-managed than humanity's materialisms – including, it seems in this still wonderful sketch, our obsession with 'private space'.

On the other hand, and even on these tentative interpretations, might Sale be overdoing the domestic and popular metaphor, losing the 'clew of statement'? Vendler, in her Foreword to **SP**, assures anxious readers

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<sup>119</sup> This was a subversive pre-war Marx Brothers' film comedy of the type Sale loved. Eamon Duffy surmises a possible reminder to him, in recalling a Magdalene Film Society that showed the, by then, cult films at Magdalene College, in the late 1960s.

of ‘the vividly felt thread’ in each of Sale’s poems.<sup>120</sup> And birds really *do* form close-knit roosts, if only out of necessity: one harsh winter, *sixty* wrens have been seen emerging from an East Anglian nest box.<sup>121</sup>

Brief comparison with another of Sale’s ‘Representative Americans’, Emily Dickinson, may be instructive.

<sup>122</sup> Here is her rather surreal handling of birdsong as the portentous ‘band-players’ unceremoniously depart:

By Six, the Flood had done—  
No Tumult there had been  
Of Dressing, or Departure—  
And yet the Band was gone—

She simply and facetiously misses their stopping singing. Yet in other moods, bird song fails to cheer:

The Birds reported from the South—  
A News express to Me—  
A spicy Charge, My little Posts—

– especially the ‘Me’ who doesn’t want to hear; dismissively, then aching, in these last six syllables:

But I am deaf—Today—

Like Sale, Dickinson’s wildlife exists happily apart in their own Band concerts and News’ journalism, ruthlessly ignoring loving poets: even Emily Dickinson.

I’ve heard it in the chillest land —  
And on the strangest Sea —  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb — of Me.

So both poets avoid sentimental personification in place of a larger, much more riddling, conceit. Both risk dropping Vendler’s ‘clue-thread’ to shock us into imagining characteristics of Nature that seem alien, but which turn out to make far more sense than, say, petty twentieth century humans coveting *Lebensraum*. He, she and other poets mined for such ‘rich and strange’ image-making in Chapter 4, explore the bizarre separateness of Nature’s finer solutions to living, with an Anarchist’s sense of satire.

### **Words spaced**

Sale’s elongated spaces between words may be another key borrowing from Dickinson. They certainly come trademark to the poetry after 1975 and count significantly towards a deliberate ‘loosening’ of syntax

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>121</sup> Cited in *The Stubborn Light of Things*, by Melissa Harrison. (Thanks to Rachel Cox for this reference.)

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Sale, elsewhere, on Dickinson: in the 1950s, he (critically – both senses) reviewed Chase and Johnson’s biographies, and the latter’s (even then definitive) *Letters* for *The Cambridge Review* – see **Bibliography**. There are of course frequent references in **SL**.

and tone. The close attention to what he called ‘graded’ spaces between words allows them to be read differently in relation to each other on the page. Specifically, they allow the eye to make new connections and meanings between individual words, that a single form of syntax cannot encourage. At their best they heighten the word music, and deftly encourage the voice towards something just a shade nearer song than ordinary speech.

Visually emphatic of course, the disruption to conventional text layout can also clearly be dangerous, if the brain seeks too impatiently for an immediate, single syntactic thread. This is another way Sale freely-acknowledged ‘the clew of understanding’ may be hidden. Again, more on this in the synoptic chapter.

In the case of ‘Cupressus’, the tone remains comic: arch. But the spacings also, quietly, make the verse sing of strange beauties in nature, as well as the implication of the opposite in humanity’s planned lunacies. The opening five lines show how Sale insists on this in the late verse; his final typescript including nine, varying-graded spacings, each setting up its own hint of syntactic ambiguity:

Now      real estate      for lesser animals  
is desperately              as for human kind  
vertical      and      worse      prophetically  
Space Ship      Cupressus Macrocarpus      aimed  
up from the good earth      all ready      at the stars

The effects start at once in the first line: ‘real estate’ isolated as it is on the page prepares us for the vital conceit, the running gag: baldly comparing animal habitats to human. The second line caesura similarly highlights ‘as for human kind’ to the reader’s brain and voice; which, along with the second enjambement, throws the syntactic emphasis forward, on to ‘vertical’ at the beginning of the third – as we search for this, the grammatical subject of the first phrase.

So far, the meaning, though disarmingly spaced, for once turns out plain enough: a statement of the ecological facts. Now comes the syntactic and graphical jolt, as ‘vertical’ turns out not to end the sentence, and our minds are lured into continuing with the separation of the two words in the compressed phrase: ‘and      worse’. This then half-lures the reader on, for the sentence could easily end at ‘worse’, to ‘prophetically’; with the darker meaning riddlingly emphasised by more visual separations.

The subtlety of Sale’s word games here is palpable when one tries to explicate them. At the end of line 3, while the mind is wanting to know what might be justifying the wildly hyperbolic ‘prophetically’, it may well also be baulking at why Sale is not simply using the conventional phrase, ‘prophetic’, to match the adverb ‘vertical’. Though the spaces

vertical      and      worse      prophetically

slow the reading voice, and emphasise the drama of the last word, we may be presuming another enjambement to resolve the meaning. Instead, we are given a touch of apostrophic oration:

Space Ship    Cupressus Macrocarpus    aimed  
up from the good earth    all ready    at the stars

The playful conceit is resolved in ‘rocket-mimetic’ Stages, as these two lines unfold, telling us precisely what habitat we are talking about, and just how surreally the poet is asking us to view it. Again the spacings matter, as the ‘prophetically’ significant meanings seep across each other.

The eponymous words ‘Cupressus Macrocarpus’ stand, separated out here, presumably as the proudly grandiloquent name of the ‘Space Ship’ - never mind *a tree*. In conventional prose, the line might well read: ‘[A] space ship [called] ‘Cupressus Macrocarpus’ [is] aimed’, and again the compression weighs each word – while also encouraging a lingering over the exotic Latin?

Still the non-botanist reader may not know what tree this poem will be about, let alone why it might already have turned into an emphatically capitalised ‘Space Ship’. But now the enjambement lightly grounds us semantically, confirming where the craft comes from, and heads towards, with the gentler monosyllables lyricising whatever Apocalypse is coming, the shimmering pun ‘all ready’ spaced apart from the rest of the phrase, as though to suggest premonition - s in ‘already’ – as well as preparedness: ‘all ready’.

Much more could be said of these disarming phrasings, and how they may be playing with us – but with this sort of serious intent. Suffice for now to claim Sale’s word spacings as being there to guide the reader’s voice and reading and, as we have heard him exhort, trust that the overall meaning really will appear if we simply read on: alert but ‘half-tranced’ to the clues to understanding.

And if the bits of meaning that don’t *quite* appear? Well, Sale is teasing, but he is *more* straightforward than other poets of his place and time.<sup>123</sup> There *is* a riddle to be solved in all his verse. It becomes clear as ‘Cupressus’ unfolds just why he is setting up the idea of Cypress as ‘Space Ship’, and even if he then quietly modifies the conceit to make plain, literally (but also in terms of all our futures) that this may well *not* be the forever-answer to life persisting on ‘the good earth’. And the more precious for it.

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. comparisons in Chapter 1, and in Chapter 3: on J.H. Prynne *et al.*

### *Loose Blank Verse*

Sale writes ‘Cupressus’, as almost all his poetry, in a loose blank verse. In the 1986 letter quoted above to John Mole, he offers this view of versification, in relation to the latter’s ‘short lines’:

Have I made you worry about your short lines? I am doubtless prejudiced by so much tunelessness in the modern recourse to them; particularly among my poetic but unpublished friends: you are a master of the contemporary scene... But when I think of the delicate but sure rhythms of the 17c practitioners of brevity - ! ...for me there is always the danger in poetic mimesis: it still can’t be literal: it must be contained within the created world of the verse.<sup>124</sup>

A metrical digression, comparing Sale and Mole, on Nature, may be instructive here. First, the ending of ‘Cupressus’:

|                                            | <i>[Syllables per line]</i> |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| mission identical but quarters closer      | 11                          |
| a pair of crows flap over the hedge lazily | 12                          |
| to their own supermarket so close at hand  | 11                          |
| so many shelves so variously stocked       | 10                          |
| and reach down casually a special fancy    | 11                          |

Contrasting the gentle metricality of John Mole on birdlife, in his *Winter Garden*:

|                                                 |   |
|-------------------------------------------------|---|
| Our forsythia bush shoots up                    | 7 |
| Its sparsely golden branches                    | 7 |
| Like Shock-Headed Peter’s hair                  | 7 |
| As a colony of sparrows                         | 8 |
| Zinging back and forth                          | 5 |
| Takes off, returns, keeps swinging there. [...] | 8 |

Both adopt similar subjects, and tonal effects – *cf.* ‘Zinging’ vs. ‘a special fancy’ – and both even share similar allusiveness. ‘Shock-Headed Peter’ is unusual enough to have been a borrowing from Sale – especially since Mole had become a good friend over four decades.<sup>125</sup> His lines are clearly shorter, and where Sale avoids all but glancing internal rhymes, not just here but throughout ‘Cupressus’, Mole is acute in his rhythmic sense, as Sale *nearly* told him.<sup>126</sup> Sale is deliberately much looser, lets the naturally-

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Cf.* ‘Notes on Nettles’, in *ScP*. One of several usages.

<sup>126</sup> See **Appendix 1**: quotations from correspondence (*passim*), esp. under *Rhythm / Metre / Gaps between words*.

articulating spoken version of the phrases resonate freely, against or with, the light-touch blank verse. No particular word or phrase emphasised, the reading almost – but not quite – indistinguishable from naturally-occurring speech; and even the deliberate wide spacings between sub-phrases insist on a low-key voice in the reading: think Edward Thomas waiting on his train in ‘Adelstrop’. Contrast again Mole making clear in the final rhyme – even as his delicate lines lilt to imitate the busy flitting to and fro of his sparrows – that it is the boyish one, the one with the ‘*hair*’, that goes comes back but finally stays ‘*swinging there*’, which poetically, at least, restores the spirit of the grieving widower: the poet himself.

For Sale, the only other obvious heightening to the rhythm, apart from the background iambs, is in the repeated ‘*so*’s of the greedy supermarket customers: the two crows implicitly excited by the goods on display:

*so* close at hand  
*so* many shelves *so* variously stocked

before ‘casually’ taking their chosen prey:

and reach down casually a special fancy

### ***Comic bathos***

Whether Sale’s insistence on unheightened sound-verse, makes for richer music in the final emotional effect of the poetry, is the widest possible subject of this study. What is clear by this late point in his writing – as well as in correspondence on the theory of it over many years – is that he *really* means it. A glance through **Appendix 1** should suffice for this, in general. In ‘Cupressus’, re-drafting works inexorably towards such *almost-prose* poetry, since it is always the ‘created world of the verse’ that matters to him. The comedy conceit of the crows chatting over the goods in their supermarket is what we focus on as we read, *not* the reassurance of the easy rhyme; this then can mask the gentler, deep shock of realisation the reader only perhaps registers after reading the last word of this poem: that nature *is* casually cruel, simultaneously while also being both deliciously playful, *and* effortlessly pragmatic in its housing schemes.

### **Genetic criticism: what Sale’s re-drafting reveals**

Given the findings about the presentation of Sale’s drafts in Chapter 1, and informed by suggestions concerning Sale’s prosody, an endo-genetic analysis of the sequential re-drafts of ‘Cupressus Macrocarpa’ in itself simply reveals much about the poet’s late-developing thematic and prosodic intentions.

Most changes between ‘fascicles’ are there, in part, to create what might simply be termed poetic ‘concision’, as well as to strengthen the complex music of his lines – as earlier examples have also clearly suggested. Most importantly, though, they seek to clarify and/or intensify effects, especially of metaphor. Occasionally – as noted above – the intensified ‘riddling’ can seem, quite deliberately, to court even greater opacity.

Though none of the handwritten versions of the Cypress poem is complete, and all are scraps written on the back of various Magdalene College administrative documents – a habitual throwback to wartime economising, though also somehow appropriately-subversive – they show clear evidence of deliberately-developing attention to all these aspects. There are also later carbon-copies and typescripts which themselves attract further handwritten emendations.<sup>127</sup> This is also the case with the manuscript originals, which strongly suggest Sale wrote and re-wrote many times – systematically, extensively and/or intensively – over weeks, months, and years – yet revealing most of this to no one.<sup>128</sup>

In terms of Genetic Criticism theory only just emerging at the time, Sale’s approach is conventional: explicitly aiming at ‘a finished version’ – *bon a tirer* (‘pass for press’), as de Biasi puts it. Once again, the fact that he kept all the versions, so enabling the present analysis, surely reflects his respect for the process itself: enshrining poem variants in their own A4 envelopes: offering a kind of geological core-sample – as genetic critics, appropriately-enough, might also view it).<sup>129</sup>

The poem is initially simply labelled ‘Cypress’, which in itself begs the obvious reader’s question as to why ‘Cupressus Macrocarpa’ arrived in the printed version; see section on the title that follows. The early manuscripts are handwritten; these in turn develop into various drafts of pages 1, 2, 3 and 4 – Sale nearly always ringed page numbers at the top of each sheet. There are several versions of *just* pages 1 and/or 2 – though none is complete, suggesting they were scattered, some lost, the rest then gathered back together. There are sequential typescripts, carbon copies and photocopies, with frequent amendments, all in Sale’s curly fountain pen. Finally, there is a handwritten proof, written into 1986 diary pages already occupied by an earlier draft – pointedly indicating the *exact* spacings to be followed in typesetting the poem – presumably for **SP**, where it then appears, so laid out.

Just one example shows how Sale ‘works up’ his metaphors. The early comparison of the Cypress to a spacecraft, morphs from:

Skirts grounded like a ~~unlike & like~~ hover craft & like

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<sup>127</sup> Wartime poems and letters are closely written, wasting no space at all. Though he liked the history of economising paper: Penny gave me a C19 crossed letter he had found somewhere.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. conversations for this project: with Bevis Sale, Jonathan Sale and Penny Robson.

<sup>129</sup> Terms such as ‘endo-geneticism’ are specific borrowings from geology; cf. those also cited in Van Hulle *op. cit.*, p.10, and *passim*. *Ibid.* for de Biasi citation.



Never another tree pencil-blank length

through to:

~~fit ready~~ fit to blast off to colonise whatever

then:

prophetically worse a space ship here

cupressus macrocarpus *[sic]* points already

~~slim~~ a colonising finger to the stars

beginning to settle into:

vertical, & prophetically, worse

Space ship Cupressus macrocarpus points

up from *[inserted above out of]* the lawn *[ditto grass]* a *[added]* ready at the stars

a colonising finger like a new

Noah's ark, *[...]*

though also:

vertical & worse prophetically

Spaceship cupressus macrocarpus points

up from good earth all ready at the stars

*[three lines added then struck out]*

A colonising arrow a Noah's Ark

or a cabin in the good ship 'Groucho Marx'

all until being set in verbal stone through three typescript versions of the same lines, as:

vertical and worse prophetically

Space Ship Cupressus Macrocarpus aimed

up from the good earth all ready at the stars

long colonising arrow Noah's neo Ark

Finally, there is the handwritten printer's proof version, insisting on the following spaces between words:

vertical (5) and (4) worse prophetically

Space Ship (3) Cupressus Macrocarpus (3) aimed

up from the good earth (2) all ready (3) at the stars

long (2) colonising (2) arrow (*[5 altered to a ]6*) Noah's neo Ark

2 x spaces *[etc.]*

Again, preserving these drafts and the slightly hit-and-miss refining it bears privileged witness to, denotes the artist's 'creative process' – as Van Hulle puts it, a shade more prosaically.<sup>130</sup> Sale's may be a particularly rich seam, given the density of the writing and the unusual techniques he refined over a long life straddling entire literary fashions and periods. As Chapter 1 argued, this process mattered more than he showed; I remember him liking written ambiguities, and, for example, letters teasing my handwriting for offering 'better readings' than the intended ones. Perhaps initially keeping the 'fascicles' – as he called his bundles of drafts – meant he could then see and sometimes revert to earlier trains of thought.<sup>131</sup>

Overall, the Cypress drafts embody Sale's search for poetic concision, 'music' in the lines, clearer, and more complex, metaphors. The versions quickly move from a concentration on the unusual features of the tree (*cf.* 'hover craft', 'pencil', 'blank' etc.) into comedy fantasy: the tree is re-typecast as a timeless 'Space Ship' headed out from earth to colonise the stars: as 'Noah's neo Ark'. I am reminded – perhaps intended to be reminded? – of *TinTin's* equally speculative rocket:



*Figs. 11 & 12: Tintin's rocket and a Cypress*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10. Tangentially, and more romantically, I am reminded a little of *cf.* Frink's BBC documentary on her layering on of plaster; or Picasso's 'live action' 1949 *Bull painting on glass* film. Or, again, Wilfred Owen's, or Edward Thomas's, notebooks – the last of these shell shock-concertinaed.

<sup>131</sup> *Cf.* Bryant's 'fluid text' theory: taking all this much further. Sale's professed insouciance over, and resistance to, engineering academic posterity was genuine. For contradictory concern over the writing process and publishing, *cf.* comments in *SL* (*passim*, but, esp. as referred to earlier: to Andy Brown (who was to become Academic Director at Cambridge University Press): 8<sup>th</sup> August 1973 **Appendix 1, Reluctance to Publish etc.**

Added details then concentrate the symbolism, as well as the richness of this thing of comedy – and nature. As the drafts pan out, we saw the colonising space ship taking off from ‘grass’, then ‘lawn’, and finally ‘the good earth’. More grand symbolism; all the more ludicrous.

The close-packed fronds of the Cypress at 2 High Street really did skirt the ground; in the final version, the ‘hovercraft’ metaphor recurs twenty-six lines further on, as younger wildlife is thrown down into the gap by the ‘fun and games      dodgems’ of the black squirrels.

That final version of the phrase is typical of the allusive, or other loading Sale seeks to add to his verse line. It is reminiscent of Sale’s *very* last published conceit of all, in the triptych ‘Darby and Joan’ analysed in Chapter 1.<sup>132</sup> The last line there is the cryptic ‘of Mr. Weston’s Good Wine      best of all      ?’, annotated by Sale as referring to the ‘Eponymous hero (God) of T. T. Powys’s fantasy 1920s [*sic*: ^‘short story’^, in *which*] ‘the black grape was death, too precious to sell.’ Powys had in turn been archly referring to Jane Austen, now hijacked into riddling out Sale’s farewell to life.

There, the poet implicitly hopes to make himself into earth for ‘Good Wine’, whereas in ‘Cupressus’ the fate is much less certain and the prophesy ‘worse’. This is partly because imperial ‘colonising’ *never* connoted ‘good’ things for Sale. As we saw earlier, he viewed the idea of man colonising anywhere, let alone space, in every sense a long shot; partly because the poem’s central symbol, the all-accommodating, self-regulating and self-sufficient Cypress tree, turned into a space rocket immediately implies a deeply ironic disjunction between nature’s skills, and man’s, in managing life on the once ‘good earth’. We are missing an obvious, ecologically important, trick. Not only is *this* spacecraft not going anywhere, the ludicrous idea of colonising other planets begs the question as to what exactly we have done to the ‘good earth’, that we might need to leave it in the first place.<sup>133</sup> All this implicit in the arrived-at conceit.

Other lines are so sharpened through multiple re-draftings. Other images are moved around in the poem: the Marx Brother starlings squabbling happily in the nose cone of the space ship; and in their last iteration read most economically, and jokily, below the incantational blank verse call to flight, since every word becomes a reinforcement of the central, crazily-telling metaphor.

The final proof leaves no printer in doubt as to the required spacings. Sale used to comment wryly on the fate of his poetic heroine Emily Dickinson’s hyphens in the hands of early publishers and we have seen how he talked – and wrote extensively – about attempts to allow words to ‘resonate’ in a range of ways, if spaced carefully apart, or together.<sup>134</sup> For example, in the Cypress redrafting ‘already’ appears in an early

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<sup>132</sup> Published too late even for **SP**, in *Figures of Speech: An Anthology of Magdalene Writers*. p.51.

<sup>133</sup> I remember him stopping me in my tracks as I expressed excitement at some space mission or other, by describing rockets piloted by ‘numbskulls in tincans’.

<sup>134</sup> *Cf.* too, letter quoted below, in section on versification, and section on *Rhythm / Metre / Gaps between words* in **Appendix 1**.

version, then morphs into ‘ all ready ’. Again, the separating of words, and even parts of words, heightens and alters the meanings. Here, the sense of readiness of the spacecraft, its prophetic symbolism – but also, perhaps crucially for the sense of symbiosis in the wildlife depicted, the sense of solidarity – confirms that we are ‘all in this together’.<sup>135</sup>

More generally, there is a further inference in such nuances – especially given the poem’s mock-dark ending – at the sheer ludicrousness of man’s delusion that he may contain the universe. Above all, Sale’s late drafts demonstrate his effort to find – then hone – the expression in verse form of *what he sees before him*. Since first trying out some of this in “‘Neither Fear...’”, he began using his own ‘home-spun’ poetic techniques to do so: spacing words, removal of sentence punctuation, neologism, reversed syntax etc. And the drafts of course show these being refined in a kind of live-action replay.

### Modernist verse influences

The multiple technical layers might suggest something to be ‘decoded’ in a poem about a Cypress tree in a back garden; this from the obscure Latin name and title. Sale eschewed Postmodern approaches to verse-making; but does the tree (for example) symbolise something else altogether: perhaps derived from Modernist influences with which Sale grew up, as a young poet? For example, the wild allusiveness of the poem might compare with the ways in which a poet like Wallace Stevens in ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ teasingly invites a range of symbolic readings. Yet where the Blackbird, from the title on of course resists reduction to ‘a single thing’ – what Forrest-Thomson calls Stevens’s tendency to ‘rational artifice’ – ‘Cupressus’ remains as transparently *itself* as its imagery is arcane.<sup>136</sup>

Sale was nuanced in his views on Pound and Eliot, but always favoured the latter. I remember being excitedly shocked in an undergraduate supervision, when he declared that Eliot and Ezra Pound (then, as now, totems beyond undergraduate reproach) would come to be known as ‘good minor twentieth century poets’. Yet at the end of his life, he specifically notes Eliot’s ability to give the ‘shiver of authenticity’ in his verse. ‘Cupressus’ certainly does not go in for any *Canto*-esque polemics or politicised cultural symbols; nor any of ‘the darkness of language’ Sale liked in Eliot’s poems before the *Four Quartets*: as, for example, noted in the earlier comparison of ‘Gerontion’ with “‘Neither Fear’”.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Thanks again to Nick Blyth for noticing this further reading.

<sup>136</sup> In *Poetic Artifice* ed. Farmer, p.97ff.

<sup>137</sup> I was trying to write on Pound’s relationship with Chinese poetry: he told me how he rated his translations more highly than any of his other work.

For ranging views on Eliot: see letter to Alex Moffett, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1989:

One understands Eliot’s defeatism, which is also essential to what distinguishes poetry from prose, but I find it more impressive than his final positivism: the consort dance [*in The Four Quartets*] seems too sprightly & simplistic after all the searching into the darkness of language [*e.g. The Wasteland*].

The ‘authentic shiver’ note of praise is in Sale’s very last letter to Moffett, marked ‘Sept. 1999’; **SL**, pp.102-3.

More follows to begin to test such comparisons, though Chapter 1 showed how something of Sale's form derived from Modernism – or possibly its Surrealist arm. A late poem like 'Cupressus' teases and riddles us through its details, transforming the subject into late-Joycean 'thickets of metaphor & image'. One after the other, Sale builds central conceits, willing us towards his own, quirky, three-fold conception of the tree. There is something of the freedom Pound enjoyed in his kaleidoscopic piling on of images. But then Sale's also turn out to be really quite specific: object-based – i.e. *not* turning the tree into a human symbol for something else. Nor are his borrowings those of the infamous 'maniac in a cultural museum' moniker one critic gave Pound.<sup>138</sup>

In other words, it really is the tree that matters, rather, say, than ideas of dissociation or other 'merely' human emotions, hung upon the tree. The images themselves cohere – on this enquiry – towards defining the precise nature of relations between the tree's happy parasites and self/entity. These first readings depict Sale's Cypress as an unlikely multi-storey *eco-habitat*; then, in the second long section, it becomes a joyful comic eco-playground; and finally, in the third short *envoi*, as Nature's Larder. Hence the 'three uses' of the title (see below).

Technically too, the piled-on metaphors are all contained, in a strange kind of blank-versed, blank-spaced, loose word-music. Metaphor and soundscape and semantics all together comically embody a larger, very specific – and *not* fundamentally critical, or satirical – view of societal life, operating in the strangest ways.<sup>139</sup>

And the meaning of all this? Something of the tentative, fragile nature of these life forms, counterbalanced by an astounding ecosystem: completely undesignated; improvisatory, yet intricate and bewilderingly, ludicrously co-existing. And the fact is somehow implicit that if this even works in the face of the poorest human planetary guardianship, in an ordinary back garden in an ordinary backwater of England, this must also insouciantly operate across – and so dominate – the whole planet.

Chapter 4 will take further the relevance of all this to an 'Eco-poetry' movement arising in America, England and Germany towards the end of the time Sale was writing poems like 'Cupressus'. Though we have seen how ruralism and anti-industrialism were long-established causes even among conservative Modernists such as Eliot; a specifically *physical* concern with the planet came far later. So even in 2000 when Sale died, the environment still represented fringe, even eccentric, politics.<sup>140</sup> Sale was always politically-sensitised – Vendler, for example, noting him as among the first to write about the emotional

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<sup>138</sup> The Cypress grew fast, high in the back garden. The love: hate Willow by then had grown monstrous in the front.

<sup>139</sup> See letter to John Mole, cited in the section on *Versification*.

<sup>140</sup> To take a few examples, cf.: *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, *Big Energy Poets: Ecopoetry Thinks Climate Change*, and *The Ecopoetry Anthology*. *Ibid.* Chapter 4 – section on *Sale as Ecopoet* – suggesting practical limits to such claims.

effect of ‘the invisible atom falling / on Nagasaki, on Hiroshima’ – but one way or another, ‘Cupressus’ clearly embodies – even if it only indirectly signals – an equally early eco-conscience.<sup>141</sup>

### *A note on the Title*

While the ‘*Three uses of Cupressus Macrocarpa*’ may thus become clearer to persistent first readers – Sale’s Cypress as habitat, playground, then larder – the choice of Latin may still seem obscure, if not plain obtuse. Sale even pedantically corrected himself before the final **SP** version, from *Macrocarpus* to *Macrocarpa* throughout, presumably realising common usage *sic* was the Latin feminine singular for the tree. Or inadvertently also offering another clue as to why: we have seen how Sale tends towards the principle of *always* adding verbal interest where remotely excusable, and there is something almost seventeenth century in such prolixity – see Chapter 4. But semantics matter too, and here he disarms with botanical detail – highlighting precisely what the poem turns out, quite simply, to be about.

Whatever the reasoning, Sale insisted on this. While enquiring about this poem, I was gently corrected by his widow Penny – *not* somebody prone to pedantry, nor latinisms – for using the short-hand ‘Cypress’. There turns out to be another explanation too – see below.

The Latin name was given early star-billing – syntactically, graphically *and* formally – as the drafting developed, both in the title, added by v.3:

Fig.13 Detail from *Archive MS*.

and in the text that follows that title:

Fig.14 ditto.

In the final pre-publication typescript this becomes:

|                        |                              |              |                               |
|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| Space Ship             | <u>Cupressus Macrocarpus</u> | aimed        |                               |
| Up from the good earth | all ready                    | at the stars | [Poet’s <u>underlining</u> .] |

<sup>141</sup> Cf. **SP** Foreword: xi.

The insistence here on ‘naming’ the ‘rocket’ itself foregoes any kind of arch, Modernist symbolism. Remarkable though the differences are between ‘Cupressus’ and the terse elegance of a poem such as Stevens’s ‘Blackbird’, Sale similarly depicts a ‘creature’ that is overwhelmingly *itself*, needs no prop *nor* ‘larger meaning’. *His* Cypress doesn’t even benefit from thirteen ways of looking at it – just three ‘uses’. Even more than the blackbird, Sale’s Cypress is a self-contained ecological wonder, a survival mechanism ‘aimed / Up from the good earth’, that *should* be so whimsically-named, recognised for being its *original self*, not, in this subtler ‘reading’, reduced to Latinate obscurity.

In other words, is Sale finding new ways of using grand Latin ‘namings’, to express the sheer complexity of nature’s processes – as exemplified by his very own *Cupressus Macrocarpa*? The cosmos itself enacts its own virtuosically-reactive – to humans, ‘cruel’ – ecosystems, simply to keep Life burgeoning – even in a Girton garden tree. And suddenly one notices a possible additional, playful pun in the title – and probably the best solution to the conundrum: ‘carpa’ is only one vowel from ‘corpa’: Latin for ‘body’: Sale’s vision of the Cypress suddenly becomes what it is: ‘macrocarpa’ – *large- or many-bodied*.

Whether or not, the implicit contrast is, once again, of humanity busy inventing much less effective solutions to living than wildlife: skyscrapers, space rockets – and overcrowding. Hence too the embodiment ‘in metaphor and imagery’ of everything Sale freely acknowledged to John Mole in defending his ‘thickets of metaphor’.<sup>142</sup> As with Stevens’s Blackbird, the ‘thickets’ turn out to be ways to try and rename the living thing itself, dressed in all its strange and complex power – way beyond anything humanity might comically imagine for itself.

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<sup>142</sup> As quoted above. Cf. **SL**, p.36. The rest of John Mole’s correspondence has been generously given to Sale’s **Archive**.

## Chapter 3 – ‘Birch Hats’

### Context

This chapter extends the exploration of meaning and form to the ‘ecology’ of another tree poem, ‘Birch Hats’, together with the tits feeding on it. The methodology is similar to that applied to his Girton Cypress.

Sale’s seven ‘adolescent’ Silver Birches grew in the front garden at 2 High Street – that is, until the giant Willow took all but one of their light. He claimed this was deliberate, and at the beginning of the earlier sequence about that tree, *Prelude Postscript*, had written:

How now old willow sallow salix Sale’s Butt  
Past prime they say and what have you to say  
That silver birch last of the sterling seven  
you melted back is slow to be convinced  
out canopied with neck ropes dangling yearly  
nearer the drop .<sup>143</sup>

Sale’s North West-facing french windows looked out onto the willow by now dominating the large front lawn. And it was large: prophetically enough, the space is now occupied by two mid-sized semi-detached houses, together with their front and back gardens, and a drive – ‘Bullman Grove’ – now winds through to the back garden which is occupied by three chalet bungalows.

‘Birch Hats’ appeared in Sale’s second, privately-printed selection of poems, **ScP**, published by an ex-pupil, John Winter, in Hobart 1990. It was ‘gestating’ eight or nine years previously, since he shared draft carbon copies with undergraduates.<sup>144</sup> Even more than most of his surviving verse, including ‘Cupressus’, ‘Birch Hats’ developed over more than thirty handwritten, then typed and hand-edited drafts. As we have seen, again part of the process felt important enough to make him order, number and deposit them in brown envelopes, and in this he acknowledged what he termed Yeats’s ‘gradual evolvment’ methodology:

‘Long ago, when I first encountered Yeats’s procedure of gradual evolvment, I tried one or two of my own (prose first, numbered drafts) and enveloped them for possible future contemplation.’<sup>145</sup>

Though virtually all his surviving post-war verse received such treatment, ‘Birch Hats’ went through more changes than any other – excluding the *Willow* sequence.

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<sup>143</sup> p.73 in **SP**.

<sup>144</sup> I recall receiving these – as do other later pupils, such as Nick Drake.

<sup>145</sup> Letter to John Constable, 30 viii '97: not in **SL**. On putting Sale’s MSs in some sort of order, *cf.* interview with Penny Robson 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022. On writing ‘for the sake of poetry alone’, see relevant section in **Appendix 1**.



