

## The Terrain across Texts: Poems Eliding/Guiding Poems: Peter Riley's *Small Square Plots*

Peter Larkin

### I.

*Small Square Plots*<sup>i</sup> has long been for me one of Peter Riley's most intriguing small press pamphlets, not only through its distinctive technique of finding new lyrics by over-writing them across fugitive British poems of the 1940s, but because of the trenchant minimalism of the title. The original project to make up to 700 of these seven-syllable seven-line poems by the year 2000 was not to be realized, so what we have is a sort of torso projected against its own macro-septimal horizon or syllabic haven. Why seven? One homophonic root of "sept" gives us also the idea of an enclosure or partition, in short a plot.

Tony Baker remarks that much of Riley's work can be "read as a palimpsest, if by palimpsest is meant writing what is written over, or out of, some pre-existing work or occasion"<sup>ii</sup>. In thinking about *SSP*, I do not want to retrace the exact relation between source-text and Riley's creative reduction of it (though I shall do this in part) so much as consider what is implicated in this discreet gesture of over-writing so as to reset the plot. Is to over-write to place an earlier text in sharper focus by allowing a siphoning para- or meta-text to float above it? Can there even be an element of active cancellation of one text by another, and if so does it always flow only in the one direction? Is the only way in which to encounter truthfully a "dead" poem to beckon it back towards one's own "voice" (as a principle of estranged selection)? This centrifugal gesture of re-speaking a forgotten poem as it never sounded on its own terms allows the source-poem to glow at the inter-textual horizon once again as a margin or thesaurus. It also dramatizes how any "voice" emerges from a chorus of half-dismantled but not banished or even tarnished earlier voices, whose own origins remain obscure or inchoate but to a degree purified or filtered by this very process. They are to be re-emplotted within the minimal plots they can occupy now, which is also a reparative scenario for any present voice. I shall also read *SSP* by means of fragmentary echoes from *Excavations*, a text that was being worked on at about the same time, treating it as an interpretative rather than literal source-text for the motifs of minimal plots in general, so that the more capacious text can become its own species of collage-allegory for the sligher, squarer one.

### II.

It is no coincidence, of course, that all the poems Riley has selected to overwrite are centred around the 1940s. As he himself explains: "The point is that these were written when I was in the midst of my work on Nicholas Moore, which involved combing through all the 1940s literary magazines I could get my hands on, mostly in libraries or in my bookselling stock. I think a number of *SSP* poems were based on poems I noticed while doing this, some of which may remain uncollected, and most of which have floated away... The whole project was meant as a homage to the richness of British poetry from about 1938 to 1948, a climate in which people who wrote little and are now completely forgotten were enabled to produce quite substantial, richly textured pieces at least occasionally, or poems worth dwelling on"<sup>iii</sup>. I had originally assumed that *SSP* consisted of fairly strict permutations of textual material

from the original poems (such was the instigation of my own *Spirit of the Trees* cycle in outright imitation of *SSP*), but in fact Riley has used a much lighter touch than this, so that some of his syllabic renditions can be “about the poet in question.” In some cases he acknowledges taking a very distanced view of the original text, “writing from its remote implications” or “starting at the end of the poem.” Some other poems in *SSP* simply “floated away from the original text under their own impetus”<sup>iv</sup>. We can establish that over-writing here is matter of a highly variable density of incorporation, which also includes an element of spontaneous lift-off introducing new material over and above the stricter recomposition I had originally envisaged. This makes identifying many of the source-poems tricky, and Riley has emphasized that most were fugitives drawn from literary magazines of the period and often uncollected subsequently which passed through his hands before being dispersed.<sup>v</sup> However, with his help I have traced two sources definitively and had two further suspects confirmed. However, before turning to these sources, there is a need to revisit Riley’s impassioned (and at times missionary) involvement with his 1940’s poetic forebears, an inheritance he has taken pains to rediscover and unearth.

