Labouring Destination: A Poetics of Inheritance in Donald Hall’s *Life Work*

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Donald Hall was instrumental in sustaining literary representations of rural New England. After a string of academic positions, he met his wife and fellow poet Jane Kenyon, and in 1975 the couple moved to his ancestral farm, Eagle Pond, in Wilmot, New Hampshire. But he had no intention of becoming another ‘farmer-poet’ alongside other American influences and contemporaries such as Robert Frost and Wendell Berry. Hall returned to his grandparents’ small holding with the singular intention to write. Thus, rather than an inheritance that married writing to a practical philosophy of the land, his oeuvre reflects a life-long commitment to exploring language’s role in place-making. In this paper, through a close reading of the prose text *Life Work*, I argue that his comparisons between agricultural labour and the labour of writing, grounded in particular topography, create a ‘poetics of inheritance’. This poetics evaluates the past’s place in the present by a re-conceptualisation of the oscillating nexus that captures the self between history, memory, and text.

Soon after moving to Eagle Pond farm, Hall wrote to poet Robert Bly, ‘it is the lack of future dreams which I find continually such a startling change in my life’. His comment implements the farm as a final destination, one for which he articulates a teleology of arrival in lines such as this from his poem ‘Flies’: ‘I planned long ago I would live here, somebody’s grandfather’. But the logic of a determined inheritance—which is still a ‘startling change’ in its manifestation—is troubled by Hall’s comment that New Hampshire ‘fulfilled the sense of loss I already had’. His mention

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1 [Letter to Robert Bly, March 30th, 1997], [B4], Donald Hall Papers, 1928-2018, MC53, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH.
2 Donald Hall, *Kicking the Leaves* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979), p. 34.
of distinct prior feeling pitches inheritance not as a direct line of succession, but as a process underpinned by reciprocal relations. While he illuminates the rural world’s losses—of agricultural labour, of landscape, and of belonging—he simultaneously orients his individual elegiac disposition towards future creative work. This work rests on an interaction between the fragile, imagined memory of material life and what Pierre Nora calls the ‘spectacular bereavement’ of a text that vitalises loss in its present. In loss, Hall finds a sufficient gap between himself and his ancestors to re-articulate their image and mobilise the affective value of their crafts, while increasing the expression of his written legacy. This labour of perpetuation and disavowal strains towards greater sociability with the past’s scattered means of communication through craft, oral tradition, archival resources, and conversation to stimulate ways to experience, investigate, and accommodate present attachments to inherited places.

Perpetuating Presence

Hall’s inheritance could have gone one of two ways. Both sets of grandparents owned farming establishments on the East Coast, but of very different kinds. While his mother’s family kept a self-sufficient holding at Eagle Pond, his father’s owned a large mechanised dairy in Whitneyville, Connecticut. Beyond their material status as places he might return to permanently, the act of writing these two destinations into imaginative constructs of arrival allows Hall to explore their creative resources. The move is characteristic, demonstrating the increasingly performative agency he lends to language; his use of poetics as experiment and future-finding is a version of Walt Whitman’s ecstatic improvisations of American identity, grounded in genealogy. Such dexterity is most pronounced in his later collections which move from an early preoccupation with metre to free verse. These poems, particularly in his 1978 collection Kicking the Leaves written just after moving to Eagle Pond, explore the use of a semi-autobiographical lyric subject and a regional attention to the value of work. But they depart from the broad environmental concerns of Berry’s poetry and Bly’s Jungian notion of accessing a collective consciousness through nature by shifting the focus to what Hall calls the rural world’s ‘middle distance’. Closer in perspective to poets like Thomas Hardy and Seamus

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Heaney, Hall uses his middling position between binaries to re-orientate the intimate networks between people and place which are mediated by the physical and psychological localities of agricultural labour.

The poem ‘Traffic’, which appears in *Kicking*, envisages his paternal inheritance in the exhausted landscape of Whitneyville’s Brock-Hall Dairy. Here, Hall applies the eerie existential aftermath of Frost’s New England narratives in *North of Boston* to the industrialised suburbs. The scene is a dystopian-style future in which the factory’s façade has become ‘covered with ivy like a Mayan temple, like a pyramid grown over with jungle vines’ — an exotic generality or tourist spot. Far from appearing alluring or accommodating however, something in this scene jeopardises the nature of human subjectivity. The poem’s epitaphic stanzas read like a series of tombstones inscribed with names of dead workers and the machinery they operated:

They
have gone into graveyards, who worked at this loading dock
wearing brown uniforms with the pink and blue lettering
of the Brock-Hall Dairy:
Freddie Bauer is dead, who watched over the stockroom;
Agnes McSparren is dead, who wrote figures in books
at the yellow wooden desk; Harry Bailey is dead,
who tested for bacteria
wearing a white coat; Karl Krapp is dead,
who loaded his van at dawn,
conveyor belt supplying butter, cottage cheese, heavy cream,
and left white bottles at backdoors in North Haven and Hamden
for thirty years; my father is dead
and my grandfather.