Like ‘Cupressus’, ‘Birch Hats’ was inspired by a form of nature thriving unaided – in this case, a fine Birch sapling laden, one dank Autumn morning, with ‘toy scale’ birds.

In early drafts there was initial disappointment at the lack of morning sun to light it up. In the **Archive**, I discovered two separate, unfinished drafts of what appears to be an earlier version in an envelope labelled (in ink) ‘Weaving Hats’ – though that title is provisional: the first draft title adding a question mark, as though to self.<sup>146</sup> These show the first ideas for the poem beginning as a consoling elegy on ‘a shower of arrows of arriving tits’ coming to make love with his ‘stiff tillered sperm’, of a mini Birch, brightening up ‘An autumn’s drabness’.

The finished version is in an envelope labelled ‘Birch hats’ in large felt pen. Apart from a lower case ‘h’, the title is the final one. This too he dabbled with, morphing from ‘Hats of birch’ (f(ascicle).2), to “‘Hats o’ the birch” (f.10 & f.14), back to ‘Hats of birch’ (f.17 & f.20). The latter looked definitive and typed out, with Sale’s trademark hand-ruled under- and over-linings, as:

H a t s o f B i r c h

but this gets shortened, as late as f.22, into what re-appeared in **SP** as ‘Birch Hats’:

B i r c h H a t s

One obvious line of enquiry, pursued in the genetic discussion below, concerns just what provoked such ‘minor’ changes: insights into the poem itself as well as the poetic principles underlying Sale’s finer judgements. Thus, the second version of ‘Birch Hats’ begins completely differently, with an ‘anarchic’ comparison between the tits feeding on the birch and one of Harpo Marx’s skits in which a surreal variety of objects appear from inside his rain mac. Only gradually do the subtle forms of enquiry – and with them a sense of poetic delight – emerge, as Sale works out how to depict in words the tiniest of birds balancing and feeding on the birch’s seeds and insects.

From this wild start – among his most extravagant – the poet goes on to ponder why on earth trees *should* attract birds of an appropriate size – and vice versa. This morphs into an elegiac comparison with Sale’s own treeless – i.e. rootless – identity, resolved by the poet, finally, imagining himself at one with the nimble, nervous flight of tiny birds away.

### **First Reading: challenges**

As the discussion on ‘Cupressus’ noted, such ‘knotty and... reclusive’ late verse can seem deliberately ‘idiosyncratic’ – Surrealist, even. Or, as Sale bluntly puts it: ‘meaningless’.<sup>147</sup> However, a late, dense poem like ‘Birch Hats’ can seem particularly ‘opaque’ – even in literal meaning.

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<sup>146</sup> Several poems deal with such emotional starts – finding a way out of depression, perhaps? Most notably in the Bridge sequence

<sup>147</sup> Helen Vendler, Foreword to **SP**; Letter to Isabel Wolff, 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1987 **SL**.

Unpacking that meaning is a delicate operation. As with ‘Cupressus’, any précis might simply provide a salient reminder as to why Sale himself resisted offering annotations. The compressed notes that annotate the end of **SP** were not exacted from him without his telling his volunteer-editor – former pupil, Nick Blyth – that ‘an interested reader should be prepared to puzzle things out – *things that are parts of the nature of the poem*’. The italicised phrase is typical of how Sale felt about poetry, and what he understood makes it a form of art rather than something strictly analysable. We feel whatever we feel as we read the words of a poem, *not* afterwards: in its cadences and imagery. It is therefore *not* reducible to paraphrase. Sale liked to repeat his old boss Ivor Richards’s insistence that ‘time should be taken over meaning’, though he did eventually acknowledge to Blyth that without some sort of guide to complex allusions ‘it is my experience that at all levels, the reader comes to an alarmed full stop to questions about meaning – resentment, even’.

And there is a twentieth century habit of ‘obscurity’ here. In her *Poetic Artifice*, Forrest-Thomson’s wonderful analysis of the ‘Unreal City’ passage from *The Wasteland*, while contrasting this with the ‘irrational obscurity’ of David Gascoyne’s ‘The Rites of Hysteria’, showed that some poets employ multiple layers of sound and image resonance that really do make disparate parts of the whole adhere.<sup>148</sup> The test is whether Sale’s poetry employs the techniques found in Eliot, rather than in Gascoyne.

### **First reading – a paraphrase**

In trying to paraphrase any poem, there will also always be the danger of luring a new reader onto the rocks of boring plot- or (as Cleanth Brooks argued) meaningless- recital. The Modernists debated this, seemingly endlessly, possibly, as Sale felt, poetry slipped from meaning much to society. MacLeish’s elegantly-phrased ‘Ars Poetica’ submits gracefully perhaps: ‘A poem should be palpable and mute / As a globed fruit... A poem should not mean / But be.’ On the other hand – because Sale simply *is* so dense in his range of working, so ruthlessly denies us literal explication – even he recognised the reader’s need for some ‘clew of comprehension’.

It is then with such hefty caveats that the following ‘clews’ are assembled, merely as starting points, to see where and how and why Sale then took – and sometimes deviated wildly from – his literal meanings. His is a stratosphere of image and sound effect: but again some paraphrase feels right, as well as important, because the work blows in a single and quite clear direction – celebration of the object depicted, however wildly. The following sections of paraphrase are set to the right of corresponding sections from ‘Birch Hats’ – all scanned and pasted from Sale’s final typescript:

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.* Farmer ed.– analysis beginning p.82; see especially p.86 for an example of how Eliot’s: ‘image-complexes move through these [levels of Artifice] in a newly alive and potent verse line which progresses inexorably through citadel after citadel of social ruin, only to shore them (‘These fragments I have shored against my ruin’) by its technical re-shaping.’

**'Birch Hats'**

Harpo's capacious slack White Jacket stocked  
 bagful of tricks pig for a pick a lampost  
 inconvenienced for lapdogs beating their bounds  
 netted like sticklebacks So neighbour birch

scarce younger not much taller than myself  
 bristle cone pines victorious by a bristle  
 is too like me a silver adolescent  
 and angle in girth cast line spray leaves fry  
 like wise to toy scale even to birds

None welcome whether fit or free upon it  
 grosser than troy than feather -weight the tit  
 exclusive hostel to that coterie  
 tom willow cole longtailed tadpole in pink  
 oxeye black sheep or troll oscillating  
 overpoised overbearing overborne

on springboard hair Wrens even barely touch  
 down on a flight rare now a flash of fire  
 or splotch of gold that dodges nought but notice  
 By preference tangential other wings  
 as by compulsion swift's to everything

But what the affinity of bird to tree  
 still more of tree to bird is as unsure  
 as elms those unsure trees to rookeries

Sparrows alone gate crashing with intent  
 exasperate to mimicry of guests  
 on a tit bit treasure search invited in  
 coverts of birch random but fleet as e'er  
 a hirondel's through mited air

So will  
 this band of copycats on winter thistles  
 stand off and on while the provoking bullfinch  
 a bulb of crimson in a Noel pane  
 scorches to cores and then through chiding chatter

and mime as nullified as winnowed down  
 his full fat whistle flutes

**Literal reading**

*A silver birch [in Sale's garden] seems to resemble Harpo Marx's big comedy jacket: it drops tiny pigs or lamp-posts, or lapdogs marking their territory, before being re-netted like stickleback fish.*

*But this tree is somehow stunted like Sale ('a silver adolescent'), so slender its boughs ('cast') like fishing rods ('angles'), leaves like tiny fish ('fry') - and the whole too miniature even for birds.*

*In fact, no birds, however 'fit' or 'free', can ever settle on the birch tree's limbs for long: even all the types of the tits sway wildly there, and Wrens barely touch down...*

*...without attracting attention other than their 'flash' of colour, just touching at a tangent, as though they were swifts that seem compelled to fly everywhere.*

*The poet asks why particular birds should be so attracted to a particular tree; and why even more so the other way round, given many poor matches - for example, rooks in elms, or sparrows alone 'gate crashing' the tits' birch tree, and its treasure trove [of seeds and bark insects], swift as swallows ('hirondel') flying through insect-laden air.*

*A sparrow will even try and mimic a brilliantly lit ('Noel pane'; 'crimson') bullfinch by flying on and off winter thistles, drowning out their song ('chiding chatter'), just as it's demolished the thistle ('as nullified as winnowed down') with its smug, loud song.*

So though there be  
 pigeons for pines      helmets of elm for rooks  
 any dichotomy is born to stares  
 indefinite enough      and calm for crow  
 bare bole   spare arms   like almonds blanched      hoar roof  
 to cap grey polls of daws      generic these  
 peculiar   mine   to tree bird me      unique  
 as nursery nucule   that nought else would bear  
 but silver nutmeg   gold pear and   king's daughter

And pallid as sluiced veal or rhubarb forced  
 this tom thumb   template   this more air than tree  
 assembly   vantage   hors d'oeuvres   for  
 our doucest   sprucest   avian family  
 and meagre mint for tanners and for guineas  
 derision and absurdity apart  
 is      perpendicularly musing      prone  
 the same      for me beneath      philosopher's stone

mysterious   mystical identity  
 of confine and escape      of shrink and stretch  
 like Alice   balancing hallucogens  
 of infinite   and infinitesimal  
 of iris thoughts   and shocks of sense      that flock  
 and nibble prettily      and pirouette  
 but never stand   on ceremony      still  
 presuming on their sibling privilege  
 in haste too rare   to stay with joy and grief  
 but hoist me too   in leafage incandescent  
 boosters that burn off      as they graze the sun  
 to pinpoint dazzle      flaring thence alone

*So, pigeons suit pines, the tops ('helmets') of elms lodge rooks, starlings ('stares') make their 'dorm'[itories] anywhere other birds nest, and crows go anywhere quiet – a bare tree boles, or bark-blanching limbs, above the jackdaws nesting in canopied tree crowns; [but] these are general connections ('generic these'): this poet feels a 'peculiar' affinity to his birch, 'as unique/as a nursery nucule' (miniature nut) - as in the nursery rhyme's 'King of Spain's daughter[s]... little nut tree [that gave no fruit] except a silver nutmeg and a golden pear, and' [Sale's addition] the 'king's daughter').*

*And so this pale 'tom thumb' of a tree – more like a 'template', 'more air than tree', is only an 'assembly' point, viewing and eating platform for our gentlest, nimblest birds. Its few leaves are unprofitable ('meagre mint' – i.e. despite being silver and gold). But though it is both comical and absurd, the Birch seems a sort of vertical ('perpendicular') version of the poet musing ('for me beneath philosopher's stone').*

*The Birch has become a 'mysterious [and] mystical' collision of something confined to the spot attended by tiny birds always in a state of 'escape'. Everything is out of proportion ('shrink and stretch'), or like Alice [in Wonderland] 'balancing hallucogens [drugs] of [the] infinite and infinitesimal'; the tree launches the poet's rainbow 'iris thoughts' on seeing 'shocks of sense' – the flocking, endlessly nibbling, pirouetting, never-settling birds. The poet senses formality beneath their 'haste too rare' as through them his thoughts too are hoisted in incandescent colour [leaves? swallowed seeds? Tits themselves?] on 'booster' rockets taking the imagination off to 'graze the sun' – leaving tree, everything, behind on earth.*

## Genetic criticism

'Birch Hats' was the result of extensive re-drafting, over years, probably *c.* 1978 to 1990, when it was published in *ScP*.<sup>149</sup> 'Cupressus' showed Sale's usual poetic principle entailing what emerges here: a complex process toward finding the right image, expression, and/or music in the lines. Once again, his poetics are by some of today's measures conventionally linear: a child of Modernism heading in the direction of a 'final' version, both in form and idea.

How a poet is 'inspired' into a poem like this by a particular phenomenon fascinated Sale: several late poems he claims as 'extorted' from him by the sheer miraculousness of their being.<sup>150</sup> This was the subject of the 'Final Supervision' mentioned in Chapter 1, where he described the poetic writing process as more a feeling 'driven' or 'forced' by a set of circumstances into yielding to a feeling, *then* an idea coalescing into an image or images that 'require' writing down. In this case, and using more or less the same method as 'Cupressus', there now followed the long labour of meticulous, even pedantic, verse drafting and re-drafting, sometimes in barely changed versions. These were written out longhand, then typed and re-typed, usually several times. In 'Birch Hats', he even returns to longhand, then back to typing, as though still too dissatisfied for a final assault on finality.<sup>151</sup>

Facetiously or not, only a year before he died, Sale was describing the process of getting to this refining procedure – as something to be avoided, but actually enjoyed thereafter:

Taking on a poem is Question No 1 for me. Something dimly suggests itself – and I run a mile, try to forget it (sleeping on it is the easiest, for I may wake with it transformed into the incoherence of a dream). But if *it* won't go away, *I* still do, out of premonition of the trouble that lies ahead – endless revisions of a tiny section rather than movement forward. But when it is in some sort of shape, there is real pleasure in improvement (of single words, even) refinement, new vistas, new connections, until I have the last word – *finito!*<sup>152</sup>

Laying out all the drafts of 'Birch Hats' it is easy to imagine why: this was a serious endeavour of which he made light.<sup>153</sup> For 'Birch Hats', there are at least 21 drafts: 10 handwritten, like 'Cupressus', on the back of various Magdalene College administrative notices; some also on foolscap, and other scraps of

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<sup>149</sup> Draft 10 is written on the back of a Magdalene circular dated September 1978. An earlier draft is written on the back of an invitation to a Bevis Sale Private View at the Bene't Gallery, in Cambridge. He was sixteen, so as much as a decade earlier.

<sup>150</sup> 'Cupressus' and '“Quite overcanopied by luscious woodbine”' are perhaps the most obvious examples – see also notes above and below, and discussion in Chapter 4.

<sup>151</sup> Nick Blyth, interviewed on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022, remembered the 'Final Supervision' well, as Sale's explicit way of 'giving back' in gratitude: to those ex-pupils (like Blyth) who had gone to great lengths to publish his work; to the College that had employed him; and as a gesture to his friends. It was an enthralling – and of course poignant – evening, as Sale, with little voice, but total poise, mused quietly without notes for well over an hour, on how he had written what he described then (and turned out to be) his last poem.

<sup>152</sup> To John Mole, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1999 *SL*, p.42. See too **Appendix 1**.

<sup>153</sup> This was somewhere between poems like 'Birch Hats', and before he reported feeling 'required' to write such poems as 'Cupressus', or the Honeysuckle poem '“Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine”' (discussed in Chapter 4, and in letters on the latter e.g. to me, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1995, in *SL*). I vividly recall him talking quite matter-of-factly, about 'not even feeling guilty' about *not* wanting to write poetry. This was perhaps somewhere between *c.* 1988-1993. The memory stays, partly because it had not even occurred to me (a working teacher with children), that one might feel guilt at wasting creative time on earth – let alone be even mock-grateful *for its absence*.

paper; and 11 hand-typed (a few carbon-copied), re-amended, usually in fountain pen and latterly in italic marker.

The effort and gradual extent of Sale's re-workings makes a late contemporary – like, say, Sylvia Plath in *Sheep in Fog* – look strangely casual in her re-castings – and all despite Ted Hughes spending far more words than she drafted on the seismic implications of small changes towards the genesis of that startling verse. Such a comparison is not facetious: Sale's later changes *seem* as minor as Plath's, but the first few involve equally startling re-writes – as well as similar versions of her false starts, *re*-starts, ideas built up or dropped later on. *Unlike* Plath, whose re-drafts mainly focussed on mood, Sale addresses three technical aspects: tightening and finding the right images for his meaning; tightening the rhythm of each line of blank verse; and creating more interesting – elliptically concise – kinds of meaning.

As noted already, the first extant version, a scrap tentatively entitled 'The weaving birch(?)', starts with the tree seemingly invisible without Autumn sun to light it gold – or, the poet ruefully suggests, ignite it into cheerier conceit. By the third draft, the poem has acquired something akin to its working, ambivalently darker, title – which alludes to the birch hats worn by the dead in a very few Scottish ballads. As though to underscore the allusive mortality, fascicle 17 adds an epigraph quoting the only known source:

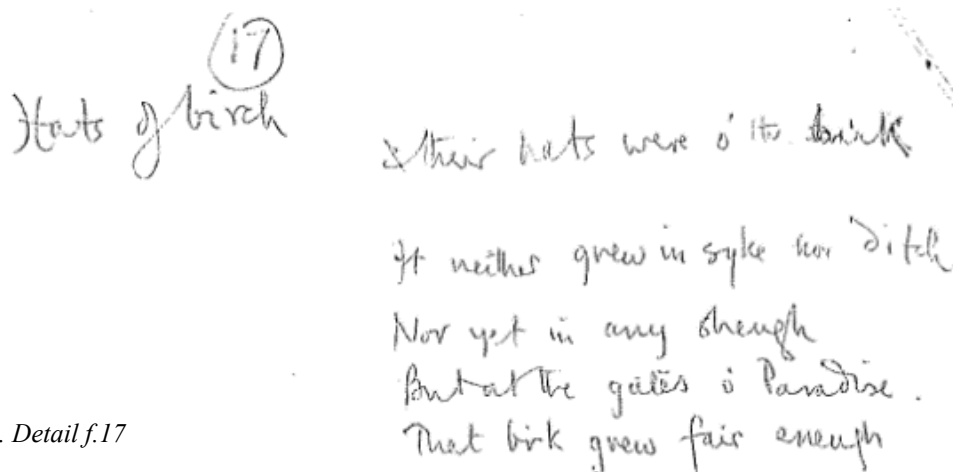


Fig.15 'Birch Hats' MS. Detail f.17

In fact, the whole framing device becomes semi-ironised – as well as self-mythologised, even at source.<sup>154</sup>

Everywhere the tone also tends this way: strikingly so in the title, whose deliberate or implicit ironies again recall Yeats's. Sale's 'birch hats' enter the poem far from some pagan funeral rite, but rather as magic-coloured, 'hallucogenic' birds. They connote life – much more than death – in their every action. At the

<sup>154</sup> *The Wife of Usher's Well* (cf. *Folk Ballads* (1982), p.34ff:

Robert Graves sees its birch hat as a kind of 'day pass' from Avalon, so the dead can visit living relatives (in a note on the ballad at the back of his *English and Scottish Ballads*, p.151). More generally, Proinsias MacCana asserts that Irish Celtic mythology contains a specific word for sacred trees ('bile'). However, Jeremy Noel-Tod comments (in a note on an earlier draft of the present study: 'there seems to be some uncertainty whether 'birk' is 'birch' or 'bark', and it also seems as though the hats are ghostly/metaphorical, rather than a 'real' funeral ritual. So much poetic suggestiveness to consider and draw out of the lines Sale quotes...').

end of the poem it is Sale himself seeing himself carted off to an imagined heaven with the fleeing tits. From the beginning, as we will see, the birch is almost comically evanescent: ‘more air than tree’ – ghostly; finely-wrought.

In this first version, there is more solipsistic melancholy than hint of mortality: the poet opens his blind and surveys the grey/white/black grimness of a Fenland Autumn morning, and wills his birch to ignite in sunlight, to cheer *his* spirits:

The weaving birch (?)

An autumn’s drabness    beyond lifting blind  
birch cannot work    its magic of the dawn  
today’s & man’s

Indeed the poet wonders how it *can* possibly ignite

without sun under it

~~to blast~~ narrow-point its smalling leaves & blast  
the space streamed craft off into no return

If only it could turn into a streamlined / jetstreamed space craft. We saw the same conceit returned to in ‘Cupressus’ – though also in other poems Sale wrote around the first flush of the space age, but here the rocket is not taking off: the poet imagines lack of sunlight as lack of fuel.

The conceit needs honing: for example, the recondite – because neologistic – ‘narrow-point’ and ‘smalling’ have morphed by version 33 into the magnificence of ‘leafage incandescent’; ‘smalling’ (not in **OED**) emphasises Sale’s initial focus on the elegance of the birch’s shape – defining its purpose in nature, but failing to give aesthetic consolation to a poet.

Again, in version 1, it is the birds that render the scene incandescent, albeit after much crossing-out:

No Sun no joy    the longest ever reign  
of dullness ~~until~~ untrackably the tree  
is charged with not a spray of quickening gold  
but a great kit [*sic*] of long-tailed kits [*sic*], at ~~the~~ breakfast  
~~fast shift~~, defining its complete    minutiae  
~~not with electric light tree for summer pricks bulbs illumination~~  
~~bulbs of the dawn have grey pine behind black & white~~  
or plush confining

~~grey black grey white~~ — ~~bass hoc opus in bass~~

~~pink dawn bulbs~~

not with electric tree illumination

for dawn pink bulbs    extinguish behind bars

grey      grey

of drab black & drab white    but with electric darts

This is the idea almost retained to the final printed version, but compressed into a single, interpolated, meta-illustrative, phrase:

...while the provoking bullfinch

a bulb of crimson in a Noel pane

scorches [*the winter thistle*] to cores

However, the next simile of this first draft – albeit a fine Metaphysical one – actually disappears altogether through the re-drafting: the birch was initially pliable above but ‘solderfooted    like an Eastern dancer’ below. Perhaps the original text is excised from all subsequent versions, because this opening reveals too much of the immediate inspiration: birds as human consolation. Instead, he begins the poem all over again in v.2, with the Harpo image.

But *why* start again? A less sentimental – though far more disarming – comedic model for comparison may have seemed preferable to the serious (and potentially clichéd?) piece of ‘Orientalism’ quoted above. Tantalising to know we’ll never know, and despite the drafts; but Sale does leave remarkably-decisive internal evidence. Version 1 (v.1) peters out, so something was not right for the poem. As early as draft 3 a personal, even plangent tone utters itself, that the depressed poet summarily excises. In other words, Sale deliberately takes out his own narrator, leaving behind a childlike depiction of himself, as some sort of comic sidekick to the birch itself. Here, from now on, the tree and its tenuous co-existence with its feeding birds, becomes everything that counts. Humans are destined for another place. In escaping the temptingly local, over-personal, references to which that first version bound him, the poet ditches the melancholy of a drab autumn dawn, and adopts a completely different conceit; as part of the refining risks perhaps the most surreal, unnerving, opening he ever settled on, in ‘Harpo’s white jacket [holding] a bag of tricks’. More on this follows below, under *metaphors of living*.

For now, after the first proto-‘Birch hats’, v.3 is more tightly-metred – even, in places, lyrical. After the first phase, natural images are juggled, altered and compressed through successive drafts – in a very similar



way to ‘Cupressus’. Imagery settled on, Sale packs more and more into each phrase, only altering – sometimes almost imperceptibly – the musical effect. There is consistent working-up throughout the remaining elaborate twenty-one-plus re-drafts; Sale’s intent concentrates – if not exactly clarifies – as he goes.

From the first words of the final revision, he is again clearly ejecting us from the expectations of Romantic Pastoral poetry of the sort he admired: Wordsworth in small bursts, for example. A discussion on the wider implications of this follows in Chapter 4, but for now we are headed towards a stranger, late-twentieth century ‘cosmos’ in which very different natural and poetic rules apply: light shifts, time shifts, four minute warnings – and ‘art-without-rules’. In the later, shape-shifting Cypress poem, we saw a similarly rational refinement of the central metaphors and sound effects, back towards a very different kind of feeling. That tree is also initially a ‘Space Ship...*all ready*’ for take-off to another planet, given the real estate situation. By the end, we witness it becoming an eco-friendly skyscraper of different inhabitants, playmates – though also self-culling supermarket, that feeds the casually-predatory crows.

By contrast, all but the earliest versions of ‘Birch Hats’ end with a rather more exultant, surreally-comic – if tragi-comic – departure from Earth. Sale seems to will himself a nut or ‘nucule’ inside a Christmas-lit Bullfinch, and so flown away; or else he simply feels carried away by the tree ‘lit up’, after that disappointingly dull dawn by the flickering, luminescent birds, he lets us imagine himself zooming off to the stars, away from his kindred spirit / alter-ego, his tiny Silver Birch:

In haste too ~~to stay~~ (long) with joy & pain  
 too exquisite but thirst me doo in incandescent leaves  
 boosters that burn off as they graze the sun  
 to pinpoint dazzle flaming thence alone

And their hats were o the birk  
 It neither grew in syke nor ditch  
 nor yet in any shough  
 But at the gates o Paradise  
 That birk grew fair enough.

Fig.16 ‘Birch Hats’ MS. Detail f.29

But this is no fantasy departure to the stars: note how the epigraph slips to the end – perhaps to remind Sale as well as us, of the mortality the conceit really connotes? In fact, there is a telling addition after this last handwritten version of the drafts (f.29), since the quotation re-appears in the final printed version, moved back *next* to the title that alludes to it. So the ambivalence is better balanced: the idea may still be to connote poet, and engaged reader, transported by delight at the Tits feeding, imagining themselves becoming incandescently-coloured leaves high in his strange, beloved Birch. But the verse also imagines a seventy-

something year old imagining the ultimate space flight. Accurately depicted, with booster rockets burnt off, then discarded on leaving Earth's gravity, he is 'flaring thence alone'. Like Hyperion – as Sale's note in **SP** suggests – he may be one among all such living things, but while imaginatively-headed for the sun, is also *en route* to oblivion.

## Some emerging characteristics

### *an obsession with nature*

'Birch Hats', like all Sale's mature work, is brimful of *unnatural* metaphors – filmic, literary, music hall, industrial – all seemingly to help project something of his sense of the surreal essence in the physical phenomena of nature. He tempts readers' imaginations to see the complexity, both bizarre *and* beautiful, in what he had become obsessed with: 'the daily miracle of life itself that fills my own life'.<sup>155</sup>

Put another way, the apparently simplest idea – here, small birds feeding on a small tree – become the subject of multiple quasi-riddles – at least as many as anywhere else in his verse – each inviting us towards logical, playful extrapolations about the extraordinary implications of these ordinary things of nature. And this also then opens up ideas in relation to human behaviours: are these so far removed, any saner than the bizarre ones of nature?

The poem reflects Sale's deepening focus on the *detailed nature* of nature, in all its bewildering glory. As the first chapter suggested, this was the result of a sensitive man turning or closing imaginatively in upon himself: 'Driven inwards', inside his immediate environment, as life and time prevailed.<sup>156</sup> But in this poem there is now no passive submission: the kinds of energy conveyed – even in a bare tree: manic birds, colour against drabness, Darwinian games etc. – are simply *too* exciting. As Sale seems to depict nature and poetry in this poem, the celebration might well end by soaring a dying man beyond the world: imaginatively, and regardless of the physical passivity of the observer.

### *complex conceits*

And the key is in the complex of images Sale sculpts; or rather, perhaps, the amount of attention to be paid to each one. Again, Forrest-Thomson's contemporaneous invention of the 'image-complex' may be salient here. She calls it:

a level of coherence which helps us to assimilate features of various kinds, to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and to control the importation of external contexts... when we hear 'Out, out

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<sup>155</sup> Letter to John Constable, 18<sup>th</sup> May '94. Not in **SL**. (He goes on to say how painful this can be: regretting picking beautiful leaves of green spinach for colleague Nick Boyle. He then mocks himself for taking himself – and the spinach – far too punctiliously.)

<sup>156</sup> Cf. 'Accidental Voices', in **SP**.

brief candle...’ etc., the level of coherence established by the lines tells us that only certain features of empirical candles are relevant to the passage... .<sup>157</sup>

And much, much more. Sale was always suggesting related ideas: for example, in defending missing out sentence punctuation in verse: it is:

the overriding of sense-syntax for flowing & overleaping linkage & interaction of phrasing that poetry, largely unconsciously, has.

Or more precisely, discussing how much is, or isn’t, needed for a reader to comprehend an image:

I like to think each item is explicable in the way it is used, the part it plays, in the poem itself: e.g. all the knowledge of a Daniel Lambert the poem needs is that he was so heavy he could/[n’t] stand up: he is sufficiently created to make (or illustrate) a contrast attractively.<sup>158</sup>

In ‘Birch Hats’, some of this theory – just how much of an image’s associations we need to take in to make sense of it as part of the whole – may help make with the peculiar, surreal image that opens the final version of ‘Birch Hats’. The American music hall-turned-film comedian Harpo Marx, opens up the gig, of tree and birds:

Harpo’s capacious slack White Jacket stocked  
Bagsful of tricks pig for a pick a lampost  
Convenience for lapdogs beating their bounds  
Netted like sticklebacks So neighbour birch<sup>159</sup>

Harpo’s pre-war and – relevantly perhaps – pre-talkies’ mime act involved producing bizarre objects from a dodgy-looking, long raincoat – including, as here, a toy lamppost, a lapdog to wee – in earlier drafts, poo – against it, and a shrimpnet (v.3) to gather dog (or poo) back into the coat.

Forty years after Sale first shared these creative ideas via carbon copies with his eager – but frankly baffled – undergraduates, it is still a startling metaphorical starting-point.<sup>160</sup> Sale hits us between the poetic ears with the period cultural conceit, disarmingly delivered in a ‘loose bag’ of blank verse: setting another level of demand on the reader. It immediately sets a riddle rather than offering any sort of even glimpsed connection between human and avian behaviours.

Why might the poet demand this? As we have seen, Sale was fascinated with American Literature and culture.<sup>161</sup> He delighted in baffling friends and colleagues with new ‘Representative Americans’ à la Emerson: at one time positing Melville or Henry James as American archetypes, at another Marilyn

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<sup>157</sup> *Poetic Artifice*, p.38.

<sup>158</sup> Letter to John Winter and Elizabeth Bennett, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1990, **SL** p.80.

<sup>159</sup> All references (other than drafts) to final MS. typescript. Identical in **SP**. ‘lampost’ as spelt.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. RR’s conversation with Nick Drake in Dublin, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2021 – Nick remembered the poem fondly “as though I knew it off by heart”, alongside several poems Sale was showing to his undergraduates.

<sup>161</sup> See Chapter 1. He taught the American Literature Paper for Part 2 of Tripos, loved Emily Dickinson’s poetry (*not* her letters), critiqued about her and Melville, admired Leavis’s view of Henry James as ‘writing masterpieces’ (while commenting wryly on his own wife’s denying it (in a letter to John Mole, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1990 **SL**), wrote to me, making conversation about ‘Americana’ (undated, c. 1999), even going there (he claimed) to prove his theories wrong.

Monroe, or Buster Keaton; or, as his *Times*' obituarist noted, even the fictional Pink Panther. All were 'types' that simply could not quite ever naturally arise from or exist as comfortably in European cultural life.

The Marx Brothers certainly fitted his mould – with a telling irreverence: instantly undercutting social politeness and norms, with a surreal logic that compels, and so also leaves the old world gobsmacked. Is that part of the point here, to set a scene for an unashamed, tell-it-how-it-is, yet shape-shifting, view of Nature? (When this poem was first gestating, Sale wrote to Keith Wilson – ex-pupil and lecturer in Ottawa – despairing at only seeing 'Marx Bros. zaniness' in the hypocrisy of picking a fight in the Falklands to save 'a few thousand' Islanders, instead of addressing '3m.+ unemployed in Britain at the time.)<sup>162</sup>

The end notes to **SP** pin down the specific gag Sale intended: Harpo's slapstick role as 'dogstealer' in the 1932 Marx Brothers' film *Horse Feathers*: i.e. the lamppost goes down, the dog obliges, Harpo catches it in his shrimpnet.<sup>163</sup> One critical approach might suggest the 'Eco-poet' in Sale seeing the tree as 'Harpo's treasure-store of wildlife'; that this forms the underlying sense of the conceit. But are Harpo's antics also pointing an imaginative finger at nature's own 'adolescent' behaviours – with a crucial difference? The conceit may also then suggest nature's benign anarchy; but unlike the 'Marx Bros' comic subversion of human worlds, nature's anarchy remains pristine in its weird harmonies.