It is well known that Riley befriended the beleaguered Nicholas Moore in the latter’s last invalid years and edited a retrospective selected poems entitled *Longings of the Acrobats* (1990). Riley has also published, not only accounts of his personal involvement with such work, but what are intended as long overdue re-evaluations of writing that he feels constituted an essentially normative development within British poetry of the period, not an eccentric dead-end. As Riley summarises: “In the early 1940s a number of British poets...were writing a densely metaphoric poetry in a heavily stressed metrics and a tone of staged personal declaration over a fictive arena, resulting in constructs which could be of challenging difficulty”<sup>vi</sup>. Riley identifies this technique as “multiple mixed metaphor without grounding” in which, though more rarely, “syntax itself comes under threat, or comes apart”. What Riley dubs a post-Dylan Thomas manner came to be known as “New Apocalypse” though Riley himself prefers a “New Romantic” label which for him seems

a larger and vaguer term covering what many poets and artists were doing during the 1940s which indulged symbolic (or symbolist) figurations and avoided the prosaic. It could be seen as leading straight into later 1950s anti-rationalist or anti-secular poetry. New Apocalypse was a genuine movement with a programme, however disputed, the impetus of which seems to have pushed poets like Hendry and Cooke to extreme procedures in the years immediately around 1940, though it involved other poets, such as Moore, who if they agreed to the programme at all, did not see it as necessitating the super-figurised or post-Thomas style in poetry.<sup>vii</sup>

Hendry and Cooke, as well as Moore, provide source-poems for *SSP*. A further aspect of “New Apocalypse” which Riley is keenly alive to is its historic grounding and as such its role as a test-bed for later experimentalisms:

There is an inference, too, of the poetry as a response to history in the present tense, to the current situation, figuring the horrors of the subconscious which generate the horrors of war. It is no longer the human biology or nervous system as such which the poetry engages with, but its aberration or perversion in a theologically fallen condition. We may in fact locate here an originary site of one of the great unproven dogmas of much contemporary experimentalist poetry: that there is an inverse causative connection between broken or distorted language

and a broken or distorted body politic, and that by perpetuating the one you defy the other".<sup>viii</sup>

Here, Riley includes not only Dorian Cooke and J. F. Hendry but also Thomas Good (who also sources *SSP*) while at the same time emphatically mapping the 1940s onto the strategic poetics of later figures like J.H.Prynne, John Wilkinson and Keston Sutherland. Riley has ruefully to acknowledge how short-lived the movement proved to be, so that by the 1950s "it could be said to be in disrepute and largely (forcibly or not) 'forgotten'". Riley sees "The Movement" which quickly but definitively, it would appear, altered the course of British poetry as the:

1950s attitude that there was only room for one kind of poetry, a specialised and itself quite extreme kind, which attempted to exclude not only the Soho avant-gardists but a middle-ground which inevitably restored itself in the form of people like Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill, in a re-assertion of metaphor and spirituality".<sup>ix</sup>

The story doesn't entirely end there, however, as Riley discerns not only a path that goes across the waters to the New York poets O'Hara and Ashbery (in whose city Dylan Thomas died) but even an affinity with the poetic methods of Paul Celan.

Focusing now on actual or likely inter-textual channels discernible in *SSP*, the source of the ninth poem emerges as W. S. Graham's "Soon to be Distances" first published in an issue of *Poetry* in 1942 – itself an evocative title in view of Riley's own *Distant Points* that was to become the first instalment of *Excavations*. 13 words in Graham's poem recur within Riley's: "I", "move", "slowly", "stumble", "between", "bar", "voice", "know", "with", "weight", "prints", "on" and "sand". There is also one transformation: "warnings" becomes "mornings". One can speculate whether there might also be configurations of sheer coincidence here that draw in other poems of the period as pseudo-sources even if they were not so literally (many of the overlapping words are extremely common ones), and if so, what sort of phantasmic relationship would that imply? Wherever clusters of words from different texts overlap, apparently achieving a "fit" from the reader's perspective, there is always the possibility of divagation as well as channelling, and this is no less a part of Riley's own non-systematic excursions through this material. In the Graham poem we find "Soon to be distances locked sound / In the day of travel" which develops to "What I learn turns barrier to voice." Riley's reworking would seem to scour an inter-terrain connecting the two texts, so that we read:

I move slowly and stumble  
through the spaces between roads.  
A bar opens in the voice  
of no one I know. (*SSP*, 9)

A "bar" clearly derives from Graham's "barrier to voice" but here opens up to the connotation of some sort of measure (musical?) as well as an obstruction, even a type of decoration, not to speak of a sly reference to Graham's love of holding forth in pubs after a day's writing. "Barrier" also indicates difficulty, resistance, and as Riley observes about the poetics of this period:

at this particular juncture of mid-Century Britain the imaginative space to which the reader gains access is, perhaps for the first time, imbued with the features of a barrier, by which the figures of language, while retaining traces of their representative function, become themselves objects of attention performing their own acts and creating their own theatre without becoming fixed as symbols".<sup>x</sup>

More immediately, this distancing and poised unknowing seems something equally shared between present and past poet in a terraced inter-subjectivity.

*SSP*'s sixth poem is drawn from Nicholas Moore's text entitled "Poem (for Priscilla)" first published in 1940 and reprinted in *A Wish in Season*, Moore's debutant collection brought out by the Fortune Press in 1941. Riley acknowledges two poems in *SSP* deriving from Moore, and his sensitivity to Moore's own place within the poetics of the 1940s is acute. Riley notes the earlier poet's "central confidence [that] didn't need to apply to Thomas for anything, assaying that public, declamatory tone and the ancestral rhythms that go with it, obviously very much in the air at the time, though in a completely, perhaps 'classical' (and so appropriately anonymous) manner, within a decorum which was subject to sudden undermining"<sup>xi</sup>. While in Moore's source-poem we find "The first idea of resting found its place" in Riley's recomposition we get "In the first idea of rest / was traffic and distant / war" which again offers itself as an oblique comment on the terrain connecting and disaffecting the two texts: the necessary struggle to write *into* the source-text but also the exemptions which come from writing after and across it. Riley dubs his "second idea" a "cushion called despair" where the original could hope "it is safe within this cushioned place." Riley's phrases echo what might have informed Moore's own imagined proleptic commentary on what it is like to be involved in the small square plot his poem was to become. From within that latter-day compression Riley is actually tracing, of course, the plangent tragedy of Moore's own disappointments and numbing invisibility. The grasped hope of a temporarily self-defining respite in the earlier poem succeeds in the later to an intimate identification of total loss with an exact lack of disruption, cushioned by what is itself a despair.

The tenth *SSP* arises out of a text by Stephen Coates baldly entitled "Poem" and beginning with the phrase "Now the excitement of this day" which was published in his *First Poems* of 1943<sup>xii</sup>. Little is known of this poet, but his work turned up in *Poetry London*, in *Cambridge Poetry: 1940* and in the more retrospective *Poetry from Cambridge in Wartime* (1946). A year later he published his *Second Poems* (1947). Riley's revision takes 17 words from Coates in a compaction that now feels more ironical than valedictory. Whereas in the earlier poem "the excitements of this day / Draw it to its warm close" the later text renders this as "Day closes in a mad rush / to get the small letters right" which broaches another indirect commentary on the shuttling contrivances involved in the meta-poem itself. The fraught commerce between the two texts will buy out such a phrase as "The fat commercial and the usual roads" and repeddle it as "beautiful eyes fat commerce", so underscoring that there are no usual roads by which to attain such a recompositional fabric. Coates's "To take the journey to the new experience" is sucked back into the verbal shower of the earlier poem which Riley recombines by accounting for the cost of such a trans-migration as "sharp words and luggage labels / meeting in the windy street."