Deathlessness is those who ‘have gone into graveyards’, perhaps still able bodied, until everyone—even father and grandfather—is included in the noun ‘dead’. The refrain ‘who’ after each death affirms individual status while posing subjectivity as a question. Brock-Hall is full of activity, but nobody is definitively present. Bottles are filled by ‘another machine/that turned them instantly white, as if someone said a word/that turned them white’. They disappear into the colour’s ambiguous visibility, as do words. Speech is absent in the factory. The poem has no dialogue; it lies on the

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7  Ibid., pp.100-101.
8  Ibid., p. 102.
page ‘as if’ to mark death by its silent deathlessness, and so fails to conjure affective memories. At its close, the speaker waits ‘for the traffic to pause, shift’ and then enters it himself. He is going nowhere, nor are the workers ‘who walked their lives/into brick’. Perhaps in ‘a week or a year’ a trailer will stop the traffic ‘and brick will collapse, and dump trucks take clean fill/for construction’. But while they are taken to ‘a meadow ten miles in the country’ for re-building, the map is vague; the meadow could be anywhere, in any direction, and the traffic makes access ultimately indefinite.

In a sense, ‘Traffic’ is a crude elegy to the critique of mechanised lifelessness which Hall spearheads when he writes to Berry on the ‘deathlessness’ of machines. The poem articulates a grey area between life and death in which work, worker, and poetic resources are entombed in a repetitive non-existence, amplified by industrial agricultural processes. Farmers in 1940s US society, the years of Hall’s youth, met the oncoming force of mechanisation ambivalently, and at first through the introduction of electricity. On the one hand, such progress promised to ease dangerous and arduous work, while on the other it threatened debt and livelihoods. Companies were reluctant to provide electricity in rural areas for fear it compromised their investment in urbanisation. As Robert Caro writes, they were unpersuaded still, by farmers moving closer to the lines themselves. One spokesman said: ‘Who knew how many farmers would try to move near electricity? Where would it all end?’ His comment, as well as dismissing agriculture as a sustainable economy, unwittingly evokes the real and imaginative role death played at the heart of agrarian progress. Exploring this further, Hall turns to Eagle Pond farm’s manual labour and autonomous economy, which supplant Brock-Hall’s deathlessness by the material certainty of an end and thus an unexpected chance for renewal.

Historically, New England’s agricultural topography has not offered a particularly desirable future. The region suffered from a real and mythic identity of decline stretching back to a time when settlers headed further West in quest of new land for settlement. As Dona Brown notes, when the agricultural depression began in 1890, it was characterised by ‘a nebulous sense of looming crisis compounded of longstanding economic difficulties, a shifting population, and a gloomy social analysis’. For Hall, as for

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 [Letter to Wendell Berry, 10th January, 1984], [B14], Donald Hall Papers.
13 Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century*
other poets, however, a vision of ruined farming life still held a fragile imaginative currency. One example of such currency appears in a passage from his 1961 work *String Too Short to be Saved*, which documents summers spent working at Eagle Pond. Written from across the Atlantic during his time at Oxford, the text swings between pastoral idyll and images such as the following that touch explicitly on agriculture's brittle reality:

> In the first years of haying, when Anson was with me, there was a part of me that assumed I would spend the rest of my life haying. I could see clearly the three of us in the same fields of summer until the end of time, with the same bony Riley pulling the same frail hayrack—old man, half-wit, horse and boy, locked in a scene where they repeated the same motions under the same skies. The tableau existed alongside the knowledge of death, that perpetual elegy which began earlier than I can remember, and which grew into the colour of everything I saw on the farm. The two feelings contradicted one another, but lived together like old brothers who had not spoken for years.  