Sale had already written on the discoveries of modern physics at length – most notably, in “‘The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived’” touched on in the **Conclusion** of Chapter 4 – and alluded to his ideas in many other letters, as well as in other verse.<sup>164</sup> Just as the Cypress high-rise dwellers obey complex, spontaneous, social rules humans couldn't dream of, is Harpo's tree store preparing us, in a kind of daft poetic *riddle*, for the sheer random – *yet far better functioning* - intelligence of nature's bizarre collection of creatures, as they compete to feed off the pine cones and bark-insects of a Silver Birch?

Again, in the Marx Brothers' films, Harpo always has the last – riddling, anarchic, and *silent* - laugh. In the final version of this poem, the sheer, playful bizarreness of the conceit is softened by a similarly self-mocking comparison of tree with poet:

scarce younger            not much taller            than myself  
is too like me            a silver adolescent

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<sup>162</sup> 6th May 1982 **SL**.

<sup>163</sup> **SP**, p.109. Interestingly, the shrimpnet disappears from the final version, presumably as taking too much away from the essential point. This is Sale's gag about nature, not Harpo's about humans.

<sup>164</sup> In **SL**, e.g.: 'how Plato combines the best qualities of Jesus, [Bertrand] Russell, Einstein, Voltaire & Gandhi' (in a letter to I.A. Richards, 19<sup>th</sup> April 1964); on the origins of 'the Greatest Man' poem, in 'a tv programme on Einstein's centenary' (Andrew Cozens, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1979); how Richard Feynman effectively debunks 'poor unifying Einstein' by suggesting there are 'no explanations' to the universe (John Constable, 1<sup>st</sup> May 1988). See too **ScP**, 'Art & Algy' on the nonsense of scientific over poetic explanations ('Let's pretend'...imagined real / and real imaginary') pp.23-25.

This is not just Sale being self-deprecating, for we have seen how the true his eco-poetic – though also simply *poetic* – feeling for birds and tree turns out to be: he identifies completely with his stunted Birch and its hangers-on. Which is the point.

There is another related, even more throwaway, conceit in the *Cypress* poem, as the watcher hears at the very top of the tree:

a susurrus  
of starlings stacked up like that ocean cabin  
bursting with Marxes and with half the crew  
contented sweeper caste for consolation

It reminded Sale of how starlings stack themselves in a tree, tipping to and fro, in and out, in frenzied jockeying.<sup>165</sup> Harpo in *Birch Hats* offers another daft motif for impossibly-overcrowded urban space – with an altogether more surreal, overflowing sense of chaotic order, as we are invited to imagine ludicrously disporting pigs and lapdogs running riot, only to be invisibly, equally impossibly, re-netted by an equally-ludicrous ‘neighbour birch’. (Significantly or not, in later years Sale could even look very much like Harpo Marx.)<sup>166</sup>

Looked at afresh, this brazen, ‘chin-out’ opening may then be seen to challenge us into seeing the simply weird mix of chaos and of order embodied in the very lifeforms Sale sees before him – and then as portrayed in the rest of the poem. The almost comic lunacy of nature’s inner workings in turn is intended to ironise the much greater lunacy of our comic attempts to impose our own tight social order on everything else. However baffling, the fresh perspective may help cajole us back to some sense of the bigger system to which we ultimately belong, as opposed to the endless physical disconnects we twenty-first century suburban dwellers set between ourselves and the natural forces which underpin our very lives.

Whether or not the meaning quite reveals itself in the opening conceit, the comedic ‘running gag’ - of the tree’s choosiness over its clients or ‘coterie’ - is presaged. And the poem’s unapologetic affinity for Harpo’s effortlessly action-packed coat also prepares us at least to expect a poetic world in which the impossible *is* made surreally *possible*. Reading on, something of the mad, self-regulating order of both appears, *if* the reader suspends sufficient disbelief. That is the challenge, perhaps of all of Sale’s poetry – but in these lines perhaps as much as anywhere.

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<sup>165</sup> The scene from *Night at the Opera* was actually improvised (seemingly with real slapstick joy...) as passengers and staff pile (for internally logical reasons...) into a ship’s cabin, until nobody can move. Cf. [Ordering Dinner and Crowded Cabin Scenes YouTube - YouTube](#).

<sup>166</sup> Long-limbed, tightly-curved hair, in later years (cf. photos in Chapter 1). A strangely handsome, benign, yet imposing face and penetrating eyes, counterpointed by a comic tendency to sudden grimace or deliberate satiric leer, then back to benignity.

## *cosmic metaphors*

Most importantly perhaps, this all gives rise to the seemingly innocent question of exactly who or what control these living mechanism(s), and how. This was Sale's more direct question in 'Cupressus':

Whoever over all

Not without mayhem sits at what controls

In 'Birch Hats', example after example begs the same implicit question. We see this, for instance, in the delicacy of tree and its pickiness over allowing only the lightest of birds a perch:

None welcome whether fit or free upon it  
grosser than troy than feather -weight the tit  
[...]

And then the question becomes more explicit:

But what the affinity of bird to tree  
still more of tree to bird is as unsure  
as elms those unsure trees to rookeries

This last is an allusion to the surreal spectre familiar to rural observers of hundreds of rooks circling then roosting in the top of even diseased Elms. The poem here posits some of its own unlikely mis/matches: sparrows 'gate crashing with intent', yet failing to remove a fraction of the seeds 'scorched' from a thistle by a bullfinch taunting them with 'his full fat whistle flutes'.

Again, the Biology is specific, as well as shrewdly observed. It seems Charles Darwin reported finches developing specialised beaks that sparrows lack, but Sale invites his reader to enjoy the seeming human-*envy* in their still trying to core a thistle, despite Natural Selection to the contrary – and the 'provoking bullfinch' mocking as he reduces the thistle to 'winnowed down'. All deliberately begging the obvious, human, question, "why keep trying?" – though such 'species-*envy*' goes much further as the poem unfolds.<sup>167</sup>

Or there seem to be specific biological reasons – and multiple mysteries - about why specific birds live in specific trees. And vice versa: pines find homes for pigeons, and the tops or 'helmets' of elms rooks; so

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<sup>167</sup> Among many sources, cf. [Darwin had Galapagos finches. Norway has... house sparrows? \(sciencenorway.no\)](http://www.sciencenorway.no)

why do starlings ('stares') make a 'dorm[itory]' of any 'dichotomy' – in other words, find spare place to sleep wherever random, unpaired space may still be found? Presumably in turn, these noisier living arrangements create 'calm [spaces] for crows', who mysteriously choose:

bare bole spare arms like almonds blanched

to lodge in, above the 'polls' (pollarded) full of 'grey' Jack'daws'.

The complex accommodation arrangements remain mysterious to a mere poet: these baffling questions yield to mind-games over Sale's own 'peculiar' predicament. What place can a human ever have in the natural world? This comes with quite possibly the oddest – most surreal, and rhapsodic – musing in his oeuvre, as he goes on to spend the rest of the poem describing his unique lack of certain place or home, how he feels set in paradoxical close relationship to his treasured, *paradoxical*, birch:

So though there be

pigeons for pines helmets of elm for rooks...

peculiar mine to tree bird me unique

as nursery nucule that nought else would bear

but silver nutmeg gold pear and king's daughter...

And pallid as sluiced veal or rhubarb forced

this tom thumb template this more air than tree...

is perpendicularly musing prone

the same for me beneath philosopher's stone...

like Alice balancing hallucogens...

of iris thoughts and shocks of sense that flock

and nibble prettily and pirouette

but never stands on ceremony still ...

but hoist me too in leafage incandescent...

Extraordinarily, Sale takes 29 lines to complete the sentence, and its overarching cosmic conceit. It even feels slightly longer because Sale omits sentence punctuation in these later poems. There should be a full stop two lines later, which never comes. The sense, pared back here, is syntactically Henry James-dense. The poet counterpoints his earlier ‘nature notes’: trees-plus-birds in complex bio-dependency, with his final awed adoration of the finches: these ‘shocks of sense        that flock/ and nibble prettily’.

The allusive detail piles up. Sale now pictures himself both as a ‘nursery’ (baby/rhyme) ‘nucule’ (seed) on the same little nut tree that bore ‘nought else.../but [a] silver nutmeg [and a] gold[en] pear’. Crucially, that thought, once the reader has riddled it out, is what lets the bullfinch later ‘hoist    me    too... to pinpoint dazzle’. But it is not safe passage to the stars they/he seek/s: it is Sale himself swallowed by the brilliant bird and carried hence to replicate the tree’s life somewhere new. And that is why, when the Tits in haste fly off, they are also taking his own – bemused, delighted: moved - imagination soaring away with them.

This ecological detail is not just emotionally vital. It is entirely consistent with nature’s pragmatic pairing of the right bird with the right tree: the right beak to extract the right seed etc. But the subliminal, sublime shock on reading these lines, is that suddenly the poem has itself in some way become *its own* new life force borne out of the insignificant suburban garden scene. Seeding itself in the reader’s mind as a contemplation of ‘great creating nature’, wonderfully and enigmatically hinted at in the seemingly throwaway:

of infinite    and infinitesimal... .

To this end, the sense doesn’t stay still there, but is concentrated still further as the compressed syntax elides ‘silver nutmeg.....gold pear’ ...with the ‘king [of Spain’s] daughter’. It is as though Sale’s imagination is so trained on his subject, the nursery rhyme allusion quite naturally means he is both seed ‘carried away’ by his birds, *and* the scene’s observer: traditionally:

the King of Spain's daughter [*who*]  
Came to visit me  
All for the sake  
Of my little nut tree!

Yet even now there is a further meaning lurking in the imagery, of the sheer physical beauty of nature in action. White birch bark is now, momentarily, homespun, domesticated, ‘similed’ into pale (‘pallid as’) washed veal, or forced rhubarb. The pallor also echoes the tree’s own ‘meagre mint for tanners and for guineas’ – its sparsely-hung leaves of silver coins. But it then is placed in spectacular contrast to ‘our doucest    sprucest    avian family’ of varied Tits. These tantalising flashes of colour are what comforted Sale in the earlier version of the Birch poem; now they remind him of the contrast between a pale-skinned

‘Alice’ [*in Wonderland*]    ‘balancing hallucogens’



of infinite and infinitesimal

of iris thoughts...

‘iris’ here is merely annotated ‘rainbow’ in **SP**: presumably ‘iris thoughts’ are of the residual colours the eye ‘remembers’ even if the bird is too fast-moving for the observer to register a distinct and conscious image?<sup>168</sup> And they are also

shocks of sense

that is, ‘*shocking*’ us into realising the ‘sense’ of nature’s strange processes. They also play with our sensibilities: physically shocking, and lovely, too:

that flock

and nibble prettily and pirouette

but never stand on ceremony still

Our ‘doucest sprucest’ garden birds really do flit in and out of trees with astounding agility and speed. Sale turns out to be literally, as well as sensitively, observant. This is aesthetic observation, of course, but also forensic – offering glimpses of the mysteries of *nature*’s elaborate, as well as pretty, processes. *Precise* glimpses: hear the difference between this and contemporary, John Mole’s otherwise almost identical metrically-elegant sparrow-flitting:

Zinging back and forth

Takes off, returns, keeps swinging there.<sup>169</sup>

Overall then, the poetic conceits in ‘Birch Hats’ are intended to reveal Sale’s distinctive, imaginative view of Nature operating its extraordinary mechanisms – and the paradox of what on earth controls them, at cosmic, quantum levels – and everything between. The poem works through a dense, multi-faceted, and deliberately overwhelming layers of meaning, irony, word- and sound-play, to lure us near that feeling, that baffled sense.

### *metaphors of dying...*

Thus, a layer of bitter-sweetness is also implicit in Sale’s imagery, and runs through the poem. The opening wild conceit tells the reader that the narrator *knows* the Birch is neither Harpo’s dropped treasure, nor a

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<sup>168</sup> **SP** p.110.

<sup>169</sup> See above, Chapter 2 – section on *Loose Blank Verse*.

comic genius. This is a fantasy image on one obvious level. On another, neither will Sale become seed, nor will he fly away with the Tits, *nor* become honorary Birch-companion. Take too the fourth line, which emphasises the separation by adding something of a grandly Hardy-esque (Nick Selby suggests ‘Frostian’) mock-grandiloquence: ‘*So* neighbour Birch’. The pun on ‘*So*’ – meaning ‘likewise’, ‘just *so*’, and perhaps even something akin to ‘so what?’ – means Sale himself remains, as though by implication, the Birch tree’s ‘neighbour’. On one level this implies our egalitarian respect: trees are just as valid inhabitants of the Earth as humans. On another, Sale’s imaginary fate will lie in the hands of the Birch tree, as we have seen, associated – in Sale’s free-wheeling iconography – with death.<sup>170</sup>

Overall then, Sale evokes a tragi-comic sense of a man comically separated from nature outside his window. Though we have seen the redrafting process excise all autobiographical references, Sale hints at himself – for example, as a pale contrast to the palest of trees – as excluded from nature, alongside the vast majority of modern suburban dwellers.

Apart from one thing. In this extremely unusual case, it is a man who is also writing it down: a poet making me, his reader, aware of his tree’s delicate beauties, as well as its baffling – but comic – ecosystems that control poet as much as bird. And one of these is death.

The playful conceits hardly disappear, of course, as ‘Birch Hats’ begins to pose such serious matter. By the end we are asked to imagine the narrator solving everything by imagining himself as one of the bright-plumaged birds ‘in leafage incandescent’ cracking the code of the tree, dazzling up. But by then this playfulness has become pointed: the Fool always speaks true, and Sale’s last slapstick ride is also imagining one out of this life: ‘alone’.

In later years, this became a theme he unflinchingly addressed, I once asked him whether he was frightened of dying. Without hesitation, he replied: “No – how can you be frightened of the most natural thing in the world?”

The final handwritten draft of the poem makes ‘birch hats’ into a folk-symbol for death. A sombre kind of allusion for a seventy year old imagining himself joining then flying past his garden birds on a final flight to heaven. Sale, playfully, affectionately, or otherwise, seems to have intended this allusion as a kind of icing-on-the-poetic-cake homemade ‘mythologising’ of his favourite birch. The final, playful-serious conceit of the poet yearning himself zooming off to heaven ‘flaring thence alone’, all happens while imagining, and sound-mimicking, the colourful Bullfinches flitting away from their chosen tree.

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<sup>170</sup> In conversation, March 2022.

### ...metaphors of living

Properly, then, these two sets of complex conceits interconnect as the poem unfolds. Right from the beginning, the Harpo conceit, and the surreal images that follow it, are there to make *some* sense of Birch and birds as small members of a seemingly inexplicable mechanism – generous, ruthless, anarchic, self-ordering, complex, elegantly simple, infinitely-intricate, infinite... – called ‘Life’ or ‘Nature’.

As the poem unfolds, the birch is always depicted as somehow ephemeral, temporal, passing. It is variously described as:

...too like me            a silver adolescent

but also:

pallid as sluiced veal            or rhubarb forced

and, in very next, lovely line:

more air than tree            .

And so towards the end, the birch becomes a playful emblem of death. As in Sale’s Nettle or Honeysuckle poems, nature may be astoundingly dynamic, beautiful; yet seemingly the next minute desiccated into nothingness. ‘Birch Hats’ attempts to unfold from a similar paradox: the secret logic of how Nature – even in the most tame, domestic, of suburban places – plays by its own complex rules, just as Harpo plays by his: till both spectacularly combine in the final flying/dying conceit.

The title corroborates all this. Whether or not the ‘birch hat’ as death symbol may be tenuous in folk-ballad terms, Sale took Graves’s line. The epigram from *The Wife of Usher’s Well* stayed till the printed version in order to underline his imagined sense of what his unusual, even extraordinary, little birch might ultimately mean: a consoling beauty before life’s end.

### *loosened syntax*

Particularly in ‘Birch Hats’, well before the redrafting ditched the romantic lyricism of a ‘drab autumn’ dawn – in exchange for Harpo’s anarchy, and Alice’s drug-taking, and trolls and sluiced veal – the freedom in image and sound also extended to the rhythms and phrasing, that begins to make the poem *seem* to move some way from conventional notions of iambic pentameter, let alone of prose syntax.

‘Birch Hats’ shows Sale’s longer, looser, verse lines in action, at least ten years before ‘Cupressus’. This highly-enjambed blank verse certainly also *appears* loosened further by punctuation-free sentences, and the type of compressed syntax that we have seen as both a strength *and* a challenge in Sale’s verse. Similarly, a great variety of long and short phrases teases the reader as to where semantic and/or sentence

breaks may or may not be coming, straining the mind and voice between pulse and prose, towards what Sale called the ‘music’ of the poetic line. In ‘Birch Hats’, both brain and mouth are encouraged to dance through the intricate, oscillating descriptions of different types of tits attracted to – and mostly rejected by – the Silver Birch:

tom willow cole longtailed tadpole in pink  
oxeye black sheep or troll oscillating  
overpoised overbearing overborne  
on springboard hair Wrens even barely touch

down on a flight rare now a flash of fire  
or splodge of gold that dodges nought but notice

On top of the disarming ‘Harpo’ start, followed by all the anarchic bird riddles, there is a complex syntactic architecture unfolding. Eventually this blossoms regally into the poignant eulogy to avian beauty, and purpose, and place, in the final long section.

Note the delicate, held poise in the rhythmic imbalance of

oscillating  
overpoised overbearing overborne  
on springboard hair .

Later in these twenty-nine lines, which are so Miltonic, in their refusal to get to the finite verb, the staccato, halting musing of the implicit problem: ‘why *do* these birds congregate in this small tree?’, begins to answer itself in a pacing rhythm, based on internal, alliterative tri-syllabic beats:

pigeons for pines & helmets for elms  
dorm to stares  
calm for crow  
like almonds blanched [etc.]

All these lines tentatively, perhaps questioningly, seek to ‘place’ particular birds in particular places – places it will turn out the poet can never fly.

As has been observed several times now, there is the obvious danger, in such complex syntax and opaque metaphors, that the whole thing becomes unintelligible: especially when emphasised or reinforced by spacings and deleted punctuation. He acknowledged as much to I.A. Richards, Alex Moffett, Nick Blyth, and others.<sup>171</sup>

Nevertheless, in the Mole letter from this time, Sale reassured him about his own ‘short lines’ of verse, while enthusiastically also offering a clue by juxtaposition, as to how his long-lined loose blank verse held together – and *should* hold together:

Yes, I’m sure I do load every drift of meaning with ore: I think poetry is not statement to guide us through the thickets of metaphor & image & perhaps we are too relieved to come across an occasional recognisable stretch of twine.<sup>172</sup>

As he implies – indeed, as Helen Vendler trusted – the impetus of the poem – including its syntax, and rhythms and other sound effects – really do guide the reader through the ‘thickets’. In the case of ‘Birch Hats’, we soar – slowly – up through the complex, unfolding (‘irregular’?) blank verse twine, and Sale’s syntactically ‘recognisable stretch of twine’: ‘So though there be [pigeons for pines *etc.*]...this more air than tree...is perpendicularly musing...like Alice balancing hallucogens...and shocks of sense...that flock...but never stand...in haste too rare to stay...but hoist me too’... .

The next section gives further examples of how careful Sale is *not* to loosen the sound-music of his lines.

### *playful sound effects*

A note on Sale’s sound mimesis is important here, again as a means for emphasising the playful tone in possibly his most fantasising of poems about a small garden tree. To be clear, he always unswervingly believed in poetic sound effects: for example gently inviting his young poet friend to ask his own young children for guidance on the need for basic rhythm in verse, if it were to become poetry.<sup>173</sup>

As both poems begin to show, there are precise tightrope walks of tone, for example between fantasy-facetiousness and something more orate. Sale’s technical draft changes reflect his tightening both, as he proceeds. Every other word is clearly intended to have its moment of resonance – Sale would say ‘space to breathe’ – in which new punning images, and meanings, become possible. In this poem, words like

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<sup>171</sup> See **SL** respectively: p.7 (‘Limits, departures from, rhythmic constraints’), p.103 (‘Obscurity’, then punctuation), p.107 (on (lack of) poetic coherence). All also quoted in **Appendix 1**. Cf. also Mole quotation below.

<sup>172</sup> **SL**, p.36; 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. 1986

<sup>173</sup> Letter to me: July 1999, in **SL**, p.96.

‘stand’ involves plays on both stasis and politeness; ‘still’ is obviously adverb as well as adjective; ‘graze’ both touches and nurtures – *et cetera*.

The sound make-up here is as complex as what it depicts: as with the Cypress’s mad communal living, ‘Birch Hats’’s weird life forms living alongside weirder ones may also thus fire inside a willing reader’s brain: hearing not only to the puns, word plays, but also to rhythmic stresses and flows that mimic his anarchic imagery.

In the final section, for example, we too may begin to imagine ‘hoist’ing us into space, as the rhapsodic hymn to nature’s cycle quickens the pace, into increasingly definitive *four-syllable* emphases:

of shrink and stretch

of infinite...

of iris thoughts            and shocks of sense

and pirouette

in haste too rare

but hoist    me    too            &            incandescent

...flaring thence alone

If this complex mimesis is not enough, here is one further set of sound-clues: the lightning flitting of the birds is captured onomatopoeically in the conceit of man reduced to a tiny seed (‘nursery nucule’), only to be eaten by one of them, lyrically, at last, to hoist    me    too [*on*]:

boosters that burn off            as they graze the sun

to pinpoint dazzle            flaring thence alone            .

In these final four sets of five-syllabic realisation, Sale makes me either feel it is only man who can dream such daft dreams: ‘thoughts etc. passing the sun into space, as Hyperion did in Keats’ (as the **SP** note has it); *or* that only ‘great creating nature’ – which formed the ‘incandescent’ partnership of bird and leaves in the first place – will be the one telling us one day where else to go. If the sound effects are well-wrought enough, Sale’s – or rather, our – realisation of such astoundingly bizarre ecological mechanisms may soar us into a kind of emotional humility, make us accept our place as mere seed, life born to die – rather than delusional demi-gods.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Cf. Sale’s own note in **SP** (p.110) to ‘flaring thence alone’.

## Broader findings

### possible poetic traditions to which this verse may relate

We have seen so far now how Sale's exhaustive refining process of metaphor and sound effects – is clearly intended to result in one final version. Where does this approach place Sale as a 'period poet'? We have seen hints as to how his earlier verse was Modernist, and how the Cambridge world at the time of writing 'Birch Hats' was essentially a Leavisite, *pre-Structuralist* 1970s' bubble. Yet even in that mini-world Sale seems to have found little in common with the other poets he knew, nor their poetry.

#### *a. twentieth century Cambridge poetry*

In Chapter 1 again, we saw how Andrew Cozens, who arranged for Sale to appear in at least two publications during 1975 – including one apparently turned down by J. H. Prynne – remembered Sale as less than interested in this new rationale for writing poems. Nearly fifty years after publishing *UW* in the same year, Tony Whittome, ex-poetry editor at Hutchinson, remembered likewise. Yet a passing resemblance might well be presumed fifty years later, simply because of the apparent opacity of meaning in each poet's writing.<sup>175</sup>

There are other superficial reasons for connecting Sale with Prynne: they knew each other, overlapped for thirty years in affiliated organisations a quarter of a mile apart, were respected outsiders, seen as ferociously well-read – 'even' for Cambridge – and of course wrote obscure poetry.<sup>176</sup> But the forms of opacity are very different. Where Prynne deliberately fragments his meanings between melded lines containing two or more distinct, conflated, phrases, Sale teases out single meanings, admittedly via typically intricate conceits and soundscapes. Contrast a relatively conventional poem by Prynne, with almost anything we have so far seen by Sale:

We are at the edge of *all that* and  
can reach back to *another*  
*matter*, only it's not *back* but  
*down* rather, or in some involved  
sense of *further off* [...] *Which way*  
*are we facing*. Burn the great sphere:  
count them, days of the week.

[*my italics*]<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Zoom interview with Andrew Cozens, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022. Cozens guest-edited a Cambridge poets' edition of *The Windless Orchard* (Purdue) in 1975. Importantly, as a mark of his reputation locally, Prynne is significant enough a figure to be mentioned in the editorial, even though he – presumably? – chose not to be included; cf. Interview with Tony Whittome in Shepherds Bush, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023.

<sup>176</sup> The back of one of Sale's poem drafts, is a letter showing that Sale's close colleague Richard Luckett sat with Prynne on an English Faculty committee. Cf. undated letter (c. April 1976), asking colleagues for donations to the T. R. Henn Prize fund, signed by JMY Andrew, Muriel Bradbrook, Richard Luckett, and one 'J.H. Prynne' (**Archive** & photocopy).

<sup>177</sup> 'Bronze: fish' in *The White Stones* (2016)

Prynne's poetic voice here has the sure lilt of Wallace Stevens, perhaps, but also literally connotes 'lostness'. He only half-mocks the achingly-orate Eliot-ic tone that Sale's early poems – among countless others – imitated.<sup>178</sup> The italicised words, in the above quotation, all suggest a psychologically, or possibly intellectually, symbolic 'place' that simply can never physically defined. Despite the apostrophic flare – 'to Burn the great sphere' – there is no escape, or home: at the very end, we are still left counting 'days of the week'. This hints at traumas or irresolutions – or something different altogether? So the abstractions tantalise: just beyond conscious thought. Though Prynne sounds far more abstract and riddling than *the Four Quartets*, the cadence and psychological conceits remind me of lines like:

If you came this way,  
Taking the route you would be likely to take  
From the place you would be likely to come from...

Or

If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,

in which Eliot grimly teases us that:

It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion

...in order to find a spiritual salvation was attained – Sale might and did say – far too glibly.

Prynne – a gaunt figure even when I heard him lecture when he was only 44 – never seems confident of too much salvation. Again, he uses plain words, few concrete metaphors, almost surreally tentative, fragmented, shimmering – or semantically impossible, or philosophical – meanings, as in his elegy for the poet, Celan:

Fire and honey oozes from cracks in the earth;

the cloud eases up the Richter scale      (*from 'Es Lebe der König', in Brass, 1971*)

Even such relatively-conventional opening lines conjure 'impossible', 'unsettling' landscapes; but these are meta-poetic ones, emblematising not volcanoes, but abstract forms of despair, of violence. Indeed, this is a theme developed throughout Prynne's verse – according to Matthew Hall's *Violence in the Poetry of J.H. Prynne* – and gets bleaker as time goes on. The language is stark beyond measure: in his much later 'Refuse Collection', Iraq War-torture becomes viscerally commodified: 'The differentiation between the act and its representation slowly erodes, as can be seen in the lines "stripped canny / sex romp" (s.1/578); "yes rape yes" (s.1/578); "shagged out" (s.2/578); "sodomised in a honey cell" (s.2/578); "food for / sex molest

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<sup>178</sup> Cf. F.R. Leavis on young Cambridge imitators of T.S. Eliot, even as early as 1929 – *art. cit.*



modest” (s.2/578); “chicken rape” (s.2/578); “cash for sex for punishment” (s.4/579); and “stamp on non-white body parts [...] huddled up naked” (s.4/579). It is hard to think what words could be more brutally – perhaps sado-masochistically? – re-hashed.<sup>179</sup>

Sale’s tussle with his own ‘obscurity’, was sometimes a mystery to him; with usual satirically self-deprecating candour on the new-found topic of ‘living things’ he adds:

My appreciation... reaches out – more to things than to people, I fear – living things I had always taken for granted. But, as if to keep the balance comically even, any verses I make about such “public” objects as bindweed & thistles are thought to be incomprehensible.<sup>180</sup>

These chapters have suggested much of his meaning really may be more accessible than it looks at first. Perhaps sheer brightness was/is partly to blame? He is much more forensic about the issues – implying his inveterately ‘riddling’ resistance – in his ‘clew of statement’ note to John Mole, remarking how

we look for the clew of statement to guide us through the thickets of metaphor & image & perhaps are too relieved to come across an occasional recognisable stretch of twine.<sup>181</sup>

The ‘*too* relieved’ comment is instructive. As is the conceit: thickets. Each metaphor returns to nature, and is intended to explicate nature’s complex workings. As are we as readers. As is the rest of Sale’s poetic language. Is this enough?

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Taking another tack, the tendency to abstract personal reflection was, and often still is, widespread in verse of Sale’s time in Cambridge: whether in Prynne’s ‘British Poetry Revival’ avantgarde style; or, say, in verse by Rod Mengham, of Jesus College, Cambridge – who also knew Sale and wrote verse as eclectic as Prynne’s; or more mainstream ‘Movement’ work by poets such as Clive Wilmer – who taught some of my contemporaries at Cambridge, and was known for being far more traditionally accessible while evincing similarly self-conscious characteristics. This seems rather in the elegant, lyrical style of Cambridge contemporary John Mole. Even in an occasional piece like *Bottom’s Dream*:

...And when she drew me in, she made

The whole world bottomless.

...I woke and yes I was a man

Was I myself though? Self, like sleep,

May well be bottomless...<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> See **Bibliography** for Prynne sources mentioned here.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* to Isabel Wolff. Quoted in full in **Appendix 1**.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.* Cf. **SL, Appendix 1 & Archive**.

<sup>182</sup> *New & Collected Poems*, Carcanet 2012.

Again, though, the analysis so far has strongly suggested late Sale verse – though equally-riddling, sceptical, ironic, arch – is, literally and simply seeking out ways of celebrating the tangibly ‘living things’ of nature. As both Cypress and Birch have suggested, there *is* a near-botanical meaning to each line, however opaque each metaphor; this is because Sale’s prolix, playful conceits and sound-plays resonate with the implications of the complex – he finds simply astounding – nature of each tree’s parasites.<sup>183</sup> Though disarming conceits *really* disarm, the sense is there to be found – and is oddly obvious once found.

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A final comparison with an obscure – borderline recondite – conceit in ‘Cupressus’ may test or negate this last idea. The daily Dawn Chorus song mysteriously dictated by the first bird awake, reminds Sale of tram windows opened, or not, by the first passengers of the day:

the idle singers            of an empty day  
whose leit motif        the first awake selects  
          as shut or open        decreed for that day  
          windows        inexorably        of earliest trams

Though this is there to emphasise the nostalgically-remembered link to an aspect of human behaviour, the riddling conceit feels for a moment like it might derail the tram of remaining readers. This is exactly the sort of line that evokes that dislocating feeling Sale acknowledges once again, in landing us in the ‘thicket’ of his metaphors. Have we again landed for a moment in a different poem, and will we ever makes sense of the one we were ‘in’?

In the moment just quoted, the anthropology of humans on public transport provides some clue to the riddle set. Tortuous as this may be to explicate in prose, this really *is* only a simile to reinforce the poet’s pleasure in easy natural behaviour patterns, which are clearly enough depicted in the first two elegant lines. And in the context of the whole poem, there is clearly a thematic need to fly back to childhood – and *childlike* – observations, in order to articulate what most adults *don’t* seem to notice in the ‘living forms’ of nature.

Perhaps this is an exception to the issue the only reviewer of **UW** noted, that his is verse not seen by enough early readers, and as a result too packed with conceits: in this case popular allusions too period-specific to carry to the next generation? (It should perhaps be added that the reviewer, John Fuller, also thought Sale an inexperienced young poet, rather than 63.)<sup>184</sup> Sale implicitly acknowledged this particular conceit demands further explication, a note in **SP** showing that even ‘the degree of openness of the windows’ was somehow set by the earliest passengers to board. This noted, the obedience/inertia of passengers that

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<sup>183</sup> For critical summaries, see Jeremy Noel-Tod, ‘J. H. Prynne’, in *The Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry in English*, pp. 492–3; and Nicola Stark, ‘Necessary and not Permanent: huts in the work of Paul Celan and J.H. Prynne’, in *German Life and Letters* 69:3, University of Nottingham: online 2016.

<sup>184</sup> *Times Literary Supplement* 7<sup>th</sup> November 1975. Cf. discussion with Andrew Cozens, who kindly supplied a copy of the ‘review’.

travelled subsequently that day, *is* the point of such types of conditioned behaviour. Today, even on air-conditioned underground trains and buses, windows are often left opened or shut against strict logic: humans behave more like birds than we generally ever imagine, seems a quite plain – and most important – gist.