The final inter-terrain I plot is that between the fourth poem in *SSP* and Ronald Bottrall's "Moving Depths" which was included in the 1945 *Atlantic Anthology* for which Nicholas Moore was one of the editors<sup>xiii</sup>. Riley affirms that his syllabic equivalent here is in fact largely about Bottrall himself rather than being a freer variation. So, where the Bottrall

text reads “It may be asked what love has learned by knocking at the door”, Riley’s poem comments: “Love wants to get in at him, desperately, making him real / and lasting, a kept promise.” “Moving Depths” had climaxed with:

Beneath the face of enamelled sloth  
Quivering life breaks from capsule and sheath into light-winged  
dragonish grace

Once this has made its way into Riley’s text a rather more ungainly zoological transmutation is enacted, no doubt saying something about Bottrall’s headstrong experience itself but also fulfilling what can happen when a hibernating textual chrysalis is allowed to break out. The *SSP* poem can own a “kept promise” lightly derived from the Bottrall poem but what arrives is: “the chrysalis opened / and a hairy bear strolled out.” Bottrall’s poem speaks of piecing “the intricate edges into a solid square to solve and salve” while in Riley’s hands a small, not solid, square becomes an unself-justifying compactness rather than the ratified pact envisaged in the earlier poem.

### III.

I now want to map the *SSP* sequence onto the much larger, but only a little less palimpsestic, *Excavations* project<sup>xiv</sup>. Riley describes his prose paragraphs as “meditations on 19<sup>th</sup>-century excavation reports of the uncovered contents of prehistoric burial mounds” in Bronze Age northern England (5). The primary sources are J. R. Mortimer’s *Forty Years’ Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds in East Yorkshire* (1905) and William Greenwell’s *British Barrows* (1877). The presence of the source material is more overt than in *SSP* as here it is italicised though not necessarily delivering an exact transcription, and Riley notes that at least 10% of it follows the anarchic principle of being anything else it wants to be (6). There are also fragmentary quotations from 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century lyrical poetry, but which might also include anything from medieval songs to Housman. Tom Lowenstein remarks on Riley’s “excavation of a particular and previously submerged life. Anonymous as it remains, this life is unearthed, brought to our view and warmed by the imaginative counterinhumation of the poet’s regard – even though this regard remains incommunicable to the anonymous dead”.<sup>xv</sup> Lowenstein also comments on a “process of unpicking and convergence, disintegration and consolidation [as it is] re-enacted in the collaborating yet mutually discordant elements in the poem” and sees this as at the heart of Riley’s meditative procedure.<sup>xvi</sup> Many of these observations can be transferred to account for what is happening within the starker containments of *SSP*. In *Excavations* itself, as in the Bottrall poem, there is talk of capsules, as in a “compact cremation capsule” (153: original italics) or more exactly “full of static, all the messages wrenched to a capsule” (170). This text can help sound out by way of echoic commentary how *SSP* retrieves a set of intimacies and localities across the distinctive micro-graining of distances – such a “grain” being a factor of attention in the willingness to redistribute one text towards another but so as to end up with a very different species of coalescence, or a “directional” co-ordination as the more archeological *Excavations* might understand it in terms of how burial confinements align or square up. In *SSP* this will relate to horizons of all-absorbing contingency but in terms of the paradoxical capacity of such a residue to offer the present itself as an emergent lyrical inclusion. *SSP* deals with poems dead and buried not just to exhume them but to re-

bury them in an even smaller plot as a *transmission* of their non-resurrection. This is not now austere in terms of an absence reinforced but as how these least findings actively quiver as less than their original self-achievements but are becoming positively compressed (not merely suspended) beyond themselves. They become the active, intervening scarcity of their own half-lives.

*Excavations* itself can be read as a chaotically complete dis-occupation in song which rejuvenates the horizons of that chaos, or as Lowenstein astutely observes, is a way of musing “unknowingly on the inchoate”<sup>xxvii</sup>. What is re-absorbed into an earth disordered by such residual emergence becomes itself riotous in robust de-selection constituting a sort of lyrical smudge or lumpen mud of the numinous. In his *The Gig* interview, Riley speculates on an “ununderstood thing which is retained in the text’s mind and completed or extended or revised on another occasion”<sup>xxviii</sup>. *Excavations* can furnish us with a collage fabric commenting on what is implied in how *SSP* both elides and guides earlier texts through a process of inventive “dia-carceration” in terms of dynamic recontainments. *Excavations* knows that what is “squared in his own frame” (13) provokes “pains of succession *tightly crouched*” (17: original italics) which are “spoken into nonentity and a scripted remnant” (36), as “even the nothing we become may be compacted or thinned” (87) given that we are “never more at home than hovering above on a daily problem of transfer” (89). The result is that the “rest of the syntax is omitted” (92) as “the pains of lessness fall / into the ground” (109) while “Lyric is our nomad wedding...It thieves its vocabulary from memory” (119). *Excavations* summarises it all by intoning “Claim and loss, it all goes written into the future so slightly” (135) and also records how “The accuracy of these artists terrifies me” (74). Here we find the declaration “I too head for a closed space” (108) and if there is any entry into eternity, it will be as “carrying a small bag of pivotal details” (122). Distance, which is always a terrain filtering itself to itself, “turns on the rim, neither self nor other is the world” (146). Distance maintains an often troubled contact, a sort of rough handling and being handled by, but it claims its own lyrical intactness even in the midst of such textual engineering: “Thus safe in the fold of song, no reductionist could get you now you (could not be further reduced) and the language becomes strictly applicable” (160).