The static ‘tableau’ is locked in laborious reiterations whose movements are mirrored by the almost repeated refrains ‘with the same’, ‘the same’ ‘which began’, ‘which grew’. Each replaces progress with a stuttering simulacrum that threatens generational lines. As it stands, the subjects risk mirroring the dairy’s production line. But, crucially, the passage’s phrases also hint at a more sustainable literary resource in the ‘the perpetual elegy that began earlier than I can remember’. Its scene offers the writer an as yet untapped means of elegiac labouring in language and form, and a glimpse of the utility of the past in creating a poetics.

The poet claims to see ‘clearly’, which reveals the historical richness and singularity of his grandparents’ labour. Their work, saturated in loss and death, is capable of becoming memory-work which vivifies affective forms of absence, thus a ‘knowledge of death’ in life is precisely what produces conditions for writing. Death for Hall is what Gregory Orr calls an ‘ingathering’: ‘not a scattering of the objects and meanings of life, but a centripetal funneling of them’. Its mode, in Nora’s words, ‘is a history that, in the last analysis, rests upon what it mobilizes: an impalpable, barely expressible, self-imposed bond; what remains of our ineradicable, carnal attach-

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ment to these faded symbols'. Such a knowledge of death can ‘anchor, condense, and express … the exhausted capital of our collective memory’. But the elegiac centre is not static. Death enters into what Nora further describes as the lieu between memory and history. Here material and imaginative compartments collide to communicate and embellish past losses. Agriculture’s ‘frail’ relics that creak intermittently in a delicate, fraying recollection, are as yet unmoving. By attempting to channel limited means into the mobile space of text, two crafts—agriculture and writing—come to overlap in their processes of production. In this version of creation, Hall uses Nora’s lieu to outline an inheritance.

Fourteen years after String, Hall moves to the farm permanently. In 1993, he writes Life Work, a text which measures the relationship between experience and expression, prompted by his living and writing in the same place he takes as subject. Despite his intention not to farm, Berry writes to Hall with advice on how to live off the land: ‘[d]on’t depend on the farm economically and don’t do too much too fast’. His misconception of Hall’s intention speaks instead to his poetics which relies on a gesturing between language and materiality. ‘Don’t depend’ echoes William Carlos Williams’ well-known lines from ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’, ‘so much depends’, in which language proports a materiality it can never fully realise. Yet the sensory world offers prompts that might otherwise go ignored. As Bill Brown notes, to neglect the things which populate material life ‘is an account of how our ideas prohibit our senses from offering access to new knowledge’. The materiality of Eagle Pond within Hall’s ideas, which is nurtured by his actions there, forms the unexpected shape of a sensitive lineage in this text. Writing, as it elides with farming’s past, produces new ways of using left-over resources to increase affective expression. The objects of an agrarian world are absorbed by a linguistic succession that shuttles between memory and history, losing and finding itself again, in an attempt to restore and progress the farm’s activity.

17 Ibid.
18 [Letter from Wendell Berry, 8th September, 1974], [B14], Donald Hall Papers.
Inheritance’s Labours

*Life Work* is a dialogue between agricultural and writerly labour. The text situates Hall alongside other politically and socially minded rural American poets such as Thomas McGrath and Wesley McNair. Like them, he challenges economic structures by extracting the emotional value and relational bonds latent in tasks and tools. Hall’s particular interest is the reliance on, and reuse of, waste as built into quotidian routine. Waste makes itself and other things visible by disrupting normalised boundaries. He utilises this characteristic by converting the waste products of farming into equivocal waste products of language, and in doing so both emulates his grandparents’ thrift and preserves a sense of loss in the memory of their craft. This work, which relies on the productivity of mistakes and revision, also echoes the techniques of Modernist poets Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, who Hall interviewed years earlier for *The Paris Review*. Their concern with textual waste became, for him, an answer to more philosophical questions about the problematic continuation of agrarian life and writing’s place within it. One such answer is suggested by the foundation for the successive bond between Hall’s grandfather, Wesley—the farmer—and Hall himself—the writer:

> When I emulate his habits, I can take storytelling literally; but I must go metaphoric about mucking out the tie-up, and substitute my crossing-out of failed language for his disposal of bovine feces.\(^\text{21}\)

In this passage, contrary to actual farming practices, Wesley does not reuse bovine feces on his fields; the excrement disappears entirely as its visibility is adopted by the writer. Metaphors and crossing out can be seen; as can the work of grammar on the page. The semi-colon after ‘literally’ cordons off psychological habits from physical ones, so that the writer’s desire to emulate Wesley is grounded in storytelling over bodily movement. By using the farmer’s waste, he momentarily makes a clear distinction between roles, taking his role as storyteller literally by explicitly documenting the writer’s mundane and localised tasks. But he goes one step further. To ‘emulate’ is to equal or pass; it pulls past, present, and future chronologies into contention, and so, absorbing the farmer’s habits, after the semi-colon Wesley is Hall’s shadow to play with. The pattern of emulation then develops from a scene of agricultural to cultural production.