## b. older models...

As the first chapter explored, several earlier role models might lay juster claim to encouraging Sale's more surreal imagery: say, Eliot's earlier verse; or nearer to home, Empson or I.A. Richards's. We saw how Sale had – more or less accidentally – grazed the Surrealist movement in 1937, through which he met his abstract sculptor friend, Henry Moore.<sup>185</sup> But Sale, even as a young man was aghast at the art of the Surrealists themselves – not least that they claimed his early poetry *as* 'Surreal'.<sup>186</sup>

Other later comparators have been mooted. The 'Martian Poets' like Craig Raine, writing around the time 'Birch Hats' was gestating, adopted superficially similar models of surreal metaphor. Ditto Robert Graves, whom Sale once told me he admired as the modern "poets' poet", for his personal myth-making. But as we also saw, such styles of poetry tend on the whole to be *far* more emphatically undertaken: in shorter, less intricate, lines, and with a poetic voice often grave – as well as solipsistic: even sententious.

In Chapter 1, we saw how Sale distinguished his efforts from those of famous contemporaries like Heaney, Hughes, Larkin et al. This was partly simply for technical reasons, because of his longer lines and more complex conceits: **SP** carries more endnotes on 'Birch Hats' than any other poem in the collection.

Partly too, it involved the same witty railings against solipsism. I remember his disarming honesty in calling himself an 'amateur' compared with Heaney; though literally true, since Sale earned a slender living teaching and Heaney made rare money as a modern poet selling poetry, he was only partly self-deprecating. In late correspondence with Penny's father, it was still Yeats – and specifically *not* Heaney – he rated as the stand-out Irish poet of the twentieth century, *because* his invented poetic language transcends a focus on Self.<sup>187</sup>

As Cypress and Birch genetic criticisms have also sought to show, the exhaustive 'working-up' process for both hardly suggests 'amateurism': this after all was a methodology modelled on Yeats, whose care over words we have seen he valued, developed his own version of, over decades – implying both graft *and*

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<sup>185</sup> Bevis Sale, in taped conversation, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2021.

<sup>186</sup> In conversation. See too Chapter 1, *Sale's 'Surrealist Period*. The **Archive** contains Sale's unpublished *Memories of Moore*, in which Sale found himself missing a preview of the 'pathetically tawdry' Surrealist Exhibition that would have put him 'in the company of every famous artist in Europe' (p.10 & *passim*).

He often talked about being much more drawn to Buster Keaton – preferring him to Chaplin – and the equal 'zaniness' of the Marx brothers, especially Harpo; not just for laughing at the Establishment, but for embodying his own disestablishmentarianism. In a letter to his ex-pupil, the Ottawa lecturer Keith Wilson, on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1982, he compares Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* most favourably with Margaret Thatcher's Falklands war-mongering, **SL**, p.16.

<sup>187</sup> See also concluding Chapter including this extract; and in **Appendix 1**.

craftsmanship. Again, it was Yeats's 'matchless verse' he praised in a letter to Nick Blyth.<sup>188</sup> Sale's late-poem wrestling is also protracted, as we have seen his correspondence bear out.

Nevertheless, detailed comparisons undertaken in earlier versions of this study ruled out poets he otherwise admired; going back in 'voice', if not time, for example, analyses of Edward Thomas, Robert Frost, W.B. Yeats and William Wordsworth. Taking just one of these clearly shows the general lack of 'fit': Thomas, to whom we saw Sale pay homage in 'School of Nettles' in Chapter 1, turns out to 'narrate' – or at least poetically *imply* – much more of the poet's state of mind than eulogise his natural subjects: whether 'Two Pewits', 'Swifts', or even his favourite 'Swedes'.<sup>189</sup> In the first of these, Thomas *is* presumably

...the ghost who wonders why  
So merrily they cry and fly,  
Nor choose 'twixt earth and sky  
While the moon's quarter silently  
Rides, and the earth rests as silently.

The focus is the Pewit's cry against the silence of a Hampshire night, and exquisitely felt by the poet. Effortlessly, in Thomas's perhaps unique way – he daubs in just enough verbal (Impressionist?) detail to tease us into recreating this world for ourselves. All else is quiet. Even the poem is silenced – as it would be too for Thomas, very soon after. The Pewits' somewhat Georgian Poet-clichéd 'crying and flying' 'merrily' nevertheless contradict the silence. Though we sense his implicit, and profound, irony – *this* ghost's merriness about to end, Thomas's, let alone Edwardian 'Merrie England', about to end – might 'piercingly', or even say 'plangently', have raised the same emotion, without risking the inherently-inane bathos of 'merrily'? To be sure, this writing is poetically transformative – in several senses 'fine'; but it is also aethereal, delicate – and completely unlike Sale's. Contrast, for example, the various kinds of tits – including made-up varieties – 'troll' – that deliberately set out to overbalance the others – all swaying wildly on tiny twigs in 'Birch Hats':

oxeye    black sheep or troll    oscillating  
overpoised    overbearing    overborne  
on springboard hair                      Wrens even barely touch  
  
down

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<sup>188</sup> Undated, in *SL*, p.109. For Yeats's craftsmanship, cf. Sale's contrast with the facile, if 'sensitive', Clough, in a footnote in the **Archive** section of the first Chapter.

<sup>189</sup> Titles are those adopted by R George Thomas, in the OUP *Collected Poems*.

The enjambement, extravagant spacings, repeated ‘*over*’s, assonant ‘*o*’s, line and paragraph breaks all send the rhythm as deftly out of control as *our* imaginations are also invited – albeit less subtly than Thomas – to ‘hoist’ ‘our doucest sprucest avian family’ into the whirring tree. In all but love for the countryside, this could not be further from Thomas; far more ‘physical’, line-breaking, robust, than the earlier poet’s fluent sketchiness of technique to evoke a Parnassian sense of the simple scene’s unexpected perfection: as fleeting, exquisitely sad.

Sale, who loved Thomas in his best near-prose, delicate verse, used to comment on just how ‘entitled’ his poetic hero could be, especially in his letters: disappointed in real life, playing the intellectual poet ‘surveying the grounds’, on his way to ‘the pub with no name’ down in Steep.<sup>190</sup> But does this matter, to the poetry that resulted? Well, take again ‘The Swifts’ in which the poet elegantly prefers to muse on the paradox of the bitter-sweet knowledge his favoured birds may not return – rather, say, than enjoy them *this* summer? Or, most pertinent to the present comparisons, ‘Swedes’ or ‘Nettles’. These are the sorts of subject Thomas triumphs in metamorphosing from ugliness into beauty. ‘Swedes’ indeed turns out transformed to tenderness, though it strains its own conceit: *cf.* ‘Dreamless long-dead Amen-hotep lies’ etc. And is the ending not at best ambiguous, rather than poignantly ambivalent; a shade *too* generalised: ‘This is a dream of Winter, sweet as Spring’?

In terms of poetic language, ‘cutting-edge’ poets of their time – Wordsworth, Yeats, Frost or Thomas – skilfully manipulate ‘off-the-shelf’ poetic languages with which to seduce readers into a passionate sense of a wilderness nature now made unfamiliar to millions in the newly-industrialised cities. But Thomas’s verse a century later was passionate, Romantic Pastoral re-invention, essentially.<sup>191</sup> Sale too cares enough about expressing the cosmic mechanism he sees in one piece of nature – Tits in Birch trees) to spend twenty-one drafts perfecting his own, rather more *made-up*, poetic mimicry of the birds’ movements. Using Knickerbocker’s eco-poetic model (defined in the next Chapter), it is only by making up his own verse line and phrase to express every aspect of it, that this *mimesis* turns into *sensuous* engagement.

True, Thomas’s peewits also

now low, now high [...]

Plunge earthward, tossing high,<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> *A note in case of betrayal...*: all this despite Sale speaking affectionately of Thomas, even, for example, when he would *against* himself, report a Practical Criticism session that once reluctantly convinced him Frost was the better poet – as far as *road navigation* was concerned, at least... [Conversation with me *c.* 1980.]

<sup>191</sup> I am taking the Penguin Editors’ definition and timeline for the demise of ‘Pastoral Verse’ – see also note towards the end of the study on this.

<sup>192</sup> *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, OUP 1978

But Thomas's genius rests in so much simpler a flight – of verse. The peewit utters a plangent, single 'sound under the sky' that carries the delicately tender mood. But by contrast, Sale wants us to see, intuit and *feel* the physical intricacy – the virtual *impossibility* – of his lightweight birds, again and again attempting landings on such fine twigs, constantly counterpoising the need for breakfast, against the physics of flight and gravity and venue. In other words, he depicts a far more intricate scene than Thomas: in chiming epithets and seeming endless enjambement, he seeks to capture the complex forces at play, in close observation of the tragi-comic interaction of birds and tree. There is none of Thomas's simple – *impressionistic, elegant* – delicacy: one movement high, one low. In the example above, Sale's birds endlessly 'overpoise' their landings, 'oscillate' to and fro, are 'overborne' – fall – back into the air. Some (Sparrows) never make it; some (Wrens) 'even barely touch down'. Yet somehow – and certainly against all human reason – the system of angle girth tree and hallucogenic tits is fully functioning, and the aerobatics spectacularly lightning fast, and effective, and over millennia. All this is somehow implicit in his comedy sketch lines, in his word spaces, and in his absent punctuation; and above all, in the heady conceits that bear the far bizarrer, perhaps necessarily late-twentieth century, idea: of nature's endless, strange permutations of (im)perfection.

### **A feeling for – and about - nature**

Even Sale's two late tree poems – themselves taken from those that made the 'cut' into **SP** – show a poet finding his subject. Further research will confirm or disprove a – necessarily tentative – hypothesis that the earlier verse, though just as carefully assembled and felt, may not quite 'take off' with the expressive range and freedom of 'Cupressus' and 'Birch Hats', to 'hoist me too in leafage incandescent'.

Previous, 'solipsistic', subjects in the end did not engage him, nor us, so fully. The examples so far suggest an intensity of technique Sale imparts to each line which is commensurate with nature's sheer complexity: appropriate because these *matter* to him. Whether or not, Sale's path emerges as his own. The younger Sale clearly sought out key literary figures' – especially Eliot's – poetic tone. A lifetime later, by the time of 'Birch Hats' and 'Cupressus', the approach to metaphor and sound effects may be complex and idiosyncratic, but is also better-fitted to their renewed purpose.

Sale's determination has by now become to describe the ineffable – yet botanically literal – qualities of the life forms he 'simply' sees, and then works hard to depict. Perhaps this is the poetic equivalent of Constable's cloud studies, or Moore's endless, careful sheep drawings – which Sale was lucky enough to see, almost first, in Moore's living room.<sup>193</sup> Both artists found new techniques to express both subjects, Sale achieves this through *appropriately*-bizarre images and a complex – loose – musicality of line, to get

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<sup>193</sup> *Memories of Moore, ibid.*

somewhere nearer the specific characteristics of his subjects, and so somehow try and express their overwhelming magnitude.

Sale wrote at this time about what the poetry strives for:

I am interested in giving these belongings [‘living forms’] a life outside their own small & undistinguished & undistinctive selves: i.e. making something out of them that is (hopefully) *rich as well as strange*.<sup>194</sup>

And to do so, he has to shoe-horn in the whole Cosmos – which he sees as an absolute part of, vehicle for, nature to exist at all; and to do this he needs objects reflecting the cosmic difference of scale, ways of acknowledging our minimal importance in it:

...the marvellous role of the leaf in the universe in correspondence with my own exploratory & diffident findings in several poems, from my own beginnings to my poetic conclusion. (Darby & Joan). In the small hours, at any rate, I felt less alone in the universe, rightly or wrongly hardly mattered.<sup>195</sup>

The final, compelling image of the poem is mentioned in Chapter 1; and the poem at the end of Chapter 4, “‘The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived’”, offers waves shivering onto a beach as the cosmic solution Einstein could not compute.<sup>196</sup>

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In all this, there is the related question of *evoked feeling*: he clearly values a poem’s capacity to move the reader, not just, say, intrigue, or bemuse, or refer the reader back to their own reading.

In a locally-famous anecdote, colleagues noticing him crying at John Mole’s reading of his own poem: this was rare enough a demonstration of feeling to be remarked upon – indeed, an incident he was proud to report – while lampooning himself about it, in several letters:

I went out of loyalty but remained to pray (& indeed weep anew at one poem – “A Different Dream” – so easy to coarsen by the voice, but suited it perfectly, & accentuated, even).<sup>197</sup>

This all granted, there still remains the challenge raised at the beginning of the study, as to whether feeling can be evoked in such complex verse – can ‘survive’ the clever, surreal conceits unpunctuated, spaced lines - let alone their re-drafted elisions and ellipses. When I once quizzed Sale on his tendency to torment his readers with compound images and spaces, his reply was a gently sardonic reminder that poems are *supposed* to play with our heads, in order to lure our hearts. But in this he perhaps masks the fact he reveals

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<sup>194</sup> To Andrew Cozens, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1975, in SL, p.30. Cozens had sent him somebody’s poems, ‘still in the Narcissistic stage.’

<sup>195</sup> To Jo & Richard Francis [2000], p.60 SL.

<sup>196</sup> Ch.1: section on **Last poems: reconciling nature with verse**.

<sup>197</sup> To me, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1989 – not in SL, but in Sale’s **Archive**.

in other throw-away lines: that he was *compelled*, in some way, to write in the intricate way he does – regardless of immediate accessibility.

For example, to take just one further instance of how preoccupied he was with his trees, a letter to Phillip Vann on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1979 mocks English ‘grey flannel’ skies, before noting what most of us might easily miss: the disproportionately-ugly – then beautiful – sheer slenderness of a Birch tree:

On waking I look away & up to the sky with a verticality one cannot comfortably affect when vertical oneself, & the flight of birds and clouds from this proneness take on a different being, almost. (Well, I wd.n't say that of the grey flannel ceiling of the last six months, but one still has to believe that is not the norm), & the stunted birch stalks (rather than stoles or trunks) seem to reach up indefinitely instead of only too limitedly (See, in a forthcoming volume by A.S. "By way of trees").<sup>198</sup>

Self-mocking he might be, about his own philosophising, but the joy seems palpable, in the stunted trees that seem to reach unfeasibly (‘indefinitely’) up to bridge the gap between earth and the ‘different, almost’-world of a bird-filled sky.

Whether obscure or stimulating, again it should at least be clear in both ‘Cupressus’ and ‘Birch Hats’, that the intensity of Sale’s focus is certainly *meant*: and felt in *heart* as well as head. While Helen Vendler is noting his powers of consciousness in the quotation above, she links it directly ‘to the powers of *affection* maintained over many years’. She talks – compellingly – of Sale combining ‘cerebral investigation with *tender vulnerability*’.<sup>199</sup>

I now recall Sale asking me, as an undergraduate, whether one of the carbon-copied versions of ‘Birch Hats’ was ‘moving’; I panicked because I really didn’t understand it, said “no” – and he laughed, in recollection only very slightly reflectively: I suspect amused by the blurted honesty, as well as freely accepting the put-down. Sale strongly believed in, and was of a generation that lived by, *not* revealing – let alone revelling in – personal emotion. But he acutely knew how poetic words work to move - not by telling you what to feel, but by *embodying* that feeling. The intricate conceits and other techniques he develops to evoke feeling may seem arcane – even still ‘incomprehensible’ to his few readers to date.. Nevertheless, these poems do intend their emotional correlatives – as these tree poem Chapters have sought to suggest. Sale clearly *cares* about the poem; but more particularly about communicating a sense of his *trees*: emotionally and literally.

‘Birch Hats’ shows this even more perhaps than in ‘Cupressus’, where the pleasure of the poem *is* the very bird- and tree-life the poet is privileged to eavesdrop into. In the former, Sale himself becomes a walk-on character in relation to his Birch, positing his own personal – if whimsical; elusive – relationship with (t)his

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<sup>198</sup> SL.

<sup>199</sup> SP, *xii*. My italics.



‘more air than tree’. At the end of ‘Birch Hats’, Sale imagines us into a poetic flight from human suburbia, into the madcap ‘Harpoland’ of the little tree, and the littler tits upon it. But this is a flight somewhere else too, as we have seen: metaphors piled on Birch(-hat) death metaphors, more than hinting that *this* septuagenarian’s flight may be the final one, away – from life itself. Either way, ‘Birch Hats’, like ‘Cupressus’, poses – then half-answers – its own opening riddle. The opacity may just begin to clarify here: the sheer strangeness of Harpo’s capacious jacket – ‘derision and absurdity apart’ – turns out to be the very kind of madcap mechanism that, completely literally, cheats death itself: again *and* again, successfully – over *millions of years*.

The Christmas light-show of the lightning-fast, seed-stripping finches may be simply ‘mysterious mystical’, but the unbelievably intricate, yet apparently unorganised, meaning of this Autumn dawn commotion is what triggers the poet to communicate both facets. The absurd beauty of this cosmic mechanism turns out to be pragmatically designed, simply to prolong life forms on an insignificant planet.

On these first ever analyses, Sale may in these sorts of ways be emerging as a kind of ‘nature poet for our age’: the very type of non-anthropocentric ‘Eco-poet’ that the first chapter hinted at. On the other hand, if so, he also emerges as ‘knotted’ and ‘intense’ (Vendler’s epithets): deliberately spins complex conceits and sounds, into long, blank-versed lines, about single, obsessively-observed examples of the infinite majesty of the infinitely- *and* infinitesimally-complex rules enacted by nature. And whether the verse moves or not, reading and re-reading the many drafts of ‘Birch Hats’, as with ‘Cupressus’ it is hard not to be struck by the sheer force of linguistic ‘consciousness’ Sale directs at depicting the concomitant subtleties of nature.

Vendler again praises Sale’s

complex mind, rich in both cultural and natural knowledge, bringing itself fully to bear on both the outside world and its own mixed responses to that world. The poems are testimony ...to the powers of consciousness (*that can derive so much, for instance, from a single tree*)’.<sup>200</sup>

What the letters – and poems like ‘Birch Hats’ – depict is a poet spending increasing time in his study bedroom – to the far right on entering the front door of his Girton bungalow; looking through the glass doors, depicting intricate re-creations of the burgeoning Willow, birds, birches and other wildlife he saw from there, over some sixty years. We are simply invited to witness in the utmost detail the results of Sale’s daydreams at the windows.

As the next chapter explores, if we attend to the anarchic metaphors, sound effects, and even syntax – from this emerges what Vendler called Sale’s ‘hymn’ to things like the infinite cycle of Life and Death: cycles carrying on, seemingly blithely, with complete disregard for mere humans. Such overview may help solve

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<sup>200</sup> SP, x-xi.

some of the riddle of the ‘opaque’ riddling – as to why he includes detailed conceits far beyond most other nature poets.

In ‘Birch Hats’, attempting to depict the intricate feeding patterns of tiny tits, Sale inserts the most delicate, ‘troy-weight’, interactions between fauna and flora; the extraordinary flight aerobatics of the former; sparrows failing to imitate bullfinch thistle-head raids; and the acute paradox most of us never notice, as to which birds suit which trees – *and* which trees suit *which* birds. And this in turn then raises the ultimate botanical questions: who on earth designed all this, let alone made it work?

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Locally, none of this matters much, of course. Just an old man musing idly over Bluetits in a Birch. Symbolically – through a poetic case study of nature in its finest metaphorical details – the underlying ‘rules’ of these interactions are laid bare in such wild worked-words, as to bewilder and mystify the senses – in the scene itself, and its vast, even cosmic, implications for the extraordinarily complex, underwriting patterns by which nature on Earth organises such impromptu sound and light shows – not just for obscure old poets.

The question still remains as to how the resulting complex poetry fits into a tradition or style or expression; and to begin to tease out further ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘reading’ that poetry, especially for future readers.

## Chapter 4 – Sale’s late verse as early Eco-poetry

### *Synoptic threads*

1. *a move away from solipsism – after c.1965, Sale’s verse about ‘self’ becomes irrelevant as he begins to write far more about ‘living forms’*
2. *towards an idea of self-governing nature – the central theme takes over, of a quantum and cosmic natural order well beyond human interference*
3. *eco-poetic ideas – Sale implicitly expresses a sea-change in the perception of nature – specifically, in the – possible – vanguard of early twenty-first century Eco-poetry*
4. *Sale’s own ‘Eco-verse’ techniques... to support the expression of self-regulating nature, including:*
  - a. *metaphors of self-governing nature (Sale calls these ‘shocks of sense’)*
  - b. *mostly regular blank verse*
  - c. *multiply-mimetic – including onomatopoeic – sound effects (‘chimes and rhymes’)*
  - d. *word links, puns, plays, ambiguous meanings*
  - e. *omission of sentence punctuation*
  - f. *extended phrases &*
  - g. *deliberate gaps between words and phrases (‘graded spacings’)*
5. *a move towards a modern and traditional poetic language; further comparisons – with Martian poetry, Clare, Crabbe and Milton – isolate what appears as a strong technical affinity with seventeenth century Shakespearian (or ‘Baroque’) verse*

*So how does Arthur Sale express ‘eco-poetic’ ideas in his late verse, and what might other poets reveal of Sale’s peculiarities of form, in seeking to embody an expression of wilfully-anarchic, well-organised Nature? The threads discussed below are as revealed by both Birch and Cypress poems; as well as the comparisons with near-contemporaries, suggested in Chapter 1. Comparisons are made with other identified ‘Eco-poets’ Sale admired – though this seems to isolate the nature of his distinguishing techniques rather than much contiguity with any.*

*It then tentatively confirms seventeenth century Baroque and Shakespearian models as part of Sale’s ‘invention’ of a distinctive poetic language; finally, to begin to suggest a number of specific ways in which his unusual combining of techniques renders ‘living forms’ ‘rich’, through the facets of this ‘strange’ poetic form.*

## Threads so far

➤ *a move away from solipsism*

The ‘removal of Self’ emerges well before 1970 in Sale’s references to poetry, as discussed in Chapter 1. As we will see later, Sale’s ‘natural’ subjects seem more like John Clare’s; they matter *in themselves*, not as a kind of psychological objective correlative for the kinds of emotion poets he admired – including Frost, Thomas, or even Yeats – wished to express *through* such objects.

Admittedly, Wordsworth’s daffodils also hung ‘upon the inward eye’: flowers resonating inside *his* head ten years later – and for the poem that resulted, resonating in mine two hundred years after. But Sale takes the subject of tree-life so much farther in poetic depiction, because the interest is not primarily with the effect on his sensibility, but because of what he sees *in* ‘living forms’. For him, it is not the memory of long ago seeing a host of daffodils that triggers a delicious memory in the poet; it is the unlikely living spaces provided by a Birch or Cypress for other living forms, that delight<sup>201</sup>.

‘Verdigris’, in the ‘Willow’ series, includes another indirect allusion to Wordsworth’s daffodils, praising their subtlest yellow as they ‘unhatch’ despite the meanest sunlight:

lemon just leaving green  
that doff distinction as they dip to blow  
into mere saffron by the worm’s eye sun’.

Finally, all these living things are ultimately realised as *comic spectacles*, in the wild intricacy of their wildly-varying habits. They fascinate the poet for what more eco-aware times have come to call ‘sustainable living’; and also for the cleverness and beauty of the intricate, invisible – and plain extraordinary – system that controls them.

As usual, Sale explains what he means in correspondence – with his usual disarming honesty:

One of my own limitations as a fellow-poet is that I cannot find poetic equivalents for pure emotion: I have to hold things off & keep cool, & more & more I come to appreciate natural objects ~ in verse, that is, for at the same time I more & more marvel that human beings, no different otherwise from ourselves can create such marvelous [*sic*] poems & pictures & above all, “sounds & sweet airs that give delight & hurt not”.<sup>202</sup>

Much earlier, his comments on poetic ‘solipsism’ revealed the ‘problem’ this later subject matter avoids:

I am interested in the problem of solipsism because it is the great danger of the poet (why shd. he think *his* emotions are important enough to have a claim on other people, with the self-same emotions? He hasn’t, unless he can find images etc. for them which *are* interesting); but it shd. be the last danger of a novelist.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> SP, p.83.

<sup>202</sup> To Alex Moffett 30<sup>th</sup> May 1990 SL p.104

<sup>203</sup> To John Herdman (novelist), 16<sup>th</sup> September 1974 SL p.23 & *passim*.



but also that

the activities and functions of different species are more or less complementary and are linked by dynamic relations;

i.e. that

Ecosystems are compounded by a number of populations of different species, that live together and that interact among themselves [*whose*] reciprocal influences can be characterized as exploitative, competitive or co-operative [*etc.*]

These sound very like the kinds of interactions Sale saw in his Birch and Cypress – and is re-presenting – in surreal imagery.<sup>208</sup> His interest goes back further than most named ‘Eco-poets’, to the period Margaluf was beginning to draw his wider ecological conclusions from his surveys of Mediterranean marine plankton.

Not that there aren’t later contemporary poets who are at least as technical in their terminology – see discussion of Crozier, Milne *et al* below; but wider implications of the scientific ideas that were circulating, are embodied in the very detail of Sale’s depictions. Though around 1975 Sale claimed his quiet epiphany over ‘the living forms I had taken for granted’, Chapter 1 identified the subjects of at least a hundred other poems relating to wilderness nature including many that gestated much earlier.<sup>209</sup> Nearly all are still waiting to be unearthed.<sup>210</sup>

The late poem on a Honeysuckle, “Quite overcanopied by luscious woodbine”, is a compelling example: and a detailed discussion follows later in the Chapter. For now, a trilogy written nearly three decades earlier on the formation and transience of the humbler nettle: ‘Nettles’, ‘School of Nettles’ and ‘Notes on Nettles’, demonstrates how early Sale afforded much the same *detail* of regard for the workings of nature – to the most hated of plants.

An early draft (v.4) of the middle poem shows Sale adopting Yeats’s ‘gradual evolvment’ translation of prose drafts into poetry; though the metre is not yet ‘tight’, the fantasy-conceit of an intelligent, chess-playing designer/creator, makes plain Sale’s interest in comprehending who on earth makes such astounding things as nettles:

What higher fascination  
than in these aligned cogs at work on an  
eternal approximation to equation  
as over quiet but unwavering chess,  
what higher intellect can one wish to see  
than one engaged ~~with~~ in profound ultimates  
equating one with many square with round

[What higher fascination  
than in these aligned cogs at work on an  
eternal approximation to equation  
as over quiet but unwavering chess,  
what higher intellect can one wish to see  
than one engaged ~~with~~ in profound ultimates  
equating one with many square with round]<sup>211</sup>

Fig. 17 ‘School of Nettles’, v.4

<sup>208</sup> From *Our Biosphere*, a 1997 compilation of papers and work going back to before 1968. See also the compilation and abstract of Margalef’s work, under his name in the **Bibliography**. And also: Roughgarden *et al*, *Perspectives in Ecological Theory* (1989) *etc.* I am indebted to Gareth Farmer for suggesting this link, as well as Harold Morowitz’s 1968 *Energy Flow in Biology*.

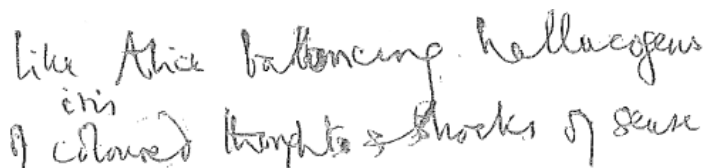
<sup>209</sup> Cf. dates on draft envelopes, paper and handwriting styles.

<sup>210</sup> Other interests matter: Art in the Clare *Bridge* series ‘which kept me sane in WW2’; sanity itself in ‘“Neither fear nor courage save us”’; other confessionals in **UW** as late as 1975. Other unpublished hand/typescripts from 1928 onwards, include love poems and cityscapes; yet Nature is always implicit, even in the *Bridge* series.

<sup>211</sup> For ‘evolvment’ cf. Ch.2 *passim*.

Sale's creator incites the highest 'fascination', and is obviously no 'ordinary' Creator: chess-playing, mathematically-obsessive, endlessly metaphorical – for the nettle-formations are always an approximation to the divine equation they are somehow 'testing'.

We have also seen this taken further in the later finale of 'Birch Hats', where Sale seeks to persuade us to a kind of awed laughter at the recreated tits manically feeding. Most bathetically, Sale reduces the birds' glorious plumage to a standard urban folk mythography:



[ like Alice balancing hallucogens of ^iris^ coloured thoughts & shocks of sense ].

Fig. 18 'Birch Hats' f.16.

Alice (in Wonderland) becomes a drug queen, managing the psychedelic feeding flights that bring 'shocking' colour of nature's 'thought' processes and cosmic 'sense' – note: 'iris' added by Sale on the draft – to a grey garden.

As in Carroll's anarchic world, there is an internal, scientific construction to all that happens. We humans just don't, or can't, see it.

➤ *eco-poetic ideas*

Pending fuller study than is possible here, a best-fit model for the formal attributes of Sale's verse may tentatively be suggested as lying much further back than the century he lived in: more on this below.

For now, in terms of overriding subject, the next two sections refine how the Eco-poetry sub-movement relates to his late work – and even though it seems not to have gained much traction nor advance in definition, in the three decades since he died.<sup>212</sup> And at least two wider eco-critical themes chime strongly with Sale's. Philosophically, Timothy Morton sees our age as moving towards an 'ecological crisis...suffused with... melancholy', yet 'evolving...into something *playful, anarchic, and comedic*.'<sup>213</sup> We are destroying the planet and Eco-poetry seeks to mimic this, sometimes in surprising ways: including

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<sup>212</sup> See *Abstract* – and *n*.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.* p.57. I remember Sale gently mocking himself for thinking he had 'discovered' John Muir, only to find he was already famous in the U.S. For one of many references to 'the great man himself', see Sale's letter to me, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1992 (not in *SL*) and to Richard Francis (2<sup>nd</sup> January 1985):

Part of my admiration for John Muir is that he rejected these lures in practice & not merely, like A.[rthur]S.[ale], in theory. He began as an...acclaimed inventor...stopped from conscience: he thought of the workmen his devices would dispossess. To make bread & clothes for his wanderings he worked in sawmills & proved a great organiser... When he married he farmed for a living & became wealthy. But he delegated this, for his real mission was to save the forests for the nation. To do this he had to write (which he hated), & oppose vested interests (who hated him). He travelled in every continent to warn them of disaster.' (*SL*, p.59)

perhaps the strange kinds of poetic mimesis Sale sculpts in *his* ‘playful, anarchic and comedic’ conceits: cf. Harpo, Groucho, the Pink Panther *et al.*

Secondly, Eco-critics respect nature as a system beyond mere human scope. Contemporaneous theoreticians such as Bate, Gifford and Knickerbocker argued – respectively – for an ‘eco-poetically spontaneous’ reaction to Nature; for the idea of nature as something subsuming all humanity i.e. neither separate, nor separable from us; and for Eco-poetry as a response *to* that view of nature: written *sensuously* rather than *mimetically*.

Bate, in *Song of the Earth* – published the year Sale died – again polemicises that ‘we have more chance of protecting the environment if we engage in eco-poetic activity, involving a sense of immediate response to nature, than if we do not’. Gifford in his 1995 *Green Voices* chose to adopt Sale’s once-socialist firebrand colleague Raymond Williams for his third definition of nature as ‘(iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings’.<sup>214</sup>

In doing so Gifford also invites appreciation of earlier and technically divergent American writers, such as Thoreau and Muir – both of whom Sale admired. Knickerbocker in his 2012 *Ecopoetics* even more pertinently praises Emily Dickinson for metamorphic metaphors and sound effects to evoke a sense of ‘awe’ at nature’s processes; though he also cites later American poets like Mary Oliver and Sylvia Plath, and Europeans such as Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney.