#### IV.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, according to David Morris, affirms that the diversity of being is “engendered by something regional, rooted in place by means of a ‘hollow’ in being” or a “generative openness endogenous to the spread of being”<sup>xxix</sup>. As Merleau-Ponty himself specifies further, “nothingness (or rather non being) is hollow and not *hole* There is no *nichtiges Nichts* [*ie* null nothingness]”<sup>xxx</sup>. This can be a paradoxical “‘lake of non-being’, a certain nothingness sunken into a local and temporal openness”, and it is nothing less than the sensible “that hollows itself out”<sup>xxxi</sup>. Each part of the sensible is torn up from the whole but “comes with its roots, encroaches upon the whole, transgresses the frontiers of the others”<sup>xxxii</sup>. Diversity as unequal and inadequate to itself arises by virtue of not *all* being given within a plenum, and it is this not-all of givenness which Merleau-Ponty identifies with the “transspatial”, or what is “between elements” as part of an “envelope-phenomenon” not reducible to its given elements.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Diversity is therefore reciprocal with place, or with those terrains which are not conceptualised as abstractly transportable across exchangeable localities<sup>xxxiv</sup>. *Excavations* itself leans into hollowness, with its “*separate hollows* at right-angles to the world” (42: original italics) and pronounces “Hollows in the earth, **the secrets**

of our hearts declaimed" (65: original bold). There can be found "a hollow in the surface of wish" (153) or there will be a "'slight hollow' in the Original Ground Surface" (167). Voice itself sounds when "speaking a name into the hollow where desire prepares a final bed" (171) or a little further on the poem invokes what is "set into its hollows, calcined, palled script on prepared ground" (181). This is a writing that will identify "a hollow in society" with its "boundless despair at the silence of boundless love" (167). Hollowness, though less explicitly, figures in *SSP* also, mainly in terms of a not-all-given transspatial that reveals the terrain to be negotiated by the over-writing itself. These are poems of textual relation, however, not reducible to any pure notional effect of textuality. *SSP* emerges as a revisionary retraction in the midst of negotiating such a tract: what is taken from the original text (even dissolving the original text so that some more primordial cluster of material can re-experience its various formations and deformations along the way as simultaneous) is the non-autonomous birth of a new poem. The source's remote secondary handling is a condition not of radical novelty but of shadowing the non-plenum of a source towards a lyrical now, where only a retractive difference remains but one setting out its present place: "then singing has a good room – / in praise of persons, taste of tomb." (*SSP* 12).

Distance emerges as relation minus conventional transmission, or "between reeds and written reeds" (*SSP* 7) within an admission of overlay whereby a non-plenum is also a form of sharing, not only drifting from place to place but constituting the lyric grain of transection from within this particular plot of place: "O love is restless there and / calls limb from limb" (*SSP* 7). Prior texts may have been actively pulverised but once they become "re-perished" (*ie*, not restored or preserved as such) they are relieved from any more nondescript perishing outside the framework of lyric itself:

hidden  
meaning floats in the hedge and  
flaps past my ear like a ghost (*SSP* 1)