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The writer ghosts the farmer's temporal constraints in his verb use. Obligation ('must') and interchangeability ('substitute') unearth and reveal the demanding and unethical structures of industrial capitalism that loomed beneath agricultural labour. Their implication counters the farmer's stereotype as timewaster, idling away in fields and keeping obscure working patterns, not unlike the poet.  

In fusing the farmer with the ideological imperatives of mechanical progress, and passing those mechanics onto language, the writer insinuates capitalism's means in merging and mobilising an 'idle' economy. Grammar and lexis pull both figures back from an obscuring web of industrialization while promoting their alleged crime—wasting—as the means of production. Archival materials from University of New Hampshire Special Collections present a drafting of this reading. In an earlier version, the first lines read 'I took storytelling literally and forgot mucking out the tie-up. I know I would put in no acres. Hall substitutes 'took' for 'take', 'forgot' for 'but when it comes to', and 'I know' for 'I go metaphoric, thinking of revision.' In the final version he adds 'must' to the clause. Actions are present tense, memory is enacted in real time (future action substitutes forgetting), and contemplation replaces knowledge. The revisions extract experience and feeling from stale economic determinism. They gesture too, towards the meaning of must as a noun: a fermenting fruit. Such fruit marks both the goodness of connections to the past and the text's maturing, which re-aligns its internal economy by etymology’s mirror to the rural world.

Hall works through an exchange with the past by taking responsibility for the methods, constraints, and ideas that transition between writer and farmer. Through language's waste, shadow-play, and revisions, the farmer's hand and humanity linger in the text so that seeing something disappear can also be understood as an act of integration. It gives inheritance an accumulative possibility by imbuing losses with temporal and spatial reverberations. In another scene, these threads are picked up by Hall's grandmother Kate's handiwork. As with Wesley, interpenetrating labours disrupt economic and mythic structures through the writing-as-work:

On weeknights she sewed or darned while Wesley read, and her work was never done. She darned socks and stitched torn shirts and underwear. If her basket of repair-work was empty, then she knitted mittens for winter, or made socks, or did some fancywork, crocheting and tat-
ting. It kept her hands busy, a form of recreation, and whilst she worked she kept on thinking; sometimes her lips formed words. Every five or ten minutes she would say something out loud—while my grandfather and I were reading—and we could follow the geography of her thought. “It does seem to rain a lot in Connecticut,” she would say, and I would know that she was remembering a postcard from my mother. (“Mmm,” my grandfather and I would respond in chorus.)

Kate evokes New England’s colonial revival version of domesticity which Brown describes as ‘an epoch of continuity, stability, self-sufficiency, and cultural homogeneity’. A craft-centred home promised ‘the imagined stable age of home spun’. But the scene unsettles stability in a crucial way, pulling ‘home’ with it. Its past tense verbs describing handicraft signal continuity’s façade. Shifting emphasis to the second half of the phrase, and to the translation between generations, ‘spun’ makes a double move on both Kate’s actions and the writer spinning a text. The scene’s centre on repair-work’s empty basket negotiates the distance between waste and gain, and from it comes a surplus of production rather than Wesley’s disappearing feces. As such, Kate’s bodily habits begin to engage with the language describing them. Her mind works over thoughts as they reach the threshold of articulation; the passage slows down her process of thinking and formulating speech at the moment it coincides with her craft. As this happens, ‘work’ becomes indistinguishable from the ‘recreation’ of handiwork and its resulted thinking. ‘[W]hilst she worked’ is a phrase that sets a limit and a confluence between the two.