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But here the likely limit to such comparisons: the last three are poets Sale may well have respected for their view of nature, but hardly emulated their techniques.<sup>215</sup> Take even that most exquisitely-sensitive, yet visceral, poet Mary Oliver, whose delicate, pugnacious lines can sometimes feel closer: like an amalgam of Dickinson, Whitman, and even Sale. But in essence she writes completely differently to Sale:

the flowers bend their bright bodies,  
and tip their fragrance to the air,  
and rise,  
their red stems holding

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<sup>214</sup> Cf. Bate, *Song of the Earth* (2000), Gifford, *Green Voices* (1995 & 2011), Knickerbocker’s *Ecopoetics* (2012) *passim*. Of course, there is a much wider, contiguous chronological relationship, with Socialist, anti-industrial, anti-landowner/land slavery ideas which Sale had long espoused, pre-WW2: witness the chance London acquaintance with ‘Anarchist’ Herbert Read. Shaw was a naturist-Fabian; Henry Moore, drawer of sheep; and even relative centrists like T.S. Eliot as an unlikely composer. Soper, in *What is Nature?*, writes approvingly of ‘Eliot’s expression of concern with the ‘deformation of humanity by unregulated industrialism’ (despite the fact that his class politics hardly placed him ‘within the tradition of political radicalism’ (p.193). Conversely – or perhaps contradictorily – F.R. Leavis, critiquing young Cambridge poets in March 1929 for imitating Eliot, could confidently also praise their *urban* radicalism against ‘Squirearchy, which once held paralysing sway’, declaring it ‘dead.’ (*The Cambridge Mind*, p.242.)

<sup>215</sup> Cf. late letter to Alex Moffett: **XXXXXX**



all that dampness and recklessness  
gladly and lightly,  
and there it is again—  
beauty the brave, the exemplary,  
blazing open.<sup>216</sup>

Oliver's just renown is for her disarming simplicity – sometimes even courting triteness: 'all that dampness...'; yet rising to sudden, finely-articulated summations: 'beauty the brave, the exemplary'. And the poem goes on (as Burton-Christie notes) to beckon us 'not only to observe, but to abandon our detached perspective...filling our arms...before it is too late, before they are

'nothing forever.'<sup>217</sup>

Against such elegant lucidity, comparison seems almost disrespectful to either poet. Any single line of Sale's 'Quite Overcanopied' poem is 'detached perspective' by comparison: fervently complex in its articulation of the overpowering scent of a Honeysuckle. Say, in:

blowing    from scarlet trumpets    lined with gold

the poet then specifically quotes Milton for his high praise of the climber:

lauds    beyond    words

But the complexity intensifies, as even this adulation is shown to be futile with a heavily-truncated line riddling us on to the next truth:

except such sallies on immortals

mortal

suddenly    themselves

In other words, 'lauds beyond words' cannot be 'the final word'.

Here there is a momentary connection with Oliver's 'Peonies' disappearing 'forever': even honeysuckles – suddenly – die, when a 'disordered blast' – presumably a gale:

bares

these bowers    to foothill detritus

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<sup>216</sup> From 'Peonies', (1992). Cf. also *Dream Work* (1986) *passim*. See also Laird Christenson, 'The Pragmatic Mysticism of Mary Oliver' in Bryson's *Ecopoetry*; *passim* – but esp. p.147, on Whitman's echoes in Oliver's verse.

<sup>217</sup> Cited and discussed in 'Poetic Imagination and Communion With Nature: A Case Study of Mary Oliver's *Selected Poems*', pp.38-39, in the *Journal of Language Horizons*, Alzahra Summer 2022.

but then nothing else here possibly resembles Oliver's flowers – other than the sheer mix of praise and grief – expressed utterly differently.

The same issues arises with later contemporary Eco-poets I have sought out for potential comparison. Either the lines are nearly as spare as Oliver's – *cf.* Andrew Crozier, Harriet Tarlo, Elisabeth Bletsoe, Thomas A. Clark, Ian Davidson, Frances Presley and Bill Griffiths (despite Dadaist complexities in these last two); or the focus is as much on self/viewer's perspective/the poem itself as on nature.

To take one further example; again Crozier, again on a flower:

Streaks of yellow show through  
the unfolding green spears  
three buds about to open among  
a cluster of pointed leaves  
. more at the first  
Unfolded, blossomed, and died  
new buds pushed through  
the waxen leaves, yellow  
emerging from green, unfolding  
blossoming for six weeks  
in February and March 1963

Superficially, the same subject: a daffodil blossoming and dying, and, expressed in something of Oliver's plain lexis. But these lines are enjambed, or otherwise given a deliberately-awkward lilt by an iamb at the beginning and end of each otherwise free-verse line. So the rendition is all the more terse, even trite – *apart* from carefully-strewn hints of archness.

All this seems in ironic opposition to Oliver's plangent adoration of the living thing – and so suggest the gaze and poise of Crozier as an empirical observer. The title is key of course: 'The Daffodil on my Table', *placing* the specimen; but it is also there in the deliberately perverse full stop right at the beginning of line 5, emphasising the clinical observation that follows: '. more at the first/Unfolded...'. And again, the final 'diarising': 'in February and March 1963', makes what looks at first like verse forensic in its attention to a living thing, into a piece of Postmodernity personified. For some this is 'collage-like inventiveness' (Peter Riley); for others 'a sense of forms thinking aloud' (Jeremy Harding). For me, the reminders – as in much recent Eco-verse – is of the observer devising a poem 'on a table': endlessly self-conscious, parodic: self-

absorbed. But whatever the feelings evoked, the writing could hardly be more different from Sale's painstakingly-ornate celebration of his once-flowering 'pingual quilt' of/on a garden Woodbine.<sup>218</sup>

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Nevertheless, the sense of anarchic, self-regulating nature must have stemmed from the same tenets as later poets now claimed as 'eco-poetic'. Socio-political, as well as the scientific stimuli coming more strongly to the surface in the last years of Sale's life clearly encouraged the general articulation (if not the readily-definable verse) of the 'eco-poetic movement'.

The same stimuli may well have encouraged Sale's late subject. There may even be stylistic elements – those hinted at by Morton, for example: 'playful, anarchic, and comedic', in his suggestion of an eco-artistic response to Armageddon. But then Morton offers nothing more defined, let alone verse-examples, so a much fuller analysis of verse of the period would be required to show the extent to which Sale's form, as well as his subject, sits in the late-twentieth-century vanguard of the sub-genre.<sup>219</sup>

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Tantalisingly, had she lived, in this sense too Sale might possibly have had an unlikely ally, in Veronica Forrest-Thomson. He walked past Girton every day, and less than a decade later she was exhorting 'examination of the devalued qualities of those conventions that lift poetry away from the commonplace.'<sup>220</sup> Sale too wants a language as 'strange' as he felt Nature to be in its anarchic prolixity. The spirit of cold-war times may have helped give him this final subject, but examples throughout this study begin to bear out a longer lifetime seeking increasingly experimental ways of writing that subject down.

➤ *Sale's own 'Eco-verse' techniques...*

In everything looked at so far, several innovative and mainly unfashionable kinds of image and prosody have begun to identify themselves. Chapter 1 noted how Sale was legendary among undergraduates for his breadth of reading: several features he unearthed from much older literary models have suggested qualities he is wrestling from a very wide range of sources, to depict his new idea of Nature.<sup>221</sup>

We have also seen how 'rich' he wants that expression to be: in prosodic tone, in freedom from sentence punctuation, spaces between words to let them 'breathe' – though also away from a perceived vapidness in short or irregular verse-lines. Most explicitly, early on Sale writes that he will not succumb to the 'parlous

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<sup>218</sup> For texts and criticism on Crozier, see *An Andrew Crozier Reader*, ed. Ian Brinton – *passim*. For all others *cf. The Ground Aslant – ibid*. For Sale quibbling over 'woodbine' (=climber) versus 'honeysuckle' (=flower) as the name for the plant, see letter to Nick Drake 12<sup>th</sup> October 1997, **SL**.

<sup>219</sup> For the origins of Eco-poetry, see Chapter 1: esp. Gifford, *ibid & passim*.

<sup>220</sup> In her examination of themes and form in Flaubert, in Gareth Farmer & Michael Hansen, 'Veronica Forrest-Thomson: 'Three Essays'', in *Chicago Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2/3 Autumn 2011.

<sup>221</sup> *cf.* Chapter 1: **context**.

state of the age...the collapse of language'. As early as 1963, he had put it the other way round to I.A. Richards: he felt 'jealous of the loss of supremacy of the great creating word.' More generally, he simply felt language being industrialised; mis/abused.<sup>222</sup>

The following summary includes the unusual techniques noted so far, in order of likely importance in the oeuvre as a whole:

a. *metaphors of self-governing nature ('shocks of sense')*

We have seen how these can be funny, deliberately disarming, teasing – even taunting – the reader, by sheer contrast with their subject. Both 'Birch Hats' and 'Cupressus' clearly revel in such metaphors, all portraying a specific, otherwise incommunicable, quality held within natural phenomena; metaphors which at first can seem 'incomprehensible', then subversive – or at worst, Toon-town *dangerous* – to mere humans. In the end, such metaphors suggest a self-governing order in nature that is way beyond our reckoning.<sup>223</sup>

We have also seen how Sale shares at least *something* of Eliot's Modernist imagery. Other contemporaries of Sale, for example Elizabeth Bishop, also take after Eliot in such disarming depictions as 'bombs unhatching / of daffodils'. Modernism's English off-shoot, Martian poetry, takes similar liberties in comparing a night-city to a surreal volcano, a seascape to a catholic shrine, the writer's desk to a developing country.<sup>224</sup> Did Sale – who we know corresponded with Eliot – also unconsciously adopt the 'highly-pictorial, abundantly metaphorical styles' of Bishop – whom he also read?<sup>225</sup> David G. Williams makes a strong case (via Andrew Motion) for Bishop as the 'clear eyed', 'more feeling' poet than later contemporary Martians, whom he sees being influenced by her.

Compare the above examples with Sale sensing birds as Saturn V rockets,

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<sup>222</sup> This is in a letter on Richards's poetic language: 'it gives in too inertly to the parlous state of the age...the collapse of language'). Sale's reservations about Postmodern verse and its criticism became a given. In the above letter, he goes on to offer approval of interest in Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*: 'Pound's abacus is certainly refreshing & reassuring, after the Structuralist invasion:~ "the nightmare & her fools" '. To me: 26<sup>th</sup> October 1991 **SL**; full quotation in **Appendix 1**.

More generally, reading a recently published academic text he found himself 'awaiting the book of which the bibliography exceeds the text' – adding: 'it seems I shall not have to wait long.' (Also to me, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1989, not in **SL**). Another hint, gently answering a naïve question: 'There are thousands of modern poets, Robert...' (14<sup>th</sup> September 1991 **SL**).

<sup>223</sup> A fascinating possibility arises at the time of writing: John Constable, pupil, and later one-time Director of English Studies at Magdalene, developed software in Japan to analyse word length differences between prose and verse (that is: versified poetry). He discussed his research conclusions with a sceptical Sale; verse turns out to use significantly *shorter* words than prose (presumably to ensure prosodic consistency). This has not – to date – been tested on Sale's verse and prose, and Sale was insouciant as to whether this mattered or not. Yet the unusual prolixity of words – as well as metaphor, and possibly sentence length – would make his an interesting test-case. (For Constable's research, see papers in **Bibliography**.)

<sup>224</sup> Respectively: 'Night City', 'Seascape', '12 O'clock News'. David G. Williams (1997) 'Elizabeth Bishop and the 'Martian' poetry of Craig Raine and Christopher Reid', 78:5, 451-458. (On imitators of Eliot, cf. (again) Leavis on young Cambridge poets in 1929 – *ibid*, in previous section.

For Sale's early imitations, see again the 1937 'Surrealist Objects and Poetry Exhibition' catalogue, and relevant section in Chapter 1.)

<sup>225</sup> **Archive**. No date but in AM's handwriting: 'Rcd. Sept.1999'.

incandescent

boosters that burn off as they graze the sun ;

or depicting young nettles becoming

metal flowers

on whose sea-anemone's raking clutch

transverse rods haul the slack boat-house waist in,

– only, the next day, to have turned into nothing but

the strings of a wrecked piano

angrily straggled away from the wall.

Something more generally twentieth-century 'trans-Atlantic' in the ebullience of metaphor here, perhaps. Unfortunately, Bishop is listed in what was Sale's final letter to his father-in-law, Alex Moffett, among twentieth-century poets in whom he *doesn't* 'seem to see the greatness others do'.<sup>226</sup> And yet again, he is simply far more intricate in his piling on of images to depict a single plant, than Modernists, Martians – or even later Eco-poets.<sup>227</sup>

*b. blank verse – see also g. below*

Frost – admired by Sale and alluded to several times already, as well as in the section below – might suggest another comparator. There is real metrical resonance in the delicious blank verse, as noted for example in Ian Hamilton's astute remarks on his 'finely calculated balancing of the elevatedly-poetic with the low-colloquial'.<sup>228</sup> Sale, however, seems free and varied in other sound-emphases: for example, his redrafts simply suggest him enjoying working the verse towards a flexible, yet mellifluous prosody. To take just one striking example, at the end of 'Bridge Arrested', Sale versifies the final four lines thus:

wa-ter and earth and air and flame and man

– √ √/ – –/ – –/ – –/ –

and through the shrink-ing ad-a-mant of fate,

– √ √/ – –/ – –/ – –/ –

falls the in-vi-si-ble a-tom fall-ing

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<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, **Archive**.

<sup>227</sup> In what he not infrequently called 'my favourite Term', Sale taught and examined the Cambridge American Literature Tripod paper, including Stevens's 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', and Carlos Williams's 'Red Wheelbarrow' – both as representative examples of Modernist poetics directly returning, reductively, to 'the object itself'. Helen Vendler connects Sale and Stevens in her Foreword to **SP** – *cf. n.* to 'Sale's complexity resolved?' in the section above. Quotations from 'Sing All A Green Willow Must Be My Garland II'; 'Verdigris'. **SL**, p.83; *Nettles* trilogy: **ScP** and **SP**.

<sup>228</sup> Hamilton's brilliant introductory dissection of Frost in the Penguin *Robert Frost Selected Poems*: p.17, and *passim*.

–     ∨   ∨/–   ∨   ∨   /–   –/   –     –

on Na-ga-sa-ki, on Hi-ro-shi-ma.

–     ∨   ∨/–   –/–   ∨   ∨/–   –

Breaking this into metrical feet clarifies that the first two lines have four feet and ‘man’, then four feet and ‘fate’; while the last two lines are each made up of just four metrical feet. There are doubtless other readings and ways of depicting the verse patterns, but the versification is already precise: especially as the hanging words stressed are ‘*man*’ and ‘*fate*’.<sup>229</sup>

c. *multiply-mimetic, including onomatopoeic, sound effects (‘chimes and rhymes’)*

– perhaps even for their own sake. We have ‘felt’ his depiction of small birds as light, fast and acrobatic as imaginable in and around a Birch tree:

oscillating

overpoised    overbearing    overborne

on springboard hair [etc.]

Compare here Frost’s *Birches*, in which the consciously ‘laid-back’ narrator yearns to see the bowing of winter birches under the mass of New England ice as the result of boys climbing them till they bend down to the ground – ‘birch swinging’:

And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk

Towards heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dip its top and set me down again.<sup>230</sup>

Frost’s delivery is more economical and sketch-like than Sale’s: aiming accurately at what Ian Hamilton calls ‘the finely calculated balancing of the elevatedly poetic with the low-colloquial’.

As the discussion below on Frost’s ‘sounds of sense’ idea will also suggest, this is the distinctively American – *very nearly prose* – poetic voice which he perfected, which seemingly every other twentieth century American prose- and poetry-writer went on to imitate; and which – in varied forms – influences poets even today. In this vein, Charles Olson in his famous *Projective Verse* ‘manifesto’ of 1950 puts the underlying poetic principle more combatively (if typically enigmatically): ‘And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but the LINE?’<sup>231</sup> In this sense, Sale’s verse enjoys the egalitarian metaphor of both ‘threshing floor’ and ‘LINE’, as well as the freedom from rhythmic affectation implicit here. He

<sup>229</sup> NB I am indebted to the Norfolk writer and Circuit Judge, Neil Hickman, for the parsing and observations on metre here.

<sup>231</sup> *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Kermode pp.146-7: Olson, *ibid.*, pp.51-61. Quotation is on p.55

commended U.S. prose – Dos Passos *et al* – for exactly this, and we also know Sale corresponded with John Crowe Ransom pre-war (imminent research findings will reveal what about).<sup>232</sup> He even rated Frost higher than Thomas, turning Frost’s famous ‘sound of sense’ summation of prose meaning, into the ‘*shocks of sense*’ that described the frenzied feeding Tits in ‘Birch Hats’.

Here I suspect Sale implicitly applies – then refutes – Frost’s theory to his own practice: in other words just as playfully showing how *musically* poetry may bring a *prose* phrase back to life.<sup>233</sup> But this also marks the distinction: Sale oozes a prolixity of images and sounds – *in order to* make his line ‘rich’ with ‘sense’. In particular, he distinguished Modernist ‘prose foundations’ from Milton’s almost infinitely intricate yet seemingly effortless mimetics; this was in a five -page typescript essay: ‘“No necessary Adjunct”, / A note on Sound-correspondences in “Paradise Lost”’, on Milton’s ‘chimes and rhymes’. His are not ‘virtuoso sound jugglings’, but rather composed – Sale argues in lovingly-detailed intricacy – with poetic ‘ease and unpremeditatedness’, *and* all related ‘to sense, mood, rhythm...’.<sup>234</sup>

The complication is that, even in this small sampling, Sale is very clearly a twentieth-, rather than seventeenth-century poet. Yet he seems to delight in the following kinds of ‘line-loosening word-music’, such as

d. *word links, puns, plays, other ambiguous meanings*

Sale professed he could not resist a pun or wordplay – especially in his letters, though sometimes even in his Criticism. A handwritten note in a ‘Working Copy’ of his own 1950 edition of *The Village*, debates whether a hypothetical second edition might ‘dare risk’ a brilliant pun on ‘austerity’:

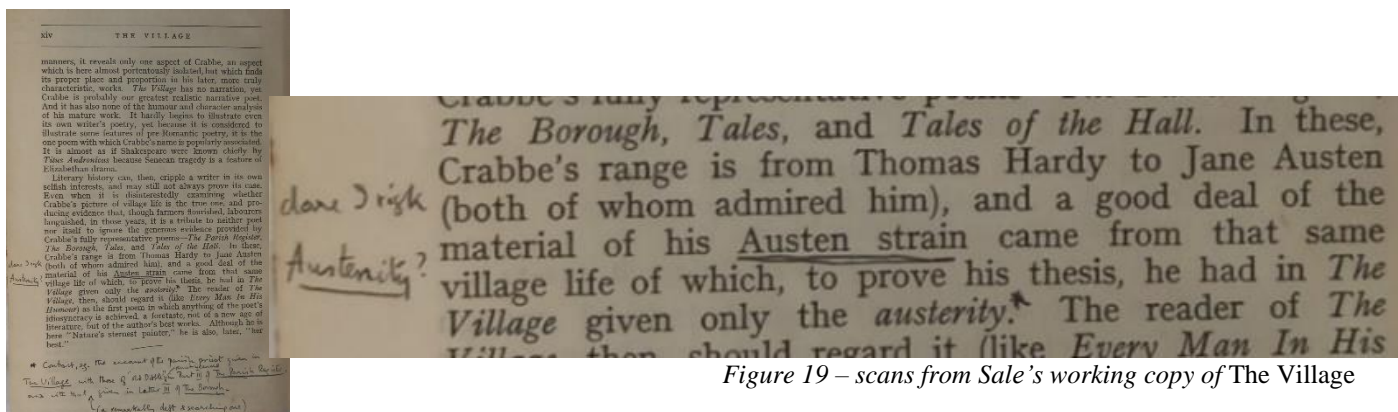


Figure 19 – scans from Sale’s working copy of *The Village*

<sup>232</sup> Visits to Stanford and Santa Cruz Special Collections – May 2023.

<sup>233</sup> Sale saw American poetic practice as essentially based on prose rhythms, in contrast to his own. (See **Appendix 1** and letter to John Constable, cited in following *n.*) Sale’s alteration of Frost’s grandiloquent proclamation ‘I alone of English writers [*sic*]... make music out of what I may call the sound of sense’ (letter to John Bartlett on 4<sup>th</sup> July 1913) read as implicit affirmation of Sale’s *poetry*-based poetics (*cf. Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, p.79).

<sup>234</sup> Typescript with John Constable. Sale wrote on 30<sup>th</sup> August, 1997 that the unpublished paper was composed, simply to understand why, when his writing seemed so otherwise mellifluous, Milton complained (in a note to *Paradise Lost*) about ‘the jingling sound of like endings’: i.e. rhymes. (Ditto: not in **SL**.)

His mocking retort to me, when I complained about ‘vert’ for green in “‘Quite overcanopied’” presumed a reader delighting with him in ‘my vocabulary occasionally ris[ing] above the Sun level’: this itself, of course, a conceit daring the wild pun on the ‘star’ rising higher than the tabloid.

As is turning out often to be the case with Sale, the facts are in his very own explanations. Like Shakespeare, every line of Sale’s later verse is packed with layers of puns and plays, and all far beyond what the literal meaning could ever entail; all embodying his own late-developing poetic language. He told it so. Every other letter seems to mention the preoccupation.

To take just one example from the unpublished criticism unearthed during this study, he once sent John Constable another typescript essay, pointing out finely-detailed examples of Chaucer’s light-touch, but intricately-detailed, sound and word associations. ‘The Irreducible Minimum’, another typescript sent to Constable in 1997, continues the discussion over the latter’s work on syllable distribution in poetry (mentioned in a footnote above). Typically over-elliptical, Sale wrote it to show that the poetry and versification in Chaucer’s octaves were not simply ‘residuum’, or even ‘catalyst’, of prose meanings, but essential *to* his meaning:

The fact is that the prose (with an accent on social) content of Chaucer is so high, attractively tinted, and apparently isolatable, that the residuum is felt, if at all, only as the lees, best left alone, or, more understandably, as the catalyst. It is therefore necessary to insist that when Chaucer glides things into verse or hitches them in a rhyme, the gliding and the hitching do condition the result.’<sup>235</sup>

I.e. Chaucer wrote *poetry* first: social satire second. Important, perhaps, to note that there is nothing ‘stiff’ or ‘artificial’ in Sale’s final-version wordplays; everyday language is never far away, and in these respects his techniques *do* come to chime with lines T.S. Eliot celebrated in his critiques of late Shakespearean poetry:

The stiffness, the artificiality, the poetic decoration, of his early verse has finally given place to a simplification to the language of natural speech, and this language of conversation again raised to great poetry.<sup>236</sup>

Sale’s verse, like Shakespeare’s, in strict sound or semantics, is hardly ‘simplified’. Though Eliot here means ‘not just clever’, Sale’s, too, tends to be wide-ranging, yet also every-day, domestic – even deliberately bathetic. His lines, though indelibly complex, are always unaffected.

And here another ‘clew’: the combination of other techniques just noted (**c.** & **d.**) within the almost constant adherence to blank verse (**b.**), suggests Sale working towards specifically seventeenth century prosody. In sheer density of voice and line, he creates a poetry, free-flowing in ‘LINE’, yet otherwise so different: packed with ‘rich and strange’ language to express his ‘matter’.

There are of course challenges, in adopting such a ‘packed’ approach to the verse line. Allowing multiple words to cross-align via complex lexical fields, sounds, wordplays, and flexible line-prosody, in order to

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<sup>235</sup> Unpublished. Not in **Archive**.

<sup>236</sup> ‘Poetry and Drama’, first published in 1951, reproduced in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, p.147.



excite the maxima of shared meanings and resonance, also courts... incoherence. We have heard Sale himself part-defend/part-critique this: ‘I’m sure I do load every drift of meaning with ore’.<sup>237</sup> And he also recognised that other idiosyncratic techniques might intensify the problem of reader comprehension, such as the

*e. omission of sentence punctuation*

In his own verse, a deliberate policy to omit sentence punctuation emerges just as he embarks on poems about ‘living forms’, c. 1975.<sup>238</sup> This then takes over his later verse. As early as 1979, in response to an offering of rather ‘neat’ verse, he was telling I. A. Richards – of all people:

I can see there is too much to talk about... & so I don’t begin. Limits, departures from, rhythmic restraints, seem to me very important in enforcing the compressed and & inter-associational demand on language that produces awe for its resources & its power of creating a form of life rather than describing it, talking round it, which prose can undertake without embarrassment or departing from its own level of usage. But that is not “not beginning”.<sup>239</sup>

The throwaway last line foregrounds the meta-linguistic implication of ‘its power of creating a form of life’. Telling reminder – in the context of this study – that Sale writes poems *about* life forms, imitatively wrought into their *very own* ‘form of life’.

Yet omitting punctuation also comes at a price: in 1998/9, Eamon Duffy was preparing to record the Bridge and Willow poems alongside John Mole, onto the CD at the back of **SP**, and a quarter of a century later recalled how tricky the omission of punctuation made following the syntactic line of the sentence.

On the other hand, Duffy never found Sale’s meanings tricky; significantly or not, must have trusted to instinct and reads them beautifully.<sup>240</sup>

A danger worth courting? As Sale told Moffett:

My own obscurity is largely an absence of punctuation which in theory *facilitates* poetic communication. Punctuation enforces prose meaning but poetry overrides that, unconsciously or not, establishing relations between phrases above their grammatical “logic” [...] <sup>241</sup>

But the complexity doesn’t stop there; there is something of both late Shakespearian and Miltonic intricacy in two of Sale’s other defining techniques:

*f. extended phrases*

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<sup>237</sup> See Chapter 3 for full quotation. To John Mole, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986. In **SL**, and also **Appendix 1**.

<sup>238</sup> Presumably after **UW**, but *before* an early draft of ‘School of Nettles’ – written on the back of a typed College list of undergraduates. (This includes a Third Year, ‘Rusbridger, A.’ = Alan Rusbridger, who left in 1976.)

<sup>239</sup> 18<sup>th</sup> April 1979 **SL**, p11.

<sup>240</sup> Interview at Prof. Duffy’s home in Cambridge 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2022.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* 5<sup>th</sup> April 1989 **SL**.

which often lead to elliptical, deliberately-ambiguous syntax, stretching over combined, and/or long phrases. Again, Sale accepted the danger, noting his parallel tendency to rely ‘too much on parenthesis’ – i.e. that ‘the clew of statement’ may also be lost if *too* many extended phrases are bunched together without conventional punctuation to delineate them. Or, as he puts it elsewhere: that re-asserts ‘dominant prose meaning’ – see **g.** below, and for the full quotation.

In both tree poems discussed so far extensive re-drafting towards a final version tends to make the final, literal sense *more* elliptical – since grammatically-functional words are also removed. ‘Dominant’ may not be a compliment to ‘prose meaning’, but the poetic sense *is* made more riddling still. Again, perhaps, was this something of the legacy of his Anglo-Saxon alliterative training?

Finally, Sale’s late tree-life poems invests in:

*g. deliberate gaps between words and phrases (‘graded spacings’)*

Chapters 2 and 3 explored several instances of Sale courting double or triple meanings by letting the eye connect words on the page that would be corralled by lazier syntax. In the same conversation noted above, Eamon Duffy told me about how deliberately seventeenth century (“almost quaint”) some of Sale’s phrasing can feel. Again, there would seem to be a similar purpose to Shakespearian verse performed – as Sale shared with pupils on the typography of the First Folio.<sup>242</sup> In specialist tutorials on the American Literature Cambridge Tripos Paper, Sale specifically would teach the purpose and effectiveness of Emily Dickinson’s ‘loosening of her syntactic lines’. He liked finding out that Edward Thomas dabbled too:

I was heartened to read, in the latest edition of Ed. Thomas’s poems that he too used spaces – whether graded, like mine, I don’t know – but that it was not found practicable *in print*.<sup>243</sup>

And Bevis Sale reports a possible connection between his father and the Concrete Poet, Reg Gadney. Gadney lived just round the corner.<sup>244</sup>

The multiple challenges relating to these last three techniques Sale specifically addresses in further answers to his father-in-law’s intrigued poetry questions:

I like to help the process of association by removing obstacles to it ... But I can see that, as I rely too much on parenthesis & that is difficult to convey as a distinct entity, there are objections to the method.

Perhaps I shd. present one in the usual way, to see if the obscurity disappears with the reimposition of a dominant prose meaning.<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Cf. interview with John Constable.

<sup>243</sup> To Alex Moffett 5<sup>th</sup> April 1989 **SL** p.103.

<sup>244</sup> Email to me, 24/2/23.

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*

(He appears not to have tried this last idea, but a telling experiment in the critical future, perhaps.)

At this point, one – very brief – example will have to serve as a reminder that Eco-poets have also experimented with several of the techniques posited so far. Much more work will need to be done on Sale's verse, to show the extent of the complex verse-lines, let alone their effectiveness; but a few lines from Mark Goodwin (walker, rock climber, poet: born in 1969) may hint at the practice of analogous practitioners beginning as Sale was leaving off:

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

So ends 'Borrowdale Details'; though the final image courts indulgence rather than arresting directness, might the overall conceit daringly be said to taste sweet as Wordsworth at his most Lakes-passionate? The Anglo-Saxon alliterations and compound epithets – 'moss green-gleaming' – are obviously close to Sale's youthful translations, and their echoes in many later sound-plays. Though the emphasis in the four final 'my's is still far too solipsistic to place us in Borrowdale rather than Goodwin's mouth, the word-spacings and lack of sentence punctuation may hint at the beginnings of late-Sale syntactic freeings-up of word- and sound-connection.<sup>246</sup>

Despite the dangers Sale's complex prosodic and sound-choices also court, coruscating moments in both tree and flower poems may perhaps have exemplified concatenations that really *do* make emotional 'shimmers' of his complex meanings, in an attentive reader. Vendler certainly praises this 'poet's eddies and flashes of charged language' – flashes enough to draw her in.

The endeavour certainly applies to all the poems studied so far, in a tone anywhere from slapstick humour to irony, sharp satire; but always back to celebration; using techniques held within a diffident, but formal, prosodic 'voice'; and including phrases alternating Anglo-Saxon lexis with more Romance-language, such as:

or *splodge* of gold that *dodges nought* but notice .

There are simply elegant phrases, such as his opening definition of a nettle:

the sting invisible is all we see ;

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<sup>246</sup> Tarlo ed. *ibid.*, p.148.

or the Eliot-like, extraordinary summation of the ultimate act of a world war – mentioned above: shocking the reader right at the end of an ornamented language-poem about an ornamental bridge:

water and earth and air and flame and man

and through the shrinking adamant of fate,

falls the invisible atom falling

on Nagasaki, on Hiroshima.

➤ *Towards a modern and traditional poetic language*

Chapter 1 indicated Sale's Anarchist beliefs – and a certain personal integrity that matched them in actions. (One colleague, twenty-plus years after he died, affectionately put it another way: 'he could be an irascible old bugger'.) The thorough-going nature of the techniques listed above attest to what the letters show: Sale was his own man and poet – slowly finding a way to write about his subject. None of his collections was published before the age of sixty, but by 1975 he could write to Andrew Cozens, confidently – if as always self-deprecatingly – critiquing contemporary poems Cozens had sent him:

I too am narcissus & first person but I wd like to distinguish. They are interested in their own emotions, plight, condition & other private belongings: I am interested in giving these belongings a life outside their own small & undistinguished & undistinctive selves: i.e. making something out of them that is (hopefully) rich as well as strange. That doesn't mean I am better: they may succeed & I may fail, leaving the score even. But I think I wd break the homogeneity, & if I offered you something as indulgent or self important as t'others, I think it wd be something I wdn't like to be known by.<sup>247</sup>

By now, his own 'anarchic' techniques help reflect his rationale for typecasting other post-war verse, as 'homogenous', 'indulgent'; self-important'. This chimes too with what he hoped he might give *his* verse, and thereby its subjects: to 'living forms...a life...that is...rich and strange'. Most importantly then, though I simply didn't realise the significance at the time, he wrote to me in 1990:

The poems themselves [**ScP**] (I hope) bear witness to a veneration for natural objects that I cannot give to much else in this man-horrible world.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1975 **SL**, p.30. This perhaps refers to other verse in *The Windless Orchard*. (See Chapter 1.)