The transspatial is whatever runs "chatting / to a further fallen town" (*SSP* 11) and, throughout *SSP*, Riley's achievement is to have been able to create a tightly woven space for what is not all present:

where steadfastly  
I am hollowed against my  
inventions in a slow tongue  
remembering well, truly,  
friendly with fear (*SSP* 11)

As Riley notes in thinking about W. S. Graham, "the venture out meets its return as a thing already known, beyond success or failure, as the poet's percepts are delivered back to him by the poem as unknowns, and he ceases from the start to be the person who lived the event".<sup>xxv</sup> There is much here that applies equally to the entire venture of British 1940s poetry including its life leaching outside its own status as historic event within Riley's poetic writings. Peter Riley himself leaves us with an apt comment on what *SSP* brings about through the "events" enshrined in its own source-texts, however much he was not thinking of his own work when he came to write: "An authorial distance from the event remains ingrained in the writing, as an emblem of the gift, an act done for the world, as an addition to it"<sup>xxvi</sup>.

## Appendix: Peter Riley's Identifications of the Source-Poet Initials in *Small Square Plots*

1. CWG = Charles Wrey Gardiner
2. DN = Douglas Newton
3. JFH = J. F. Hendry
4. RB = Ronald Bottrall
5. JGMcL = J. G. MacLeod
6. NM = Nicholas Moore
7. TS = Tom Scott
8. DC = Dorian Cooke
9. WSG = W. S. Graham
10. SC = Stephen Coates
11. AR = Anne Ridler
12. NM = Nicholas Moore
13. TG = Thomas Good

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<sup>i</sup> Peter Riley, *Small Square Plots* (Sanderstead: Grille, 1996). Hereafter identified as *SSP* in the text and the poems have been given consecutive numbers, though they were unnumbered as such in this unpaginated first edition. The 12 poems were reprinted, with the addition of a final, unsourced one, in *The Day's Final Balance: Uncollected Writings, 1965-2006* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> Tony Baker, "A Démarrage, a Letter and a Postscript, Concerning (Mostly) Peter Riley's 'Alstonefield'," in *The Poetry of Peter Riley, The Gig*, 4-5, November 1999-March 2000: 183.

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Riley, Email message to author, December 30, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Riley, Email message.

<sup>v</sup> Riley, Email message.

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Riley, "Thomas and Apocalypse", <http://www.aprileve.co.uk/thomas.html>, accessed March 27, 2013.

<sup>vii</sup> Riley, "Thomas and Apocalypse".

<sup>viii</sup> Peter Riley, Review of *New Collected Poems*, by W. S. Graham, ed. Matthew Francis, *Jacket* 26, <http://jacketmagazine.com/26/rile-grah.html>, accessed March 27, 2013.

<sup>ix</sup> Riley, "Thomas and Apocalypse".

<sup>x</sup> Riley, "Thomas and Apocalypse".

<sup>xi</sup> Riley, Review.

<sup>xii</sup> Stephen Coates, *First Poems* (London: The Fortune Press, [1943]), 25.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Atlantic Anthology*, ed. Nicholas Moore and Douglas Newton (London: The Fortune Press, 1945).

<sup>xiv</sup> Peter Riley, *Excavations* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2004). Page references given within the text.

<sup>xv</sup> Tom Lowenstein, "Excavation and Contemplation: Peter Riley's 'Distant Points'" in *The Poetry of Peter Riley, The Gig*, 4-5, November 1999-March 2000: 187.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lowenstein, "Excavation and Contemplation", 188-9.

<sup>xvii</sup> Lowenstein, "Excavation and Contemplation", 191.

<sup>xviii</sup> Keith Tuma, "An Interview with Peter Riley," *The Poetry of Peter Riley, The Gig*, 4-5, November 1999-March 2000: 26.

<sup>xix</sup> David Morris, "The Place of Animal Being: Following Animal Embryogenesis and Navigation to the Hollow of Being in Merleau-Ponty," *Research in Phenomenology*, 40 (2010), 188.

<sup>xx</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort; trans. Alphonzo Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 196.

<sup>xxi</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 201, 210.

<sup>xxii</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 218.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2003), 213.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Morris, "Animal Being", 189 et seq.

<sup>xxv</sup> Riley, Review.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Riley, Review.