As work meets word, Kate’s movement, like Wesley’s, is loosened from ideological obligation to service imaginative and human endeavour. Her particular labour has a poetic history stretching back to ancient weaving practices and their association with memory. As Reginal Gibbons writes, the ‘weaving song might be a mnemonic enactment of, a memorized set of instructions for, the pattern or part of a pattern of the weaving itself’. It is a confluence, which Hall provides not as an enactment of a previously memorised pattern, but as an unpicking and re-stitching of memory’s processes in time. Kate’s thinking body is articulated fully by his double presence as child and writer, and his joining Wesley—who reads a book—

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This series of reflections, embedded dualistically in handiwork and language by an effort of collective labour, elucidates memory-making as action. The specific image of Hall's mother's postcard is arrived at via the seemingly constitutive ('does') language of Kate's vague and unverifiable ('seem') recollection. This plotting between what might have been and what the object world tells is so then leads to a 'chorus'. Kate momentarily escapes domestic confinement, while the passage undercuts temporal determinisms of stability and capitalism's consumer rendering of 'anticipation over operation'. Her world is determined only in so far as its memory is predicated on the subject's position inside time. From within temporal operations language can return as a song both recalled and imagined by a proactively remembering and richly available present.

The writer weaves a pattern as it goes along, performing the process of its weaving while moving images as memory-making communications. He postures temporal texture as penetrable, subject to shifts, improvisations, and re-arrangement. Despite a departure from memorising, the text's complexity resembles weaving's 'positional interrelationship' as a series of knots and clusters that develop and change direction. These fabrics absorb the present when their popular motifs change during times of social shift. Thus language happens as a funnelling through its agents, rather than as articulation from a single source. The nature of such a fabric is not to provide a final object, and this is where Hall's work both absorbs and departs from Kate's which does not appear as finished objects. The moment recalls Sappho's relentlessly riddling fragment 39: 'the feet/by spangled straps covered/beautiful Lydian work'. Enfolding one another, it is never clear whether the overview of scale and place beheld by the foot, or the strap's intricate local pattern, covers the 'beautiful work'. But interpenetrating play with perspective's availability is precisely the point. Memory's vast language engages Kate in Sappho's linguistic stepping games as it trips over her 'fancywork' in time. But unlike Sappho's 'covered' work, Hall's stepping on, which is also a stepping over, is the 'beautiful work', made by the integrity of its dual components in enacting design. As these textures of labour move outwards towards other places, they remain intensely connected to a reciprocally interdependent past while making themselves visible.

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27 In drafts, Hall replaced the passive ‘geography of her mind’ with the active ‘geography of her thought’. [Life Work drafts], Donald Hall Papers.
In the handiwork passage, the present, in Hall’s own words, is made ‘an ever-shifting prologue’.\textsuperscript{31} It attempts to hold fast to the status of Kate’s incessant ‘rain’ which ‘seems’ to fall in the wordless hum of elsewhere. This resource, at its most fluid, offers an endless destination for poetic inspiration. As a temporal springboard, it also has the capacity to negotiate Eagle Pond’s future, which the writer explores through remembered scenes of his suburban and academic life. An evaluation of these inheritable parts of the self is led by his participation in farming practices and so demonstrates the subject’s integration of previous generational encounters:

My Grandfather taught me scythe mowing, which is a rhythmic motion like dancing or lovemaking. It is a studious sweeping crescent in which the trick is to keep the heel (where blade joins snath) close to the ground, an angle that tilts the scythe point-up, preventing it from catching in the ground. I no longer mow with a scythe—a certain recipe for lower-back muscle spasms—but remember it the way the body remembers weights and leanings: riding a bicycle, skiing, casting flies. Finding a meter, one abandons oneself to the swing of it; one surrenders oneself to the guidance of object and task, where worker and work are one: There is something ecstatic about mowing with a scythe.\textsuperscript{32}

At the heart of scything is a tension between the muscle’s slow retrospective aching and manual labour’s alertness to future outcome. Yet when ‘worker and work are one’, multiple versions of the self in time are revealed: tools, as Hannah Arendt says, ‘multiply far beyond’ natural measures.\textsuperscript{33} Whether this is desirable or not, it resonates with the sheer variety of activities and places provoked by the scythe. Hall is scything, mowing, sporting, and writing in three landscapes at once: Eagle Pond, his home in Connecticut, Ann Arbor’s suburbs, and Life Work. What is ‘ecstatic’ about scything then, is not the illusion of work’s singularity and absorption, but the ‘something’ beyond, when thinking starts to produce myriad directions. Mowing, like writing, is ‘studious’ as it relies on the attentive, onerous, yearning pursuit of knowledge that amounts to a solid foundation for unconscious intuition. The adjective suggests too, that one craft might read the other to gain new insight.