<sup>248</sup> In a letter to me, 20 Aug '90 (**Archive**).

The question still remains: if later eco-poetic, other younger contemporaries, nineteenth nor twentieth century poets Sale admired, barely match his *unhomogenetic* poetic, which earlier poets might help comprehend what Sale is seeking to depict or express, in such wildly-complex ‘venerations’?

In these mooted comparisons, only Wordsworth might bear anything like the same intense focus on a single living form; this is still more true of Wordsworth’s lesser-known contemporary, John Clare. He comes across a mouse nesting in rural Lincolnshire:

...When out an old mouse bolted in the wheat  
With all her young ones hanging at her teats  
She looked so odd and so grotesque to me  
I ran and wondered what the thing could be  
And pushed the knapweed bunches where I stood  
When the mouse hurried from the crawling brood  
The young ones squeaked and when I went away  
She found her nest again among the hay  
The water oer [*sic*] the pebbles scarce could run  
And broad old cesspools glittered in the sun

*from ‘The Mouse’s Nest’*<sup>249</sup>

And the moment is over. Despite the eighteenth-century iambic couplets, this is not so far from Sale’s later verse; certainly not in other aspects of form, aside Clare’s unschooled punctuation; but in the treatment of nature. Nick Selby’s comparison of this poem to verse by the late ‘Eco-poet’ Ric Caddel against the same Clare poem, is pertinent here, not least in debating the separation Selby senses between Clare and nature. Clare is clearly more artless – if more concise – than Sale in depicting, not dissimilarly, strange parts of nature lurking in the most ordinary of places. There is a similar view of it too: he counterpoints the bizarre in Nature – ‘so odd and so *grotesque* to me’ – with similar appreciations of its true purpose, resilience, *and* self-sufficiency. Clare’s narrative implicitly appreciates a mother instinctively protecting her young; and like Sale, he finds the same randomly-eloquent beauty, here glimpsed in the ‘glittering’ of other grotesqueries: ‘cesspools in the sun’.<sup>250</sup>

For me, Sale and Clare express the same instinctive joy in the ugliest, most unprepossessing parts of nature – albeit in fundamentally different idioms and only glancingly-similar techniques. Clare describes an exquisite, naturally-occurring scene that allows we urban-dwellers to call it ours, because we get to see what he saw: even if we don’t quite know why. Nor does Clare, it seems: instinctive rather than studied

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<sup>249</sup> *The Faber Book of Beasts*, p.158.

<sup>250</sup> ‘Pastoral, elegy and the politics of place in Richard Caddel and Harriet Tarlo’, in *Textual Practice* (2011).

expression, oddly, but charmingly, conveying the subject. Sale, by obvious contrast, is far more varied and adept in his prosody; as well as far more ‘knowing’ in what he concludes from such living observations. Hence too his deliberate focussing on that to the exclusion of ‘Self’. Hence also his elliptical, spinning, riddling investigations about the infinitely-complex living forms he clearly cherishes.

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Sheer prolixity, density of imagery, and extensive redrafting suggest a very different struggle from Clare’s; Sale admits as much in his comments on the struggle for imagery (see section on this in **Appendix 1**) to begin to articulate that knowledge ‘whole’ to ‘us’ – i.e. his very few readers.

So if not Clare’s, who else’s verse might this new ‘rich’ and ‘strange’ poetic language for nature build upon?

I have hinted that late-Sale is no nearer Eco- nor earlier, twentieth century, poets – even those he liked such as Frost, Thomas and Eliot. Even Yeats – despite his admirable slaving over eight lines – yields few similarities of style, or subject – one need go no further than the focus on self, rather than the elegant appreciation of swans in ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’. Of other nineteenth and eighteenth century ‘nature poets’ Sale admired, those alluded to elsewhere: Dickinson, Wordsworth and Clare have offered remote comparison, but apart from Dickinson’s eccentrically-consistent spacings, the legacy may only be a non-anthropocentric love for the natural subject, rather than kindred expression.

Hopkins might seem a tempting model in his exciting sound play to capture (most famously) the physicality of a hawk in flight; but the sounds sometimes force the words, and I remember Sale telling me the stresses also tend to fight the rhythmic coherence. And the interest is usually ideological – ‘in God’s eye’, rather than, for example, ecological. Kingfishers used as an example of ‘inscape’ rather than for catching fire – however lovely the conceit.<sup>251</sup>

The tightness of other Victorian quatrains and Augustan couplets, rule out swathes of other possible formal prosodies. Remarkably enough, as several of these trails have already indicated, Sale turns out to imitate a seventeenth century blank verse line (as well as a Shakespearian prolixity of metaphor). It is striking, for example, which models Sale chooses to help point out the dangers modern poets – such as his otherwise admired pupil John Mole – face in writing short-lined verse:

...when I think of the delicate but sure rhythms of the 17c. practitioners of brevity - ! ...for me there is always this danger in poetic mimesis: it still can’t be literal; it *must* be contained within the *created* world of the verse.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Supervision, c. 1981. Cf. ‘As kingfishers catch fire’, in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (57), p.90.

<sup>252</sup> To John Mole (aka ‘The London Poet’), 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986 **SL** p.36

Or again:

...it can also be true that a metrical form can be a product of its period (or even a single poet), Tudor drama seized on blank verse as its universal medium on the strength of a few trial bits not connected with drama (contrast French drama?). That was a truly remarkable recognition, a fervent raid and monopolising of the form as made for it...<sup>253</sup>

And again, in a question going straight to the heart of what modern verse might be:

I know there are rhythms of all sizes and shapes and inter-relations and that indefinite variety can produce more riches than ordinary blank verse, say (my only Puritanical vehicle), but where is the pattern to which they must refer, if they are to have the essential of rhythm?<sup>254</sup>

Again, in the typescript alluded to above, his appreciation of the skill in Milton's 'chimes and rhymes' is clear – despite not much *feeling* Milton's orate verse.

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As for Sale on metaphor, here are potted comments – some already quoted in this study – in letters ranging over nearly sixty years:

...the extraordinary freshness of the colouring with which he [*Henry Moore*]...made bearable his horrors...the colouring matches the imaginative strangeness of his, & your, visions.<sup>255</sup>

I think poetry is not statement though it usually embodies statement. We look for the clew of statement to guide us through the thickets of metaphor & image...<sup>256</sup>

...I don't find my own situation of poetic interest *or, if at all, in the objects that attract me.*<sup>257</sup>

And finally note what he mock-dismissively terms 'my imagistic style'.<sup>258</sup>

One late poem, alluded to earlier in the study, embodies Sale's specific homage to Baroque imagery, while making deliberate poetic play on the idea. An extraordinary (and typically complex) late poem on his Girton honeysuckle is given a Shakespearian quotation as a title: "Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine". We have heard how Sale claimed the poem as 'extorted' from him – 'as duty to the phenomenon itself' – by the sheer visual and olfactory power of its display. Sale imagines his climber teeming and thick with foliage and flower, as 'cyclopean limbs', 'lead slotted to confine', while 'looming gloomily', in lines of relentlessly alliterative 'l's.

The imagery – as well as the soundscape – explodes too – as honeysuckle scent obviously does, not least in the summer of 1997, when I still recall the smell of it on the Sales' white trellis down the left-hand side of the bungalow at 2 High Street: 'blowing from scarlet trumpets lined with gold'. The enjambement

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<sup>253</sup> To Nick Blyth date unknown **SL** pp.108-9

<sup>254</sup> To me, responding to free verse sent for comment. Undated **SL**, p.96.

<sup>255</sup> On Moore's pictures exhibited in wartime London. Letter to the artist, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1942 (**SL** p.1).

<sup>256</sup> To John Mole, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986 **SL**, p36

<sup>257</sup> To John Mole, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1994 **SL** p.41

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.* 8<sup>th</sup> January 1999, p.42

lifts us, somehow in the opposite direction, imagining us deep into: ‘phials invisible as animalculae’, which in turn are ‘mined’ by ‘midchunnel nesting merles’. These themselves tunnel impossibly into the ‘enormous

“Quite overcanopied with luscious woodbine”

(Puck (!Overon!))

You who stood by and watched your willow    polled  
 unmoved    firmed even    in white broadalatted frame  
           how glad we are    you too did not succumb  
 short back and sides    in martyr empathy  
 but flaunt one steady plume    soared heaven high  
 or was that protest    as on a chieftain's crest  
 either or both    how better be expressed

Camouflage vert    lead slotted to confine  
 cyclopean limbs    still looming gloomily  
 imperial tegs    creaseless from top to toe

With all the attars of Arabia  
 blowing from scarlet trumpets lined with gold  
 phials invisible as animalculae  
 breached by midchunnel nesting merles on walls  
 like that mad mile of ducal underground  
 clad with shirts or hedgehog's hedgehog bore  
 daylong but darkling levitation all  
 requiem saturation oceans of honey  
 lardiest sucking sods identikit  
 to foursquare bulk and crowding presence of  
 its own eglantine self lauds beyond words

(Pope)

(Portland)

(Keats)

(Volpone)

(Milton)

mortal

suddenly themselves unless everlastingly  
 tinted on paper by disordered blast  
 baring these bowers to foothill detritus

(Elizabeth Ruby)

leaving the green that lives in many tones  
 of swirling willow but that blankets here  
 blanknesses only after that pingual quilt

aromatic bath sponge of the subject’, as Sale later described the honeysuckle to Alex Moffett; these in turn become crazily re-imagined as part of the Duke of Portland’s fantasy: an absurd, shirt-stuffed ‘mad mile of ducal underground’.<sup>259</sup> The alliterative ‘m’s and assonant ‘u’s reinforce the tapestry of nonsense human images. These then yield to the extravagant ‘h’s of the hedgehogs’ *hedgehogging* ‘boring’, punningly inviting us to *re-imagine* hedgehogs as their etymology shows they are in nature: named after their predilection for hogging the edges of hedges. Immediately, we are then on to the exaggerated ‘d’s of the ‘daylong but darkling’ wall – paradoxically growing best in summer light, yet – as fast-growing climbers do – creating a dense, dark dell of foliage.

Even more concentratedly than in ‘Birch Hats’ or ‘Cupressus’, the complex of human metaphors is shoe-horned in to describe the most natural, *non-human* life forms. The phrases themselves are ‘tunnelled’ through: all these busy dungeons lifting (cf. ‘levitation all’) themselves – in this reader’s imagination – upon the initial ‘saturation’ of senses:

With all the attars of Arabia  
 blowing from scarlet trumpets lined with gold  
 phials invisible as animalculae  
 breached by midchunnel nesting merles on walls  
 like that mad mile of ducal underground  
 clad with shirts or hedgehog's hedgehog bore  
 daylong but darkling levitation all

A flurry of Baroque borrowings carries this. ‘Oceans of honey’ (Ben Jonson’s ‘paradise of parasites’ transformed into overpowering *scent*, in *Volpone*), are the food source – for the ‘lardiest sucking sods’, presumably: Blackbirds, bees *et al*; and, finally the whole edifice, tunnels and hedgehogs and birds and bees, is crazily lifted up on a natural wall of words: all striving to be returned – simply – to what it was in

<sup>259</sup> This was July 1997. Moffett received a response to his questions of meaning in the poem: unpublished, see [Archive](#).



the first place, in all its realistic majesty: ‘its own eglantine self’ (from Milton’s *Comus*). These ‘chunnelling’ creatures impossibly (perhaps Metaphysically) suspend themselves in an even more delicately alliterative ‘levitation all’.

All this in turn, even more madly recalls Sale being lifted with the Tits into his Birch. In a note in **SP**, Sale whimsically offered Hyperion – as though by way of explanation or excuse; but I am also reminded of the Cypress fuelled for space launch. The Honeysuckle images soar, even more implausibly, in a rhapsodic Marvellian complexity of language. Not for nothing the poet rhetorically asked, early on: ‘how better be expressed?’ The Shakespearian question *is* a question: how can any human possibly express such a piece of nature? Hence the chosen Metaphysical sources, deliberately added to later drafts down the right-hand margin: the creative form is rhapsodic, and the vivacious language may be Marvellian, but it is also signposted in the marginalia – not in some Postmodern, self-conscious way, but to prepare us for the turn that suddenly, quietly, comes at the turn in the poem, demolishing the eulogy of ‘lauds beyond words’:

Mortal

suddenly            themselves

because of a ‘disorded blast’ of wind:

baring            these bowers            to foothill detritus

This is Sale at perhaps his most extravagant: poetically sacrificing syntax and lexis for the flow of imagery and idea. His meta-meaning? ‘Words’ of praise for Honeysuckles – as well as the Honeysuckles: ‘suddenly themselves’ are turned ‘Mortal’; not to vernal ‘bowers’, but into ruins of dead plant. (Sale’s drafts show he means the contrast back to the polled willow at the beginning of the poem, which now carries of blanket of swirling leaves: a kind of ‘blankness’ given the memory of the ‘pingual’ (fatty) swathe of gorgeous ‘quilt’ed flowers, just gone.)

‘Quite Overcanopied’ is virtually the only Sale poem directly crediting his allusions – partly in order to point out the sheer *inadequacy* of all attempts – not just his inadequate poetic ones – to capture a Honeysuckle and its extravagant living paradoxes, in all their Baroque fecundity. Rather as in Shakespeare’s linguistic pyrotechnics – each conceit is intended to possess its precise point. Whatever the wildness of ‘levitating’ images – however impossibly-expressed – they try and express precisely what this climbing flower is doing in Sale’s actual and poetic back yard. Even with his demand for ‘swift, tranced’ readings, the extravagant depictions of the construction of the life-form itself, cannot begin to comprehend its weirder majesty and end. Perhaps the attempt is all, to try and express something of its rich – but strangely transient – beauty: for we are left by Sale with the memory of the ‘pingual quilt’, at l(e)ast:



Fig. 20 Woodbine in blossom

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## CONCLUSIONS

### ➤ ‘Baroque’ borrowings (& why Sale’s late verse may *seem* opaque)

Time may eventually render Sale’s tricks less daunting. Beethoven realised the challenge for those trying to play his last piano sonatas – pieces now felt among his most moving: “They will still be sweating over these in fifty years’ time”.<sup>260</sup> More modestly, Sale gave examples of how complex verse can become easier for subsequent generations. In asserting a seventeenth century formal basis to his late tree verse, they necessarily will always lack Shakespearian context, characterisation or plot, staging or stage ‘business’ that help place fleeting conceit, made-up words and changeable rhythms. To Moffett, Sale may also have mock-dramatised his latest claim to have given up writing verse because of a ‘box of poetics... jaggedly worn down into exasperated inadequacy’, but it clearly didn’t stop him still insisting on highly-compressed readings in the poem he was writing at the time “‘Quite overcanopied’”; nor the increasing compression, through all the tree-verse re-draftings that endlessly risk those vital ‘clew[s] of statement’.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Andras Schiff, introducing his own performance of the *Hammerklavier* sonata, at Saffron Hall in 2022. He then joked that pianists were still sweating over them... two hundred years later.

<sup>261</sup> To Alex Moffett, July 1997 ([Archive](#)), *ibid.* 5<sup>th</sup> April 1989, and to Nick Blyth, with similar sentiments: 8<sup>th</sup> November 1996.

True, literal meaning remains the obvious challenge, but this ‘clew’ was unlocked, for this reader at least, by both elements: Sale’s gimlet-focus on the quality and power of nature, and the inventive sharpness of that focus – which we saw only Helen Vendler seeing in his lifetime. As she put it, a way through the challenge of otherwise ‘knotted’ verse lies in the ‘eddies and flashes of charged language’, to be read in the way this study is beginning to suggest: allowing for a Shakespearian prolixity of ever-fluid, changeable conceits that overwhelmingly aim to evoke, and so embody, the most admirable characteristics of ‘living forms’.

Once unearthed, a Baroque vivacity in the prolix, fleeting image-making simply suits the tree and other plant poems studied here. This has already suggested some vital readings, all, in the end, evoking a complex love for ‘natural objects’, swirling into forms of paeon.

Some revisited examples from earlier analyses may help clarify how this might be working. In ‘Birch Hats’, read cold, *does* a phrase like ‘Noel pane’ readily enough convey – what the drafts clearly show as – Sale’s idea of colourful Tits lighting up a winter scene like a Christmas advent calendar window? Does ‘angle in girth’ *quite* suggest birch boughs as slender as the fishing rods they were once often made into? Sale hopes as much, just as Shakespeare – admittedly, with significant advantages of actor, character and plot – tempts us to see his ‘seas incarnadine’ as fair metaphor for Macbeth’s growing ruthlessness in wading waist deep into them (‘I am in blood stepped in so deep...’).

Whether out of deference or plain recognition, Sale knew his verse might never be cut the same slack; he refers to this kind of heavy allusiveness and elliptical, complex syntax and imagery in his letter to Nick Blyth – but then acceded to Blyth’s requests for explanatory notes to **SP**.

He obviously tacitly hoped attentive readers – in an unknown future – might open their ‘half-tranced’ imaginations, as they read, enjoy the imagery, word- and long-lined sound-plays, sense a complex harmony in the conceits, and – *in context* – hear the playful tone of celebration humming between the words and phrasing. Seen in this light, ‘tricky’ phrases might – quite suddenly – start to make sense. A ‘bulb of crimson’ – the bullfinch ‘in haste too rare’ landing on the Birch – hangs for a moment, as a crimson lightbulb... in ‘a Noel pane’:



Fig.21 Bullfinch

The birch itself, ‘more air than tree’, is too fine-sprung to seem capable of bearing any bird at all; yet it does – just – on its fishing-rod’s ‘cast line spray’ of a twig, ‘oscillating / overpoised overbearing overborne’ *before* being released – perhaps like a tiny fish unhooked?

More generally, Vendler suggests ‘a new reader’ will be sufficiently rewarded by ‘the sense of idiosyncratic language while feeling as well the presence of the clue-thread in the hand that will lead...both in and out of the labyrinth’.

In these kinds of ways, the late verse offers ample grounds for sensing something workably ‘rich’, as well as ‘strange’ – once more to borrow Sale borrowing late Shakespeare – for his poetic. The Baroque, labyrinthine complexity may in places for now be too intricate, but a societally-shared spirit of the fragility of the ecological systems he more generally identifies and celebrates, may in time make the idea easier to absorb, despite its intricacy.<sup>262</sup>

More of his c. 250 poems obviously need unearthing to test the consistency of these semantic word games. For now, one clue Sale himself offered, seems worth obeying: read slowly – probably aloud – with ‘swift, half-tranced’ attention, other poems than Birch, Cypress or Woodbine may too begin to show the nature of the veneration for Nature their author so clearly felt.<sup>263</sup> Or, as Vendler hopes:

a reader may not at the outset be at home in Sale’s stream-of-consciousness. Yet the surface of the poem is attractive enough to draw a new reader in, precisely because of the poet’s eddies and flashes of charged language.<sup>264</sup>

#### ➤ Neologising nature: new words for a new view of nature?

For obvious ways this might seem a surprising innovation for a modern poet. Four centuries on from Shakespeare, Sale benefitted from the highly defined vocabulary of a – numerically – far more literate society, and could hardly hope to neologise like Shakespeare, let alone in crowded academic bubbles to which his kind of experimental writing was by then consigned. Where novelists like Joyce – or playwrights like Beckett, who helped Joyce – tried inventing words, too many experiments, like *Finnegans Wake*, were simply too incomprehensible.

But Sale does invent new words with the best of such Modernists, often as a matter of habit in his letters – though also in every poem examined so far. Many of these turn out to relate to ‘living forms’. A brief sample of Salic words *not* listed in the **OED** include ‘*pingual*’ (of his honeysuckle mattress of flowers), ‘*doucest*’ (of Tits, in ‘Birch Hats’), Noah’s ‘*neo Ark*’ (of his cypress), ‘*urtic*’ (for ‘nettlelike’), and ‘*undesiccated*’ (of air, in ‘Nettles’). Then again, a ‘*susurrus*’ (of starlings, in ‘Cupressus’), ‘*merle*’ (of blackbird, in “‘Quite overcanopied’”), and ‘*daws*’ (of jackdaws), ‘*hirondel*’ (of swallow), and ‘*stares*’ (for starlings – all these in ‘Birch Hats’), are also in the **OED**, but all listed as ‘rare’ or ‘obsolete’. Some of these capture a punning or onomatopoeic characteristic of the creature defined (Starlings ‘stare’); some seem chosen for the sheer pleasure of sound (starlings also whisper in flight – their collective noun is a

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<sup>262</sup> Foreword, **SP**, x.

<sup>263</sup> To Isabel Wolff, 15<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1986 (**SL**), and to me, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1990; *ibid.*: **Archive**.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.* **SP**, x.

‘murmuration’ for this very reason – though Sale chooses ‘susurrus’, and we will never know why); others are clearly chosen for the pleasure of their early English or Anglo-Saxon or Latin names (‘merles’; ‘stares’; ‘urtic’ nettles; ‘Macrocarpa’ etc.).<sup>265</sup> Like Shakespeare, the habit of neologising seems sometimes simply for fun, while very much creating its own ‘poetic ambience’.

Given the forensic treatment of Nature as a theme, there also seems something Shakespearian in the pedantic precision – pleasurable prolixity? – of his ‘naming’ the ‘parts’ of nature. Shakespeare names, and symbolises, 180 flora – including those paid homage in Sale’s *‘luscious woodbine’*, and *‘Sing All A Green Willow’*.<sup>266</sup> This is dual purpose, it seems, in both poets: to speak of nature *as* nature, yet also create a rich, strange language *of* nature.

### ➤ **Other Shakespearian affinities: a fluidity of expression**

For so critical a critic, Sale admired Shakespeare’s poetry, barely without exception. It is not out of clichéd adulation that Sale called Shakespeare: ‘Miglior fabbro’ in a letter to colleague Richard Lockett.<sup>267</sup> We know how much he liked teaching that Tripos paper. John Constable told me he never met anybody so well versed in the plays: a colleague reported him quietly correcting *Professor* George Steiner’s line references.<sup>268</sup> Unmoved by post-war trends and forms of verse-making, admiring of many of Shakespeare’s plays...; the hypothesis feels right to turn on its head. Why would he *not* adopt such an impressive role model to help form his own poetic language?<sup>269</sup> Many of his borrowings may well also have been technical, i.e. adopting characteristics of a ‘voice’ only half-‘strange’ to modern ears; but one regarded globally by writers and playgoers as clearly ‘rich’, as well – even four centuries on – as often ‘strange’.

Alex Moffett was again asking the right questions of his elderly son-in-law.<sup>270</sup> In one reply, Sale wrote that the Honeysuckle poem could only ‘be a *jeu d’esprit*...trusting the command to the Immortals’. By ‘Immortals’ he means the famous poets – mainly seventeenth century – we noted him paying homage to in the right-hand margin. By ‘*jeu d’esprit*’ he refers to its playfulness. By ‘trusting the command’, he signifies both trust *and* homage about such light-heartedness.

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<sup>265</sup> OED: meaning 2b.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107. (Coincidence of course, but in 1970 Marvin Spevack, a close friend of Sale’s, with whom he maintained a long correspondence – see. **SL** – compiled the first, authoritative *Concordance to Shakespeare*, for Harvard.

<sup>267</sup> 4<sup>th</sup> July [no year, but after 1978, when he joined the College], **SL**. Nick Selby reminds me it is Eliot’s dedicating compliment to Pound in *The Wasteland*; Sale may well have been precise in his applying the phrase to his ‘Master’. (John Constable’s Sale obituary mentions finding an unknown pupil adding ‘il miglior fabbro’ to Sale’s Cambridge University Library catalogue book entry.)

<sup>268</sup> Interview in Saxmundham, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2022 & explanatory email, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023.

<sup>269</sup> See too earlier *n.* in this Chapter, on ‘my favourite Term’ – in which he could teach Am. Lit, Shakespeare *and* Tragedy.

<sup>270</sup> For all such refs., see **Appendix 1**, and Moffett folder in **Archive**.

Again, at the turn of the poem, we have seen something of a Shakespearian *meta*-facetiousness: in the poem demeaning his ‘Immortals’ in the face of ineffable beauty of a honeysuckle; beauty he, Sale, lined them up (including in the right-hand margin) to help him describe.<sup>271</sup>

Though Miltonic in subtlety of soundscape, and Marvellian in zaniness of metaphor, Shakespeare is remembered in all the features already identified: endless counterpointing of bizarre images and sound effects, in a fast-moving blank-versed vehicle.<sup>272</sup>

And in another typically Shakespearian touch: the homage turns out tellingly self-parodic: this paeon is not just an old poet rating his older betters; he is also asking: how can *any* human begin to convey the overwhelming scent, quiltlike density, gorgeousness of colour – yet bizarre transience – of a Honeysuckle?

Elsewhere, Sale often alludes to Shakespeare. Titles of poems are borrowed ironically, such as ‘Let him smell his way to Dover’, composed after 1979 and quoting *Lear*: mock-gruesomely, given that this poem is about the moving scents of summer on his walk to work.<sup>273</sup> Or ‘Sing All A Green Willow Must Be My Garland’ (c. 1970 *ff.*), citing Greenpeace digging up cricket pitches, in a hymn of praise to a willow in winter – all while quoting what is often called the saddest song in Shakespeare: Desdemona’s in Act 4 Scene 3 of *Othello*.<sup>274</sup> Again, ‘Willow Stay Bare’ (undated as yet) makes the giant tree’s leaves mock-sinister ‘like Rumour full of tongues’, from *Henry IV Part 2*. ‘“The Universal” or Popular Science’ (c.1960 onwards) mocks over-clever astronomers (or cosmic forces) for periodically reducing the status of the planet Pluto to ‘Oberon the Yob’. And of course ‘“Quite overcanopied...”’ (c. 1995-7) has its title from *A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*. This is barely ironic, given how the poem was ‘extorted’ from him by the honeysuckle’s beauty.<sup>275</sup>

Shakespearian ironising aside, the prosodic similarities are striking. Sale’s frequently-professed form of iambic-pentametered blank verse obviously matches Shakespeare’s – far more the varying fluidity, both in numbers of syllables, frequent enjambement, elongated syntax – or as Sale calls Shakespeare’s approach in *The Winter’s Tale*: ‘indirectness of style’. All in a modern age dominated – Sale felt – by those all too-short, self-reflective, and ‘solipsistic’ lines.<sup>276</sup> Again, his fluid, shape-shifting language in the late poems

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<sup>271</sup> Penelope Robson confirms the remarkable density of foliage and flower. Recorded interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022.

<sup>272</sup> Donne too, in pre-Flaubertian exoticism of imagery? (*Cf.* the Marvell ‘line-drops’ in Sale’s last poem – quoted at end of Ch.1.)

<sup>273</sup> Appears half typed, though drafts look complete *cf.* an A4 brown envelope in the **Archive**.

<sup>274</sup> **SP**, p.82. Part 2 of ‘Sing All A Green Willow’, entitled ‘Verdigris’, was composed from 1976: *cf.* dates on back of drafts; a reference to ‘summer of the unslaked watering can’, implying what was the worst drought for 200 years. Willow poems were still being composed in the mid-1990s: ‘Absalom my son Absalom’ was written ‘At the suggestion of Penelope Sale.’, and its last, ‘Willow Pattern’, dedicated to her (they married in 1990).

<sup>275</sup> *Cf.* letter to me, 27<sup>th</sup> November 1995: **SL**, p.94. The other impetus may have been his meeting with Heaney.

<sup>276</sup> See again **Appendix 1** – section on ‘solipsism’.



studied so far seems surprisingly like Shakespeare's: surprisingly neologistic: full of prolixity, invention, freedom – but also fleetingness of image-making.

Such a working conclusion of course depends on confirmation in a much larger body of Sale's verse: but even this brief study refutes any suggestion of whimsy or delusion in the technical ambition. He was always the first in his teaching to distinguish poetic technique from poetic *quality*, and in that spirit might well have been happy to be charged with everything Bill Bryson quotes Stanley Wells holding against the world's greatest poet:

prolixity, awkwardness of expression and verbal inelegance...allowing his pen to run away with him in speeches of greater length than the situation warrants'.

Or:

...as Charles Lamb put it much earlier, Shakespeare 'runs line into line, embarrasses sentences and metaphors; before one idea has burst its shell, another is hatched out and clamorous for disclosure'.<sup>277</sup>

So, hardly pretension to make such purely *technical* comparisons between the Bard and Sale. Turning the case on its head, Bryson himself turns the case on its head by pointing out that David Crystal famously defended Shakespeare as being less difficult than he looks, mocking Richmond who infamously – though hardly dissimilarly to Lamb – produced 'verse translations' of plays like *Hamlet*. Crystal reasonably enough points out the sheer range of linguistic features other poets, even of Shakespeare's period, do *not* employ. In these peculiarities, Shakespeare is the exception, or even misfit – and Sale is happy to join him in some of them.

Most pertinently, one final comparison may demonstrate how deliberately Sale works in tune with the Shakespeare's own, late-developing idea of nature – as well as his way of expressing it. The obvious borrowing in the title of 'Quite overcanopied...', its prolixity of image, interlocking ideas, neologism, and intuitive, fluid trains of pulse and syntax all embody – and convey – aspects of the late-play concept of 'Great Creating Nature'.

Sale profoundly admired the sheer potency of natural processes the heroine Perdita stands for in *The Winter's Tale*, where this phrase first arises, in Act 4 Scene 4. Perdita, the wronged queen's banished baby and now sixteen-year-old daughter, is defiantly flirting with powerful men – by disowning artificially-bred flowers:

I'll not put  
The dibble in earth to set one slip of them [*i.e. man-modified flowers*];

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<sup>277</sup> Bill Bryson, *Shakespeare*, pp.104-5.

No more than were I painted I would wish  
This youth should say 'twere well and only therefore  
Desire to breed by me.

Some might argue this play as the ultimate ‘early eco-poetic’ celebration of nature *in its own right*: that is, without traditional kinds of poetic relationship to humans rather than as a proxy for ‘the human condition’. This ‘return to natural living’ must have been radical for Shakespeare’s time, in that the starring nymph and shepherd are not literary creations, nor comic fall guys; the specific contrast is with the *Othello*-like melodramatic tragedy of the first half. Young Perdita uses canny, complex conceits well beyond her (allegedly) humble peasant ‘station’ – simply to tell the audience she prefers to be her humble self rather than caked in make-up. Full of youthful, pious pride, she coyly and successfully mocks the grand guests at her country fair, naming and making traditional mythologies of the *wild* flowers she has picked for them:

Here's flowers for you;  
Hot lavender, mints, savoury, marjoram;  
The marigold, that goes to bed wi' the sun  
And with him rises weeping: these are flowers  
Of middle summer, and I think they are given  
To men of middle age. You're very welcome.

To which the middle-aged Camillo, clearly bewitched, has no choice but to imagine himself a sheep at her command:

I should leave grazing, were I of your flock,  
And only live by gazing.

In answer to Perdita’s not liking Carnations, Polixenes (her other grand visitor), has already just observed of said flower cultivation:

Say there be;  
Yet nature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean: so, over that art  
Which you say adds to nature, is an art  
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race: *this is an art*  
*Which does mend nature, change it rather, but*  
*The art itself is nature.*

– again effectively writing a plausible definition of Eco-poetry – just 400 years early.

This time the young heroine has no choice but to agree:

So it is.



because – the implication is made plain – even humans form a part of Nature’s overwhelming power.<sup>278</sup>

Though tragedies like *King Lear* and *Macbeth* previously incorporated all sorts of images of destructive nature, Sale saw the evolution from these tragedies into Shakespeare’s late plays as representing transcendence beyond the natural human fear, of dying. For example, he loved Cleopatra’s using the most natural force of creativity: sex, to bewitch, then seal Antony’s ‘fate’. But he saw a clue here, heading beyond tragedy, and towards: *The Tempest* – where Prospero offers artistic release from death (‘sweet sounds that hurt not’), and *The Winter’s Tale* – finally evoking the most moving sense of nature’s ultimate triumph: Hermione coming back to life in order to claim her long-lost child of nature: Perdita.<sup>279</sup> Sale’s late verse – like Shakespeare’s, at the end of a rather more illustrious career – may have a not dissimilar semantic purpose: the celebration of ‘Great creating Nature’ and the extraordinary ways it finds to outwit death.

As the previous discussion suggested, Sale may therefore be applying special techniques to tempt Vendler’s ‘attentive reader’ into cognitive associations, that in turn make them feel something of Sale’s passionate – quietly obsessive – sense of the extraordinary things he sees in ordinary life-forms. Even the sample of verse so far has sought to show the sheer range of effort expended, in order to embody that feeling.

Sale’s approach casts new light on tree-life: makes them *look and feel different* – to this reader’s imagination – and also to Helen Vendler’s, who wrote that she’d not see his other major preoccupations – a Bridge and a Willow – the same way since reading Sale. She refers to Bishop’s poetic dictum to this effect, that ‘A true poem makes the reader see the world, for some time, as the poet saw it.’<sup>280</sup>

And in answer to a question about Shakespearian influences, Cambridge Professor of German, and colleague Nick Boyle, unhesitatingly recounted an anecdote about Sale teaching him something fundamental about Realism: that poetry for him was not about recreating reality, but about making “something ‘rich and strange’ *out of reality*”.

Some recognition – from a world authority on German Realism.<sup>281</sup>

### ➤ Sale as early Eco-poet

We have seen how Sale’s late tree poems concern themselves with nature in its own right, and if at all in relation to human beings: rather than the other way round. A running thesis of this study has been to posit a case for Sale’s late tree verse as one early manifestation of the later American and European ‘Eco-poetry’

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<sup>278</sup> All from IV.4; my *italics*.

<sup>279</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> October 1991 **SL** - all this (and much more) in answer (‘most pressingly’ ...) to a question I’d asked him about teaching Shakespearian Tragedy, to Luton VI Form College A level students,

<sup>280</sup> Foreword, **SP** vii.

<sup>281</sup> Recorded interview at his home, November 2022 – see **Bibliography**. Boyle is Cambridge Professor of German Literature, and was Sale’s friend and colleague for nearly forty years.

movement: certainly in ideology, and possibly in individual formal elements experimented with by other, later ‘Eco-poets’ analysed en route.

This is why.

Laura-Gray Street, in her introduction to the 2013 *Ecopoetry Anthology*, wrote:

I have come to think of ecopoetry [*sic*] not as a particular form or subject or style or school but as a way of thinking ecocentrically rather than *anthropocentrically*.<sup>282</sup>

The close and comparative analyses have so far argued for Sale’s poems about Birch and Cypress habitats embodying, and evoking a feeling for, the living things he aims in his deliberate, crafted, ‘idiosyncratic language’ to depict. This is in their own right, and largely irrespective of humans; and so its elaborate metaphors tend – mostly with gentle satire – to mock ‘the limitations of anthropocentric thinking’.<sup>283</sup>

There are of course caveats to the assertion. The movement still seems ill-defined. Eco-poetry as a subject – let alone its form (see next section) – is hardly universal currency, and still not listed in the **OED** – even though Eco-critic Scott-Bryson says it was coined by Leonard Scigaj in 1999.<sup>284</sup> In some accounts it becomes a sub-branch of the more widely used discipline of ‘Eco-criticism’. Timothy Clark, in the *Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* section on Eco-poetry, even pointedly asks if Eco-poetry is ‘a whole new subgenre or just a name for poetry with a vaguely green subject matter?’ Ambivalently enough he goes on to support it being something of both: this in 2011. And a named interest in ‘the environment’ was certainly not nearly as fashionable, societally or politically, in 1970, when Sale began focussing on such verse, as five or six decades on. And the attitude is probably at best ambivalent still: ‘weeds’ – i.e. wild plants – are still routinely eradicated in the plethora of gardening television programmes. So the idea of any wider rationale for a fledgling ‘eco-interest’ was unknown to the four editors of Sale’s collections – all of which are dated after this.

In addition, surveying the contents of more recent compilations of eco-critical thinking, there are remarkably few references to poetry – other than historico-political.<sup>285</sup> In Hiltner, for example, there is

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<sup>282</sup> xxxviii.

<sup>283</sup> I am grateful to Professor Nick Selby for this suggestion.

<sup>284</sup> Attribution in *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, by J. Scott Bryson, Utah UP 2002: p.2. **OED** lists and cites an apparent coinage: ‘eco-critical’ (as in ‘eco-critical bandwagon’), in 1982. For other citations see below.

*Cf. Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, by Scigaj – on A.R. Ammons, Berry, Merwin, and Gary Snyder.

<sup>285</sup> *Field Contexts* (a compilation of Literature and the Environment Critical and Primary Sources; Volume 4) has no verse references at all. The *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* ditto (other than theorising briefly about Charles Olson’s Field Composition of a poem, and includes a Postmodern prose-experiment - complete with molecular diagrams - in which the researcher proposes ingesting himself with toxins). *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* includes one brief reference to Eco-poetry, and two pages on Gary Snyder (seemingly the standard representative of modern Eco-verse) and Colinn Simms. Hiltner’s 2015 *Ecocriticism: the essential reader* is similarly dense: 400 pages and closely printed; it includes a discussion on the pseudo-religiosity of Romantic writers on nature; a misinterpreted Blake reference, *Othello* on early racism,

just *one* complete contemporary verse quotation, included as part of a discussion on the inadequacy of writing in the depiction of nature, among other crimes against nature:

The gum tree stands by the spring.  
I peeled its splitting bark  
and found the written track  
of a life I could not read.<sup>286</sup>

With some justification – in the largest scheme of things – Sale is hardly the first nature poet to tackle poetry’s ability to capture ‘nature’. However, the quotation above is used to adopt Buell’s Postmodern idea of ‘radical relinquishment’ – i.e. forgoing the illusion of separation from one’s environment – in order to show that the language of nature itself, rather than of human poets, is what counts.<sup>287</sup>

For now, perhaps Eco-poetry really has become less important as Eco-criticism has become more politically-charged. Ironically enough, there is nothing in the above as to how Eco-poetry might contribute to – let alone be the means for expressing – such a radical perspective. But while it may not be part of such mainstream philosophical thinking, there has been a persistent undercurrent of attention. Terry Gifford and Kate Soper (1995), Jonathan Bate (2000), Timothy Morton (2007) as well as a number of American critics, have all posited theoretical as well as ‘eco-poetic’ ways of constructing the ‘non-anthropocentric’ view, and expression, of nature. And this has certainly not gone away. While ‘Eco-criticism’ was barely British currency before 2001 when a *Guardian* review of Bate could call his work ‘pioneering’, the roots run deep that feed its growing tree of sub-disciplines.

Some of these roots have common – if tenuous – links with Sale’s work. Though many accounts of Eco-poetry are built on earlier, American, literary models – which Sale definitely espoused, taught, and wrote about: Melville, Whitman, Thoreau and/or John Muir; Emily Dickinson, and later Robert Frost – some later Eco-critics find an ‘ecological’ awareness in the Modernists, on through Elizabeth Bishop, and into an explosion of post-war nature verse, where urbanites return to various forms – or at least thoughts – of ‘country living’.<sup>288</sup> This kind of poetry we have seen some limited resonances to in Sale, as well. Bate, on the other side of the Pond, and saw eco-poetic roots in Wordsworth as well as ‘proto-anarchists’ like Blake, Shelley, and in the later ‘Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris. Gifford sees a connection

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and other glancing references. Interestingly, it claims to be representative of how ‘second- or even third-wave Eco-critics’ since the 1990s have moved from ‘a preoccupation with nature writing, wilderness, and texts celebrating pristine environments’ to being ‘concerned with ...environmental devastation...environmental justice’, meaning ‘ecocriticism is now poised to have significant cultural and political relevance.’ – all this from an introduction by the editor, a Professor of English and the Environment.

<sup>286</sup> *Op.cit.* p.362. Blake’s ‘Tyger’ is seen as ‘metallurgical’ (on p.288), rather than as its author ironically depicting the majesty of something beyond what industry could *ever* produce. Wordsworth and Thoreau are seen as frightened of God in the Alps and on M. Ktaadn (pp.105-6), etc.

<sup>287</sup> Cf. (e.g.) Buell cited in ‘Ecocriticism: what is it for?’ by Robert Kern, in *The Isle Reader, Ecocriticism 1993-2003*, p.273.

<sup>288</sup> Cf. various voluminous anthologies, but especially: *The Ecopoetry Anthology*, edited by Ann Fisher-Wirth and Laura-Gray Street in 2013. For Modernist eco-awareness, see *Eliot and Organicism – passim*.

through to post-war historians such as Keith Thomas, and critics such as Raymond Williams – who happened to be a fellow socialist *and* colleague of Sale. Some find a more tenuous Cambridge link in the allegedly Eco-verse of Hughes and Plath; but thence on to contemporary poets, again, mainly American confessional ones such as Mary Oliver.<sup>289</sup>

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All in all, Sale may yet even turn out to be in the vanguard of a sub-movement still finding its feet. A future thesis might possibly wonder if a distinctive poet like him might help it towards a distinctive voice, as well as cause. For now, later would-be ‘Eco-poets’ find themselves ‘placed’ in a sub-field of Eco-criticism, which in turn tends to re-present views on ecological interpretations of political, historical, economic, geographical, feminist, racist and colonialist, sociological and many other disciplines of the humanities – rather than a definitive focus on its artistic expression: of ‘living things’ expressed in ‘unhomogeneous’ words, that show them to be as rich as they really are strange.

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For now, one more recent example may show how profoundly the emerging eco-critical principle echoes Sale’s essential independent expression of the same ideas in his tree verse. Morton’s 2016 *Dark Ecology* argues that because of our seemingly unique ‘self-knowledge, illuminating our place in the biosphere’ we humans may be ready to ‘re-establish our ties to non-human beings and...help us rediscover the playfulness and joy that can brighten the dark, strange loop we traverse’. In other words, it no longer makes sense to define ‘Nature’ as some entity outside our windows, and however utilitarian; or wonderfully ‘Romantic’ etc.; but rather to see ourselves ‘as belonging to a species in a sense that is far less obvious than we like to think’. (Cognitive Biologists sometimes calling ‘humans overcomplicated animals’ may possibly be relevant here.) Despite a dangerous tendency to Hugh Kenner’s brand of encyclopaedically-metaphorical, morphing, meandering, prose, the real point is that Morton persuasively re-imagines our relationship with nature in extravagant *metaphorical* terms: writing about re-discovery of ‘playfulness and joy’; or indeed, in the ‘dark ecology’ of the title. In the passage quoted above, this becomes a ‘dark, strange loop’, or a ‘Möbius Strip’, in which everything is interconnected, endlessly *enlooped*, inescapable: especially humans, who might usually imagine themselves separate.<sup>290</sup>

Sale’s Birch and Cypress environments, as elucidated in Chapters 2 and 3, absolutely embody this sense of the interconnectedness of living and inanimate things – especially in the intricate, interconnected language

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<sup>289</sup> Cf. Bate in *Song of the Earth* (2000); Gifford, in *Green Voices* (1995); for Thomas, see *Man and the Natural World* (1983); see also the essay on Mary Oliver in Bryson, *op. cit.*

<sup>290</sup> *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton, New York, Columbia UP 2016 pp.108-9 – & *passim*.

Cf. also Alexandra Michel, ‘Humans Are Animals, Too: A Whirlwind Tour of Cognitive Biology’, in *Observer*, journal of the *Association of Psychological Science*, published online 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

that describes their spontaneous flourishing; all happening in the most unspectacular of settings – a tiny piece of domesticated suburbia.<sup>291</sup>

Ironically enough, because it was written that much later Morton’s intricate model tends towards a more politicised environmentalism. By then, even a late hero of early eco-critics, and of Sale – John Muir – is said to have distorted the ecology of the valley he is famous for protecting: Yosemite – later the National Park, and only made so because of Muir introducing the President to it. This was because he favoured ‘the growth of trees that covered the slopes in attractive (and flammable) swaths [*sic*] of dense green, to the chagrin of the Native Americans’.

Nevertheless, a profoundly non-anthropocentric political view of the planet still chimes with Sale’s own ‘politically-poetic’ findings from the 1970s on: his own imputations of human planetary interference – in the overcrowding implied by first lines of *Cupressus* – are soon dwarfed by the sheer human *insignificance*, in both garden trees. This is also true in other verse: as in “‘The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived’” his regular depiction of an astoundingly intricate, yet universally-designed system, that he finds matched in the standard findings of quantum physics: and in other poems too, such as the “The Universal”, the smallest component of life is related to what Einstein splashed across the universe, following the first nano-seconds of Big Bang. ‘Dark ecology’, indeed.<sup>292</sup>

Again, Sale’s metaphorical references to scale are often – even from the small sample of poems focussed on here – clearly cosmic as well as quantum. From the same study window where many of his poems find their start, he revels in the complexity, but is daunted – by the size of his trees, their power – to demolish his bungalow, by all the implications of natural power. He wrote to Will Stone – quite matter-of-factly – that he avoided looking at stars in the night sky because their scale frightened him. Eamon Duffy recalls him being overwhelmed – he used the word “destroyed” – by the sheer cliffs of Yosemite which he saw for himself on a late-life visit, aged 78, to the USA. He repeated as much to Bevis.<sup>293</sup>

➤ **Eco-poet, but with a very unusual form**

Perhaps this is why the late poems also seek out the strangest nuances of expression to express the bizarre, comic, intricate, but also apocalyptic, grandeur to it all. This makes for unusual poetry. True, as Clark notes, even in 2011 few contemporary poets of nature even shared more than one or two specific technical

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<sup>291</sup> Morton, *ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> ‘ “The Universal” or Popular Science’, in **SP**, pp.32-34; ‘ “The Greatest Man” ’: pp.55-56.

<sup>293</sup> Interview, *ibid.*, and email 24/2/23. Letter to Stone: 7<sup>th</sup> September 1997, **SL**. Jonty notes too a possible connection in his own fascination with stars as a boy – interview 22/3/23. See also last section, Chapter 1: **Sale’s final verse: reconciling art and nature**, for related images.

innovations. And we have seen how eco-poetic anthologies see no imperative to agree on characteristic forms of eco-poetic expression – beyond non-anthropocentrism, and variety.

But let alone Sale. We have seen how little contemporary poets compare in imagery and prosody. The verse in these anthologies again bears similar perspectives to Sale's, but with significant differences in approach, imagery *and/or* prosody.<sup>294</sup> What little contemporary poetry *is* closely analysed by critics such as Jonathan Bate, Terry Gifford and J. Scott Bryson, shares a clear tendency toward what Sale would call poetic solipsism, generic foci, allegory, Postmodern meta-reference, and – more often than not – polemicism, rather than even a Modernist mimetic. And how this can also tend towards various kinds of de-construction or free-form experimentation – justified by ecological imperatives – resulting in concrete, conceptual, and mainly short-lined free verse.

The examples earlier in this chapter showed how few avowed 'Eco-poets' adopt more than one or two of Sale's identified, idiosyncratic techniques. Apart from anything else, his late tree and other verse is clearly simply far more densely written. Some suggested eco-comparators, such as Helen MacDonald, clearly share the same love of nature. As MacDonald said in an interview: 'a lot of the things that I love aren't human. It's not that I love them in preference to humans; it is just that I notice them and I want to tell everyone about them. I want to yell: 'Look at this! Look how cool it is. It's amazing!''<sup>295</sup> The lexical and prose-meanings are delicately, if self-consciously, complex:

Wake, in a room where soft plaster has fallen  
& coercion sets itself pastimes, very sure of itself  
*bringing a little light into our world* and then some  
sessile cast of light seems meticulous in its suffering...

*from 'East/Absence of heat' in Shaler's Fish, 2016*

This clearly tends to the kind of personal introspection late-Sale was specifically moving away from. Taking several other, later eco-poetic contemporaries, even where the subject-theme is sustained and lyrical, as in Caddel's 'Magpie Words' or Sale's pupil Nick Drake's plangent collection, *Farewell Glacier*, the theme of ecological disaster tends to rise up far more explicitly. Note here Drake's arch but elegant:

Because the sea ice is melting,  
And no one can walk on water.<sup>296</sup>

And in fewer cases, where the form is longer-lined, mimetic, and/or densely-worded, as in Ammons' – earlier – rhapsodic philosophical monologue on sex, *Sphere*, the prosody, syntax – and even symbolic

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<sup>294</sup> Cf. e.g. *Song of the Earth* (2000), *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction* (2002), *Green Voices* (1995) – *passim*. There are of course others, but they tend to be later, and have explicit political agendas: climate change, feminist, LGBTQ+ etc.

<sup>295</sup> *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2020.

<sup>296</sup> *The Farewell Glacier*, Part 2, p.36

meanings – meander cosmically away from Sale’s ultimate focus on the living thing itself. Here is Ammons on the Earth itself:

to float the orb or suggest the orb is floating: and, with the  
mind thereto attached, to float free: the orb floats, a blue-green  
wonder: so to touch the structures as free them into rafts<sup>297</sup>

Again, taking one kind of Salic typography already mentioned, Harriet Tarlo in her 2011 *The Ground Aslant* ‘Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry’ claims

telling breathing spaces in Carol Watts’ and Mark Goodwin’s poems and the widely separated lines at the end of Mark Dickinson’s ‘Littoral xxi’.

She continues:

The use of space on the page and sound off the page are two of the most important ways in which landscape is explored... as powerfully as anywhere in Thomas A Clark’s short poems existing in wide, deep space on the page.<sup>298</sup>

In fact, other than this respect, Watts and Dickinson are conventional enough in their layouts. We have seen how Goodwin’s word spacings, serve some similarity of immediate purpose, but are nothing like as expressive as Sale’s.

Clark’s first poem in the collection, ‘The Grey Fold’, is indeed situated in the middle of a (nearly) blank page 39:

lifting your eyes  
take the small voyage  
out to the horizon  
and back again.

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<sup>297</sup> Cited in *American Visionary Poetry*, ed. Waggoner; article by Theodore Roethke, p.167.

<sup>298</sup> Exeter: Shearsman Books – *passim*.

Here the Postmodern meta-instruction to the reader and the sketch it suggests, of a vague imagined landscape (just ‘grey fold’ and ‘horizon’), are clearly dwarfed by the conceit that invites us to imagine the nearly blank page as a cunning metaphor for a moor. Technically – rather than qualitatively – whether this could be further from Sale’s very specific and variable spacings between words, dense lexical, prosodic, alliterative, multi-conceited attention to a Cypress or a Birch, the reader of the previous chapters may determine.

Seeking contemporary poets who deal in Sale’s kind of sophisticated linguistic pyrotechnics has also proved tricky. Although academic poets such as Jeremy Prynne are also complex too, in form and syntax, I have again tried to show how they differ radically in focus – but also in intricacy of form, and expression.

Drew Milne, though more Satirist than Eco-poet, has been suggested for a linguistic dexterity akin to that of Prynne. Milne certainly plays incisive satirical word-games, ravaging advertising-speak in such poems as ‘HOMAGE TO MARINETTI’:

Dune driving is so much fun,  
there must be something very  
wrong with it. In an inversion  
of prudent daily motoring, speed  
in the face of the unknowable is all.

Whether the lines are lifted from an adventure driving advert, or ironically re-composed, the misapplication of logic to justify trashing dunes (‘it’s wrong, so it must be worth doing, as society believes fun is wrong’ etc.) is finely delineated. The title, to the poet who composed the Fascist Manifesto after crashing a car, does the rest.

Self-evidently too, however, the subject is urban corruption expressed in such linguistic virtuosity, rather than wildlife. This is even more evident – but technically more relevant to Sale – in his free and frequent references to earlier literatures. Factoring in that his is poetry written much later (of my generation rather than Sale’s), the language applied to Drew’s own imaginings takes on ‘thickets’ of Joycean, Poundian ‘encyclopaedic’ allusiveness – even more than Sale’s. Again the tone is political, and the allusions grenades. Take the Modernist-echoing opening of ‘THROUGH THE BUY-OUT JARGON’:

I am virus and soul corp, hug me to this unreal



viral city which had not thought, death undone, so  
short term many fun-funding were this captive class;

– where the reference to Dante’s *Inferno*, via *The Wasteland*, is deliberately garbled – à la *Ulysses* – into the strangest, amoral business-speak – presumably to suggest a corrupt world in which money might even ‘undo death’. So Milne’s subject seems the lampooning of capitalism, or critiquing it via Postmodern meta-referencing, than, say, in dunes or tree life.

Sale – in obvious contrast to a ‘formalist’ poet like Milne – is interested in the birds themselves, rather than socio-political or meta-literary questions: ‘first-wave eco-critical’, perhaps. He too may have been ‘green’ in radical left-wing political affiliation far before it gained the mainstream acceptance it has today; as a socialist espousing a long-standing anti-industrial, pro-rural sensibility, and because he said so: ‘preaching to the converted’ he wrote of a Green Party politician offering leaflets. In his final poems, including *Birch* and *Cypress*, the interacting creatures they host are far more important as living embodiments well beyond human politics.<sup>299</sup>

➤ **And Eco-Baroque...**

Questions of poetic quality aside, the interesting point of comparison with Sale may well lie in his very varied – including Baroque – ranges of allusion, wordplay – and sheer inventive vivacity of expression. Both Sale and Milne borrow from Eliot, who borrows from throughout literature. But late-Sale is far less interested in the fractured, polemical syntax of Modernist works such as the *Cantos*, than in adopting other, much earlier kinds of poetics.

Whether or not he was aware of emerging ‘eco-poetic’ eddies, the final comparative analyses have revealed other kinds of like-minded thinking. The focus is clear enough: depiction – albeit in bewilderingly complex ways – of specific aspects of nature: geometrical nettle formations, pondering why only some birds feed upside down, *a* bridge’s reflection in water, *a* willow, the frenzy of Tits feeding on *a* Birch, or multiple habitants in *a* Cypress tree. Never a Christian, or Existentialist, symbol in literal view; nor a solipsistic meta-reference to the craft of the person writing a poem about nature.

As noted earlier, various kinds of ‘baroque’ poetic language suggest a gradual retrenchment from later contemporary influences. This would seem to reflect Sale becoming more, not less, experimental in finding new metaphors odder/older/*stranger* phrasing – in order to express something – *anything* substantive – of the *rich* power of nature. In this sense specifically, his technical mindset is not so far from Milne’s – but

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<sup>299</sup> SL, *ibid.*

with a completely different trajectory. Sale's became a long-lined, blank-versed – and ingeniously metaphorical, riddling, playful – verse line, and he makes up his own rules for getting about the resulting “labyrinth”: all the while explicitly avoiding ‘homogeneity’, but all in the service of expressing something of the nature of these ‘living things’.<sup>300</sup>

Indeed, as both Cypress and Birch poems demonstrate, it is precisely a free-ranging imagination – not reason – that is primarily appealed to in the labyrinth of Sale's anarchic conceits. The perceptions they may evoke in us concerning their cosmic sources matter much more than stricter reason. As he made clear to I.A. Richards at the very time he was inventing this kind of poetic language, he was concerned with ‘creating a form of life rather than describing it’.<sup>301</sup>

We have also seen how. ‘Great Creating’ – but also Destructive – ‘Nature’ sparked Sale into the anarchic metaphors that jolt a whole new way of seeing the natural objects we urbanites invariably take completely for granted – things he writes we rarely even notice: this of a nettle: ‘The thing invisible is all we see’. And so all those apparently Shakespearian, free-flowing analogies, puns, stresses, spacings, lack of punctuation, make up a wild consistency of mimetic sound and imagery attempting to make the reader feel – momentarily – part of the life forms living in both Birch and Cypress.<sup>302</sup>

### ➤ And Eco-Pastoral...

We heard Vendler cite Elizabeth Bishop on the idea of some poems changing one's view of aspects of reality. Again, if ‘Modernist:Baroque’ technical twists help the reading of Sale's subjects, his rather original view of Nature may also become clearer. As such it may even be the case that poets – possible early Eco-poets such as Sale – turn out also to be ‘post-Pastoral’: new representatives of the old Pastoral tradition, in their re-inventing a new, umbilical, forensically-observed connection between humans and other life-forms.<sup>303</sup>

In this more general sense there may then even be a case, in some future thesis, for seeing at least some ‘Eco-poetry’ as the direct cultural successor to Pastoral poetry – especially since even the editors of the definitive Pastoral anthology in Sale's day refused ‘to take this anthology much beyond Clare’. This was simply because ‘there are no shepherds left’: the pastoral Western world is no longer distinguishable from the urban, in terms of majority lifestyles; and even writers like Hardy (et al) ring its passing rather than celebrating something thriving.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Cf. letter to Andrew Cozens cited above: 31<sup>st</sup> October 1975 **SL** & **Appendix 1** *ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> Letter 18<sup>th</sup> April 1979 in **SL** – only five months before Richards died.

<sup>302</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.* **SP**, vii.

<sup>304</sup> *Penguin Book of Pastoral Verse* – *passim*.

Even in this fleeting overview, it is clear that Sale's tree poems are nothing like 'pastoral' elegies to nature – or even Hardy's or Thomas's or Hopkins' or Yeats' nostalgic re-visitations – even though these two, on one level, are also 'simply' about trees. This was the loss of a world the most influential philosophers, such as Marx – though also Engels, Morris *et al* – sincerely rued: capitalist industrialisation leading – in later eco-critical theory, for example – straight towards agri-tech, combine harvesters, lone-farmer suicides. Modernist rural dissociation, in another guise, perhaps – whether or not, hardly a cause for a poetic celebration of nature, however defined.<sup>305</sup>

But here too there is a 'clue-thread'. Approached biographically, older and stronger 'socialist-anti-urbanising' principles Sale generally approved: even his late-life bemoaning of motorways gouged deep beyond his Girton doorstep were always laconic. I recall that he was in no way nostalgically-archaic in his 'ruralism' – as we have begun to see, quite unlike Wordsworth, Thomas or Eliot.

Sale's celebration of 'living things' chimed with a contrary kind of Green politics at an auspicious time. Gifford certainly was writing about nature poetry having begun to 'arrive' when Sale was still alive.<sup>306</sup> Perhaps the verse that resulted may one day prove a radical kind of Eco-poetry, for a new 'Pastoral' age – one essentially focussed on the finest, even quantum, details of living forms, as well as their environment – up to and including the Cosmos.<sup>307</sup>

➤ **With intricate eco-genetics...**

Whether or not, a vital 'clue' to Sale's other, completely-unexplored, verse may lie in the Realist conviction of the subject matter, married to the linguistic trickery. In other words, his direct observation of the inherent power, grace and 'barminess' (in mere human terms) of other living forms of nature, similarly conveyed in anarchic metaphors – with loosened syntax, puns, wordplays, sound-plays, and made-up words.

But genetic analysis here has uncovered samples, at least, of the *care* Sale took in whole sets of draft-clues in 'Cupressus' and 'Birch Hats'. This has also shown how he developed verse lines: in 'gradual

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.* pp.427-433.

<sup>306</sup> *Green Voices, ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> On politics against industrialisation, I remember Sale commenting on Wordsworth decrying 'urbanisation' in the Lakes – despite his cult-poet status encouraging it. Cf. also *William Wordsworth and Modern Travel: Railways, Motorcars and the Lake District, 1830-1940*, Saeko Yoshikawa – and *passim*. Sale approved radical Chartists, and Anarchists such as William Morris, for promoting craftsmanship over sweatshops. In his own lifetime, he moved away from writing nostalgic poems about his rural upbringing in Willenhall, Notts, to praising Bob Copper (*Early one Morning* etc.) for his entirely unsentimental portraits of his. On motorways bisecting Girton, and 'infants flying through the air', he wrote to Robin Hill on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1978:

My daily tramp is made a little more hazardous by a relief road which bisects the village from below. The bridge itself seems sound enough: the hazards are from the winds which whip up, even faster than the fast lane, along the brand new valley & threaten not only one's hat but one's footing. I imagine infants flying through the air & landing in Histon, in summer, or Bedford, in winter, according as the wind is S or N.

On an enduring sentimental 'pastoralism', even T.S. Eliot let himself be photographed very awkwardly holding a loaf of homemade bread outside an English cottage. This was a professed urbanite advocating 'half the population...living rurally'. Cf. cover photograph of *T.S. Eliot and Organicism*, and *passim*.

evolvement... and enveloped them for future consideration', *through* such painstaking re-drafting. And his letters showed how this was, genuinely, for the poem's sake far more than any vague nod to posterity.

Fortuitously, the 'genetics' he preserved, also turn out to help re-thread Sale's clews of understanding. Later drafts are very deliberately worked out of a complex of material; these then rely on 'swift, tranced', 'half-conscious' readings. And all this requires a careful reading of the final version; but also a Shakespearian insouciance to over-forensic, over-rational analyses.

The particular 'genetics' of Cypress and Birch poems show how Sale requires each reader to disentangle the threads, and unknot the metaphors, for themselves; and in so doing invites arcane ways of sensing, re-imagining, how much there is to venerate in what he called 'the daily miracle of life'. In this sense, the developing labyrinth of eddying, mimetic words may possibly also turn out to reinforce as well as reveal the concentrated focus and expression of one of the earliest of Eco-poets.<sup>308</sup>

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One final caveat: much of the preceding presumes Sale possessing a potential readership – let alone an eco-friendly one. Most of the mature verse produced from c.1945 till he died in 2000 – remains resolutely dense, and he knew barely resonated in his lifetime; let alone now none of it remains in print. I hope to have suggested Sale's late tree verse as part of a substantial body of poetry that may merit more attention – and some new readers.

Might Eco-poetry at least resonate a little more now it has become politically mainstream? Sale's verse might suggest 'yes', but provided Eco-poets devise distinctive and compelling ways of expressing the majesty at threat. His remaining, ruggedly-obsessive poems may one day reveal their 'celebration' of nature, and in the radical versions of traditional genres Helen Vendler was the first to note: 'the hymn, the elegy, the colloquy'. Nature teased, in supra-human terms and images, by an old man in awe of its anarchies may one day become clearer and more charming. If so, it will be *because* and not despite the 'Modernist: Baroque' hybrid form Arthur Sale was developing to laud strange riches living in two trees.

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*Word count 47,990*

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<sup>308</sup> I have throughout been taking Terry Gifford's narrative definition of the theme of nature poetry having begun to 'arrive' c.1995, when he wrote *Green Voices* (cf. again, Chapter 1 *passim*); especially as this subsumes and subsume so many twentieth century thinkers and poets, with elegant concision.

## Appendices & Bibliography

### Appendix 1: Sale's view of poetry – extracts from known correspondence

Quotations from Sale's writings have been incorporated throughout this study. A sample is grouped here, in relevant categories, as a resource for further studies, as well as to demonstrate recurring preoccupations: of subject, form and prosody. The quotations are grouped according to key themes, then chronologically. Extracts from Sale's *Letters* (SL) form the main source. These often directly reflected his thinking while composing a particular poem (cf. titles in brackets following relevant quotations) – while writing to other correspondents about exactly the same process. They necessarily reflect particular as well as general problems of composition, and also (increasingly, as time goes on) reveal Sale's long-gestating 'poetic theory'.

The process of gathering these extracts has proved highly informative concerning Sale's developing theories about poetry and nature. Assembled comments scattered over sixty years (since the first extant letter to Henry Moore in 1942) reveal a remarkable consistency: growing refinement of his view of Nature, an early profession to blank verse, increasing fascination with prolix imagery, playfulness with sound effects, puns – all more or less present from the very start.

Sifting through Sale's writing gives a strong impression of his simply enjoying – i.e. for its own sake - his main and recurring subjects: nature; poetry; and how to write poetry. Whatever their purpose in posterity, clues in the letters also sometimes corroborate semantic ideas and technical features in individual poems, produced – and mulled over in multiple letters – at the same time.

Assembled so, these comments may give the illusion of Sale laying down a breadcrumb 'posterity trail' of ideas about writing. He could hardly have predicted – nor, typically, would claim to approve – such an undertaking. A mosaic 'verse manifesto' could hardly have been predicted from throwaway comments written to correspondents living as far apart as England, Canada and Australia, and over sixty years.

It seems much more likely Sale simply pursued the subjects that enthralled him as a human being, and which he knew would be – at least the very least – tolerated by friendly correspondents. After all, he was genuinely touched when pupils showed the slightest interest in his poetry – let alone did anything about.

As the comments below argue, Arthur Sale clearly preferred fate as a mechanism for art – just not in place of writing art down, as carefully as possible, and at every possible opportunity.

## *On the force of poetry*

It's all very derivative, lacking in any poetic force or fixity.<sup>309</sup>

All I have done to redeem myself is to look at Vol. 2 of the reproductions - & even that without the care it requires, but with enough to feel the pull of a different & better world moving at a distance of a few light years only.<sup>310</sup>

Without the poetry they [*Edward Thomas's letters*] would reveal him as the most insufferable & conceited retailer of crosses we all have to bear: how dare he think his were more interesting than ours that he should moan about them in every letter? Yet their distillation is the distinctive & sustaining note of his poetry, rather as (according to Melville) fragrant ambergris is the whale's indigestion materialised. Edward's ghost-writer [*sic. R. George Thomas, Edward Thomas: A Portrait, OUP 1985*] notes many passages from the prose works which abandon the requirements of their commissioning & anticipate the poems. *He* cites them for the resemblance, but what they do show me is how inadequate his prose is to reveal the transformation of mundanity into vision: the prose is full of boring abstractions – mystery, eternal etc. The verse *is* mystery, etc.<sup>311</sup>

John Mole read, & gave the hinterland of, some of his poems to a revived Magdalene literary society (last heard of in John Winter's day). Very impressive, I found – natural, unforced, frank & the opposite of the usual preciousness & artiness of such enterprises. I wept over one poem about his father – not unnoticed, I am told: at least they know now that literature is not merely something one is examined in, & that one can weep over it & not merely over students' essays...<sup>312</sup>

Helen [*Vendler*] somewhere says it is as an exhibition of a stored mind that I have claims to interest, which pleases me as much as it surprises me, but the miscellany [*SP*] is not meant to instruct.<sup>313</sup>

Your travels have doubtless yielded verse – which I have not been privileged to see. I have neither travelled nor versified – except at the limit of my travels – the garden gate (more or less), I felt required to bear witness to an unprecedented statement of the glory of life, before it withdrew, by the great tapestry

of scarlet-trumpet honeysuckle...<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> John Simpson recalling Sale talking about Ralph Hodgson, a Georgian poet, a copy of whose verse Sale had given him (John Simpson, *Foreword* to *SL*).

<sup>310</sup> To Henry Moore, 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1956 *SL* p.3.

<sup>311</sup> To John Mole, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1987 *SL* p.37

<sup>312</sup> To John Winter & Elizabeth Bennett, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1989 *SL* p.79. Mole told me the poem was *A Different Dream*.

<sup>313</sup> To Nick Blyth, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1996 *SL* p.107

<sup>314</sup> To Nick Drake, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1997 *SL* p.54

*Poetic complexity (& obscurity); the problem of modern poetry*

Bevis asks me over to Chester...to record on metal one or two of the Clare Bridge verses... He has idea of illustrating them & also of how to save me from learning to write backwards – though I told him that, as with Wm Blake, the poems themselves, being ahead in that perverse condition, would automatically come right on the plates.<sup>315</sup>

I am in fact, in my belated wisdom, almost entirely indifferent to my own concerns: c'dn't possibly write another *Under the War*. My appreciation by compensation reaches out – more to things than to people, I fear – living things I had always taken for granted. But, as if to keep the balance comically even, any verses I make about such “public” objects as bindweed & thistles are thought to be incomprehensible – or I should say even more obscure than *Under the War*. And, paradox outside paradox, objects like Clare Bridge, which I did celebrate for what it meant to me in the shattering years of the war, I see stripped of idolatry thirty years later.<sup>316</sup>

I like best the one about the stone – partly (I fear) from an affinity in conceits with a poem of my own about pebbles, the strange markings on some of which I see as classifications of ultimate formulas. God is confused about his creation and scribbles possible solutions on chunks or (coffee) tables of stone in different signs & languages & chucks them into the sea hoping that after centuries of rubbing off on each other in the tidal rhythm, a clear & simplified answer or two will be there for the finding.<sup>317</sup>

One understands Eliot's defeatism, which is also essential to what distinguishes poetry from prose, but I find it more impressive than his final positivism: the consort dance [*in 'The Four Quartets'*] seems too sprightly & simplistic after all the searching into the darkness of language [*cf. The Wasteland etc.*]. You avoid these depths in your appreciation of what they *can* do & *are*, & so much nearer to Edward Thomas's eulogy. The danger (I discussed this with I.A. Richards, who in his humility as a poet, as against his confidence as a critic, felt that words chose him, not vice versa) that one plays into the hands of the structuralists, who make one at the mercy of words: one writes about writing. And Thomas himself says “will you choose me, you English words, Sometimes?”... But this is writing as a practitioner, as a painter with his palette, ignoring the resultant, which is the reader's concern.<sup>318</sup>

...I think J.E.S. [*Prof. John Stevens – Sale's first boss*] must have misconstrued a facetious remark of mine into an attributable criticism. I said that my verse was so difficult in procedure that it needed all possible space *between* lines so that the fagged brain could rest before venturing on the next line.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> To Bob Chamberlain, 13<sup>th</sup> January 1976 **SL** p.7.

<sup>316</sup> To Isabel Wolff, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, **SL** p.61

<sup>317</sup> To Robert Rickard, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1989 **SL** p.88. Comments on *The Stone*, by Terence Hards, *As it Was* (Seizin - Heinemann (1964); Hards had been feted by Robert Graves, and RR sought Sale's opinion of his verse.)

<sup>318</sup> To Alex Moffett, 5<sup>th</sup> April 1989 **SL** pp.102-3

<sup>319</sup> To John Winter and Elizabeth Bennett, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1990 **SL** p.80

As for poetry it is clearly not the right representative for the age, partly because it gives in inertly to the parlous state of the age instead of trying to make a genuine creation in opposition to the collapse of language etc. (as Yeats did). Which means that anyone can be a poet, since there are no criteria, no respect for the essential creative act: the poetry is like the three bits of arbitrarily-arranged wood which, I am told, has a place of dishonour in the Tate. So its prevalence is a symptom of the complete breakdown of the age.<sup>320</sup>

I like to think each item is explicable in the way it is used, the part it plays, in the poem itself: e.g. all the knowledge of a Daniel Lambert the poem needs is that he was so heavy he could/[n't] stand up: he is sufficiently created to make (or illustrate) a contrast attractively – I think you would have similar troubles with say, Milton (in allusion), or *The Winter's Tale* (in indirectness of style). Odious comparisons, I know... Graceless & ungrateful it must seem, but I think that (1) an interested reader should be prepared to take time to puzzle things out – things that are parts of the nature of the poem, & (2) as Ivor Richards insisted, time should be taken over meaning: poetry lends itself in the sensuous aspects to swift tranced reading, with mind mostly in abeyance, but in most cases its meaning does mean to its creator – the core in fact, though one doesn't usually read it primarily for its intellectual content in the raw. So it is a brake on seduction, or should be, though it is my experience that at all levels, the reader comes to an alarmed full stop to questions about meaning -resentment, even, sometimes. I must avoid this last by an affectionate conclusion -

ever yours                      Arthur<sup>321</sup>

*[Of Shakespeare's Sonnets]*...I feel in my bones I am reluctantly right when I can't make some of them jump off the page into the realm of real poetry, but staying accomplished five finger (six, I willingly grant him) exercises as practised in the education of young aspirants of his time. Donne, on the other hand, can be said (& was said by his admirer, Ben Jonson) to have the opposite fault – too much trampoline.<sup>322</sup>

***Reluctance to publish; lack of ambition; writing for its own sake etc.***

What I came actually to appreciate, after initially adverse reflection, was that they [*colleagues and former students, publishing Ambages to celebrate Sale's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday*] had felt impelled to over-rule the veto they knew I wd. Have imposed *ab ovo* ...through their affectionate sense of propriety... my only encouragement of the supposed Magdalene nest of singing birds was to discourage anyone from showing me their verse – I have always felt that, at that stage, an undergraduate poet shd. be judged by his peers (& ready they are to do it!) not by his judges. Nor has anyone of them seen any of the salic oeuvre: no encouragement by example. Rd. Francis, I hear, thought there shd. have been instead of *Ambages* an

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<sup>320</sup> To Robert Rickard, 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1991 **SL** p.90

<sup>321</sup> To Nick Blyth, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1996 **SL** p.107

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. 12<sup>th</sup> March 1998 **SL** p.108



ambageous volume by the centenarian [=AS] & I think there is a wish to have a sister libel of a few select verses, without prejudice to a future trade edition.<sup>323</sup>

I think I have told you that the Hutch... has returned one of my two M.S. with leave to hawk around: a full year after the first warning, but I was happy to have it in deepfreeze...I wonder if you cd. send round the address of your friend the “individual” publisher...<sup>324</sup>

I think you are doing fine. Knowing things enriches, quite apart from providing or not providing riches. I am fairly happy on a lifelong no-career – happier, I am sure, because less knocked about & “public” than I wd. have been as a careerist. People can’t understand why I have turned down offers to lecture, write, review, etc. books, or believe me when I say that had I wanted such things I wd. have done them long ago. Disinterestedness, doing not for promotion or money or both, are lost concepts.<sup>325</sup>

I am very much against prizes & laureateships: they seem to be largely fodder for newsmen & for those who don’t read books. Bad for participants too... If one doesn’t write for writing’s sake, the arts are not being served.<sup>326</sup>

Will Stone of Stanford...has the risible notion of depositing my correspondence of thirty years in the archives “for the benefit of some future researcher” (into what? ...So, unless I forbid him, there is a project in store for you, when you are short of a better one, for no-one could spot the allusions as well as you, from old practice & countless Chelsea buns. Are there such in Japan?<sup>327</sup>

...it is years & years since I took the PhD supervision seriously (my last full-time student... was the fine fellow who has so dedicatedly and wilfully published some of my verses in Tasmania, intendedly on a hand-press but actually, through other pressures, desk-top or something like: luckily Bevis [*Sale’s younger artist son*] has done a fine cover design, I am quite happy to have everything made for love...<sup>328</sup>

As you know & gratifyingly appreciate, I write for the sake of the poem itself – what its subject & the means of rendering it seems to derive. I scarcely write it for my own pleasure, though I like the satisfaction of completion, of feeling I have done all I can. But then I have finished. If a few friends & peers come across it & find it worth looking at, then I am pleased, it is now their poem & they may well see it differently, in interpretation and in effect & in centre: perfectly valid & acceptable. I don’t think of publishers & what they see as marketable. You have so wonderfully & dedicatedly taken on that dimension [*publishing SP in 1999*], which is not there for me & so , not in the poems: I imagine they would be very different if concessions were integral to their completion... But I am getting nowhere. I

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<sup>323</sup> To Alan Rusbridger, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1981 **SL** p.46

<sup>324</sup> To Richard Lockett, 1981 **SL** p.49

<sup>325</sup> To Jo & Richard Francis, 6<sup>th</sup> July 1980 **SL** p.58.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid. 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1985, **SL** p.59. Cf. also p.70, Sale praising Feynman’s contempt for (his own Nobel) Prize(s).

<sup>327</sup> To John Constable, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1990 **SL** p.72.

<sup>328</sup> This was **ScP**, ed. Dr. John Winter, Hobart Press (1990). To Richard Verity, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1990 **SL** p.76.

love you for what you are doing & gladly go as far as I can to help you in what I had no thought of doing, myself.<sup>329</sup>

### ***Poetic solipsism & narcissism***

I am interested in the problem of solipsism because it is the great danger of the poet (why shd. he think *his* emotions are important enough to have a claim on other people, with the self-same emotions? He hasn't, unless he can find images etc. for them which *are* interesting); but it shd. be the last danger of a novelist.<sup>330</sup>

...almost all [*poems sent via an undergraduate*] still at the Narcissistic stage that, I suppose, all poets have to go through... I too am narcissus & first person but I wd like to distinguish. They are interested in their own emotions, plight, condition & other private belongings: *I* am interested in giving these belongings a life outside their own small & undistinguished & undistinctive selves: i.e. making something out of them that is (hopefully) rich as well as strange. That doesn't mean I am better: they may succeed & I may fail, leaving the score even. But I think I wd break the homogeneity, & if I offered you something as indulgent or self important as t'others, I think it wd be something I wdn't like to be known by.<sup>331</sup>

...I am in fact, in my belated wisdom, almost entirely indifferent to my own concerns: cnd't possibly write another *Under the War*.<sup>332</sup>

### ***Poetic subjects: nature; imagery & allusions***

...the extraordinary freshness of the colouring with which he [*Henry Moore*]...made bearable his horrors...the colouring matches the imaginative strangeness of his, & your, visions.<sup>333</sup>

...I don't find my own situation of poetic interest or, if at all, in the objects that attract me.<sup>334</sup>

I cd.n't believe it, at first (like those thoroughly dead backgrounds in Surrealist pictures!)...But wasn't it beautiful (colours too – pink and blues)!<sup>335</sup>

Yes, I'm sure I do load every drift of meaning with ore: I think poetry is not statement though it usually embodies statement. We look for the clew of statement to guide us through the thickets of metaphor & image & perhaps are too relieved to come across an occasional recognisable stretch of twine.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> To Nick Blyth, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1996 **SL** p.107

<sup>330</sup> To John Herdman (novelist), 16<sup>th</sup> September 1974 **SL** p.23.

<sup>331</sup> To Andrew Cozens 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1975 **SL**, p.30

<sup>332</sup> To Isabel Wolff, 11<sup>th</sup> September, 1985, **SL** p.61

<sup>333</sup> On Moore's pictures exhibited in wartime London. Letter to the artist, 11<sup>th</sup> September 1942 (**SL** p.1).

<sup>334</sup> To John Mole, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1994 **SL** p.41

<sup>335</sup> On London bomb damage.

<sup>336</sup> To John Mole, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986 **SL**, p36

I remember finding my views on modern (non) tragedy in George [Steiner]'s first book - & my imagistic style, too – and not liking either one little bit.<sup>337</sup>

Of immediate excitement (2 a.m.+) has been, & is, the discovery of leaf symbolism in Richard's incredibly researched account of Emerson...I have always funk'd reading in more than was required of the great man, in whom I saw little but a profusion of rich images with no more structure than sweets in a tall glass jar. I can see I should have reversed it... in particular the marvellous role of the leaf in the universe: its correspondence with my own exploratory & diffident findings in several poems, from my beginnings to my poetic conclusions (Darby & Joan). In the small hours, at any rate, I felt less alone in the universe, rightly or wrongly hardly mattered, thanks to Waldo, & friends, & so his so unexpected & leaf-sent expositor, R.F.<sup>338</sup>

...As they do not count  
nor does your verse, you say,  
and so, recant  
your symbol. Mine I can yes, I  
do, your world's I can't.<sup>339</sup>

...(inadequate for this challenge at the best of times). I tried to turn borrowing from a weakness & a defeat, into an asset. But, to avoid deceit, I supplied my sources (Milton, for *refusing* to equate “woodbine” with “honeysuckle”). Helen Vendler sees these, all indulgently, as echoes.<sup>340</sup>

To my great delight, a load of (very dubious) topsoil that was supposed to mop up the pond that collects every winter near the front gate...has yielded quite a crop of heartsease...they shine even in the ultimate comparison – with their garden descendants, the pansies – but also in my memory, for I have seen none since as a boy I used to lift them from a pleasant railway cutting... They have for me that miniature magnificence, & mystery, & peeps into the cosmic, that you find in jewels & in Lawn Tennyson.<sup>341</sup>

I hope you didn't return home to the task of clearing and sawing fallen trees. My own wilderness was increased only by a secondary branch of the willow, which blocked the fairway. But, for the first time, I felt some alarm as I squirmed up the mighty & many branches, to realise that they too must severally smash down, & with less concern... There is a frightening weight & bulk up there, suspended above our

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<sup>337</sup> Ibid. 8<sup>th</sup> January 1999, p.42

<sup>338</sup> To Richard & Jo Francis, Undated [2000] **SL** p.60

<sup>339</sup> In **UW**, p.19.

<sup>340</sup> About *Quite overcanopied with precious woodbine*; To Nick Drake, 12<sup>th</sup> October

<sup>341</sup> To Monty Don, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1981, **SL** P.66

squat heads. I have love-hate relationships with the tree but I had never before considered it in that fearsome way.<sup>342</sup>

...even Pope...accused him [*Milton*] of arguing like a “school divine”: i.e. a person who crossed faith with the paganism of Aristotle & so increased the number of permutations and combinations [*of God(s)*] possible. (I am reminded of my elder grand-daughter, who once began to count in order to settle the hash of number & who, when she got to forty odd, said in alarm, “Hey, when does this thing stop?”)

I think it is only natural we find the universe wonderful & mysterious & slightly larger than we are...Now the pathetic inadequacy of that comforting reassurance is only too obvious. My favourite quantum physicist, George Feynman (nice modest name), says there is no explanation: finality recedes the more we know about the minutiae (rather even than the infinitudes – he thinks the laws are different: alas poor unifying Einstein & almost-there Hawkings...)<sup>343</sup>

...In the Beginning there was unity. A Buddhist friend of ours had reinvigorated my feelings for (one has to use clichés) the inherent wonders in nature...But then my fascination shifted to the underside of the wonders - Great Destructive Nature, as against Great Creating Nature (these clichés)...<sup>344</sup>

One of my own limitations as a fellow-poet is that I cannot find poetic equivalents for pure emotion: I have to hold things off & keep cool, & more & more I come to appreciate natural objects ~ in verse, that is, for at the same time I more & more marvel that human beings, no different otherwise from ourselves can create such marvelous [*sic*] poems & pictures & above all, “sounds & sweet airs that give delight & hurt not”.<sup>345</sup>

...a sequence, spread out over W.W.2, about Clare Bridge (which – the bridge – kept me sane during that war)... was to appear as a contrast to the bungalow sequence on 2 High St. in *Under the War*, but which was inexplicably (as so much else in that volume) substituted by a different group called “Afternoons”...

By the way, my faith in the bridge was undermined, many years later, by the craftsman who reconstituted it, stone by stone, to save its disintegration: he showed me that it was structurally a fake, however satisfying artistically... Over the year or two he was working on the bridge I caught several colds listening to his lore, but it was well worth it, & much later, the experience produced the poem you so kindly computerised for me.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> To John Constable, Summer 1986, **SL** p.68

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, p.70

<sup>344</sup> To John Winter and Elizabeth Bennett, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1988 **SL** p.79.

<sup>345</sup> To Alex Moffett 30<sup>th</sup> May 1990 **SL** p.104

<sup>346</sup> To Richard Verity, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1993 **SL** pp.77-8. The poem was ‘The Bridge Re-Building’, in **SP**, pp.17-19 (and also in *The Bridge*, privately published by Verity as a tribute to his old teacher. (See also **SL**, p.61: ‘Clare Bridge, I see stripped of idolatry thirty years later’, but also Vendler’s Foreword to **SP**, which realises Sale’s own reassuring sense of the bridge as a kind of toy, ‘in smallness/larger than all gods and life’ (*xii*).

I hope, wherever you are, you are keeping warm & dry & floodless. But at the moment there is spring sunshine & snowdrops & aconites. The willow has fostered primroses at its base to indicate its reformed intentions. Penny's not-merely-amused comment that it is my third child (preferably a girl) suggested a poem which I will send you when I have a copy, for you to tell me that, unlike Carey [*Peter, Australian novelist*], it isn't even in the swim.<sup>347</sup>

### ***Poetic Starts & Ends***

I notice he has most worry about his (poetic) middles. Is that your experience? Openings are mine. Finding a way into a subject (through, shall we say, an analogy) often leads me right out of it and it is frantic effort to get back on course, or, rather, to *begin* the course. Endings are unknown until they arrive, as, however, they usually do. Which is for me the best part of the poem - *because* unknown till there.

### ***Avoiding poetry - then wrestling with drafts***

Taking on a poem is Question No 1 for me. Something dimly suggests itself – and I run a mile, try to forget it (sleeping on it is the easiest, for I may wake with it transformed into the incoherence of a dream). But if *it* won't go away, *I* still do, out of premonition of the trouble that lies ahead – endless revisions of a tiny section rather than movement forward. But when it is in some sort of shape, there is real pleasure in improvement (of single words, even) refinement, new vistas, new connections, until I have the last word – *finito!*<sup>348</sup>

Of course I really am a great Darwinist, but where he seems extreme I always attribute it to the Darwinians (“Survival of the fittest”, e.g. usually interpreted as “strongest”, whereas his point is that it is the freak, the sport, the weakling that only make the crucial adaptation to altered conditions). The verses themselves may be an example: pigeon-holed years ago (“Elm” and “White Gate” that John Mole said meant so much to him), chanced on by Penny & something exceptional noticed & the whole revised by the warmth of her smiles.<sup>349</sup>

### ***Rhythm / Metre / Gaps between words***

A Swedish lady once asked me to read some Whitman aloud & she, following the text painfully, kept accusing me of skipping. I told her that it was the way to read Barbaric Yawp & that Walt would have approved.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> To Mike Hollington, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1994 **SL** p.87

<sup>348</sup> To John Mole, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1999 **SL** p.42

<sup>349</sup> To Richard Luckett, undated (but after 1990) **SL**, p.51.

<sup>350</sup> To Andrew Cozens (publisher of Sale's *Songs of Willow*), 10<sup>th</sup> February 1978 **SL**, p.31

Limits, departures from, rhythmic restrains, seem to me very important in enforcing that compressed & inter-associational demand on language that produces awe for its resources & its power of creating a form of life rather than describing it, talking round it...<sup>351</sup>

Have I made you worry about your short lines? I am doubtless prejudiced by so much tonelessness in the modern recourse to them, particularly among my poetic friends: *you* are the master of the contemporary scene & so in a position to contradict me. But when I think of the delicate but sure rhythms of the 17c. practitioners of brevity - ! ...for me there is always this danger in poetic mimesis: it still can't be literal; it *must* be contained within the *created* world of the verse.<sup>352</sup>

My own obscurity is largely an absence of punctuation which in theory *facilitates* poetic communication. Punctuation enforces prose meaning but poetry overrides that, unconsciously or not, establishing relations between phrases above their grammatical "logic".

I like to help the process of association by removing obstacles to it ... But I can see that, as I rely too much on parenthesis & that is difficult to convey as a distinct entity, there are objections to the method. (I was heartened to read, in the latest edition of Ed. Thomas's poems that he too used spaces – whether graded, like mine, I don't know – but that it was not found practicable *in print*.)

Well, we shall see, for some friends in the antipodes asked to print a fascicle of my verse on their handpress. I rather took to the idea & asked if they shd.n't be printed upside down also.

Perhaps I shd. present one in the usual way, to see if the obscurity disappears with the reimposition of a dominant prose meaning.<sup>353</sup>

Rd. Luckett & John Mole (who has own private press & so was consulted) were quite happy about the absence of serifs [*sans serif font chosen for ScP*]: if one accepts the mystique of typography one dare almost say their absence helps the intended ease of associative communication, the overriding of sense-syntax for flowing & overlapping linkage & interaction of phrasing that poetry, largely unconsciously, has (in my view) that spacing, instead of limiting punctuation, is intended itself to facilitate...<sup>354</sup>

I know there are rhythms of all sizes and shapes and inter-relations and that indefinite variety can produce more riches than ordinary blank verse, say (my only Puritanical vehicle), but where is the pattern to which they must refer, if they are to have the essential of rhythm? Ask Elisabeth. Ask Ben [*the correspondent's small children*], and I will abide by their basics of answer.<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> To I A Richards, 18<sup>th</sup> April 1979 **SL**, p.11

<sup>352</sup> To John Mole – then 'London Poet' – 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1986 **SL** p.36

<sup>353</sup> To Alex Moffett<sup>h</sup> April 1989 **SL** p.103

<sup>354</sup> To John Winter and Elizabeth Bennett, 9<sup>th</sup> January 1990 **SL** p.80

<sup>355</sup> To Robert Rickard, responding to free verse sent for comment. Undated **SL**, p.96.

He [*Seamus Heaney, taken to meet Sale, by Helen Vendler*] proved free & easy & with a twinkle in his eye & he did not blanch when I said I didn't think much of modern poetry, his own included. He said he was about to translate *Beowulf* & we discussed Anglo-Saxon prosody, & how to prevent the last foot of each line from falling away for lack of alliteration in the original, which is quite subtle with its half-stresses (unexpected delicacies)...<sup>356</sup>

Americans do find an intrinsic quality in metrical forms apparently independently of the words, and a poet will say "I am about to write a sonnet", which makes him suspect to us, though poetic exercises were, it seems, part of Tudor genteel education. But it can also be true that a metrical form can be a product of its period (or even a single poet), Tudor drama seized on blank verse as its universal medium on the strength of a few trial bits not connected with drama (contrast French drama?). That was a truly remarkable recognition, a fervent raid and monopolising of the form as made for it...<sup>357</sup>

### *Satire & humour*

Lampoons have their rights but, to please, they must have the saving grace of wit... the *verve* that carries the Butlers & the Savages out of abuse into the pleasure that art can give to the negative emotions of hate, contempt, condemnation etc. In a different form, that of far more emotionally committed satire, there is a difference between Sassoon's raw indignation & naked examples and Owen's (at his best) transmutations of these into art. Sassoon is timely but not timeless.

Prosodically I can see that you [*in JC's own satires*] deliberate with the 17-18c. awkward squad rather than with the brocaded duellists like Dryden & Pope & Prior & Gay. But here too, their heel trippings & off rhymes are inventive & light-hearted: virtue is made out of a parade of comic incompetence (as with a circus clown): Byron, indeed, turned all the notorious faults of this straight verse – including all his own posturings as "the Byronic hero" – into glorious exhibitions of the comic. (*To John Constable, Summer 1986*)<sup>358</sup>

I was annoyed at the time by its omission [*last Bridge poem, from UW*] but the cold eye of later years that noted its stodginess tells me that was probably a blessing in disguise.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> To Will Stone, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1995 **SL** p.99 Sale had translated Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic poetry pre-war.

<sup>357</sup> To Nick Blyth date unknown **SL** pp.108-9

<sup>358</sup> To John Constable, Summer 1986, **SL** p.67

<sup>359</sup> To Isabel Wolff 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1986, **SL** p.62

## Appendix 2: avenues for further research

There is a large body of Sale's nature poems that remains unexplored. All are out of print, and Sale's extensive drafts totally unexplored, since their writer laboured over them, assiduously, sometimes for decades. His correspondence, and his criticism, have been referred to but barely touched on in their own right, in this study.

There remain tantalising clues regarding his relationship with his own critical contemporaries, particularly Anarchists like Herbert Read, Surrealists, his friend Henry Moore, and later admired colleague I.A. Richards; also: both Leavises, T.S. Eliot, and John Crowe Ransom.

University collections of Sale's papers have been traced to Nottingham, Ottawa, Stanford and Santa Cruz; correspondence with Henry Moore is in the Imperial War Museum.

Surviving family interviewed to date include the journalist Jonathan Sale, artist Bevis Sale, and his widow, Penny. As we have also seen, good friends included academics and writers such as the late Bill Jowitt, Bob Chamberlain and Will Stone; Marvin Spevack; and, later, Nick Boyle and Eamon Duffy (the last two I interviewed for the MAR). Decades later, there was the significant encounter with Helen Vendler, described in Chapter 1. Paradoxically less significant – if not surprising, given his attitude towards his University and contemporary poetry – comes his tangential relationship with Cambridge poets.

Sale's relationship with his pupils mattered to him very much; his correspondence with them has already begun to cast bright light on his life, attitudes, and work: the late Bamber Gascoigne and Andy Brown; luminaries such as Benedict Nightingale, Julian Fellowes, Nick Blyth, John Herdman, Nicholas Snowman, Nicholas Shakespeare, Mike Hollington, John Mole, John Simpson, Keith Wilson, Alan Rusbridger, Tony Whittome, Andrew Cozens, Monty Don, Nick Drake, John Constable, Richard Verity, Isabel Wolff – and many others.<sup>360</sup>

Most pressing, there are only three or four people alive who knew and really valued Sale's poetry. Others may have been missed. Many more treasured Arthur Sale: as an influential teacher, and/or as good friend. The twelve or so testimonies have proved riches already – but the rest will not wait forever.

Key, above all, is to test and refine the technical theory into practice, of Sale's emerging, startlingly original – yet for him deeply traditional – view of verse; as seemingly 'Baroque' or Shakespearian *as well as* broadly Modern(ist). This applies both to what I have termed 'anarchic imagery', and in his 'freed' prosody. In this latter context – barely touched on to date – remain earlier influences, especially Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, which he so clearly liked, and as an undergraduate helped translate.<sup>361</sup> The **Archive** contains made-up 'Old English riddles', and as a pre-mediaeval specialist, the advantages of a looser-punctuated approach to phrase-formation seem, consciously or unconsciously, seem to have been part of his intellectual and poetic development.

Overall, these would seem the best places for now, to help develop a fuller sense of the nature of Sale's 'Nature' verse – especially the possibility, suggested here, of his being an important, early twentieth century 'Eco-poet'. Most of all, it is to be hoped that such attention begins to offer fruitful 'clews' as to how his intense, anarchic – yet strangely self-regulating – writings, may come to be better enjoyed by future readers.

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<sup>360</sup> See also: list of Correspondents on p.115 of **SL**.

<sup>361</sup> Cf. Noel Grudgings, and in the University of Nottingham Archives. See also [Papers relating to Noel Grudgings \(c.1909-1967\), pharmacist, 1929-1994 - Archives Hub \(jisc.ac.uk\)](#)

Sale not infrequently referred to his ancient interest (both senses) in conversation, and in correspondence: cf. to Alex Moffett during 1994-5; on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1998, enclosing notes on the prosody of a translation from Old Norse, with notes by Penny suggesting Arthur's regret about neglecting his friend (**Archive**). Also to Will Stone, 6<sup>th</sup> August 1995 **SL**. Jonty recently showed me Sale's early copy of Grudgings' *Sons and Lovers* (visit to his home in Kentish Town, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023).



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#### **D. Oral Sources: interviews**

*(NB recordings of these are held on the UEA secure 'One Drive'; listed in order of date interviewed)*

Bevis Sale, 23rd October 2021, in Sale's cottage at 6 Mill Lane, in Southwold  
John Mole, 25th October 2021, at his home in St. Albans  
Dr. Andrew Cozens, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022, via Zoom  
Jonathan (Jonty) Sale, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2022, at his home in Camden  
Nick Blyth, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2022, at his home in Saffron Walden  
Nick Drake, informal conversations at his home in Hackney, and mine in Norwich (throughout 2021-23)  
Penny Robson (formerly Sale, née Moffett), several interviews at her home in Cambridge (to date, and continuing 2021- )  
Lorna Brown, widow of Dr. Andrew Brown, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022, at Penny's home in Cambridge  
Prof. Nicholas Boyle, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022, at his home in Cambridge  
Dr. John Constable, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2022, at his home near Saxmundham  
Prof. Eamon Duffy, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2022, at his home in Cambridge  
Anthony Whittome, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2023, at his home in Shepherds Bush, London  
Dr. Jane Hughes, President of Magdalene College (etc.), 27<sup>th</sup> March 2023, at the College