\textsuperscript{31} Hall, Eagle Pond (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 2007) p. 59.
\textsuperscript{32} Hall, Life Work, p. 86.
Arresting the scythe’s tacit knowledge via skill is to grasp—physically and psychologically—the ‘heel (where blade joins snath)’. Here language’s ‘rhythmic motion’ is almost consumed by rural jargon. Yet rather than meeting his grandparents, the writer, almost violently, surrenders to and abandons himself. Wary of memory’s ideological ‘recipes’ and Proustian ‘spasms’, self-reflection in this state of accumulated inheritance yields finally to a strange image of the land which amid all the activity gets away untouched. One reading of its preservation is as an allusion to the text’s own inheritable trace. It challenges the grain of agriculture as a scar on the landscape by restoring an untouched image of farmed land. American history has come up with various rhetorical ‘tricks’ to protect its national landscape, one such narrative being the virgin land. But this image of rapturous scything plays with touch in an attempt to take stock of agricultural labour, and offers it up as a resource for the psyche. This textual protection, I argue, is Life Work’s elegiac labour.

On Thin Ice

The text’s attempt to conserve agriculture’s affective resources becomes increasingly pronounced in the dangerous work of ice-farming. Symbolically, ice embodies Eagle Pond’s elegiac properties by keeping a precarious equilibrium between surface and depth. Hall writes in a poem titled ‘At Eagle Pond’ that when ‘[i]n April ice rots,’ death and memory return. While ice holds at bay, it also restricts creative pools. For McNair, ice is the substance between speech and silence. In his poem ‘Mute’, when a boy falls through the ice after the last day of hauling, his mother listens for his absent cries from the water, speechless, for the rest of her life. The ambivalence of the ice in matters of communication problematises Hall’s attempt to find a textual counterpart that mobilises his memory. In Life Work farm and language slip further away from one another and back towards a tableau of perpetual elegy:

After woodchopping, probably the next most difficult task of the year was carting ice from Eagle pond to store in the ice-house behind the tie-up’s watering trough. Neighbours worked together taking ice from the pond, often in February when the ice was two feet thick. First, they scraped snow off, then with horse-drawn cutters scraped long lines

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onto ice, back and forth making a checkerboard of ruts, then split the ice into great oblong chunks, then floated ice-slabs to shore, making watery channels for more slabs. Ice-farming, hazards were the cold and the wet, slipping into the freezing water, even drowning dragged down by heavy winter clothes. 36

The land’s ‘checkerboard of ruts’ evokes a pastime ridded of labour’s complexity and incompatible with memory’s integrity. Events are presented in a child-like sequential manner and the superfluous comma after ‘ice-farming’ calls the entire sequence into question. So far, labour’s reflections have served Hall well, but here they start to erode. There is literally nothing except a downward spiral that threatens death’s in-gathering. The scene echoes Henry David Thoreau’s ice-farming in Walden, in which reflection is deflection (agriculture mirrors industry, ice mirrors capitalism, people mirror nature). 37 Meanwhile, Thoreau’s ‘double shadow’ tries out the self’s solitude in nature as Transcendentalism.38 His images are a counterpart not only to Hall’s absence from the ice-farming passage but also to his totalising reflections which take deflection to its extreme. No one side can see itself or another as self, community, and text are pulled apart by ice’s threat of fracture.

The image of New England’s ice also recalls Frost’s twice perishing in fire or ice, summoning a world of human drama: of desire and hate.39 There is little emotion in Hall’s deadpan passage, which suggests only tomb-like ‘ice-slabs’ couched in flat description. Its lack of affectivity weakens a genealogy that thus far has relied on bonds of loss, death, and memory, to shape succession. His archives tell a different story. Early drafts of the passage did include a human drama that contributes to a reading of the final text. Hall leaves a significant detail out of the passage’s printed version: the moment the workers ‘scraped snow off, to reveal ice’.40 The second clause communicates labour’s fruit by the experience of affective visibility and collective satisfaction. The omission’s damage is visible in the ‘long lines’ that mark the land. Its absence reflects work as a ‘form of non-living, of non-existence, of submergence’41 rather than ‘an extension of human con-
Yet another way to read Hall’s exclusion is as a reflection of totalised empathy: the writer emulates the farmer in his continued pursuit of failed language. And by omitting the revelation that turns farm work into text, the text fails in such a way that emulates its subject.

The passage’s flat description can be re-inscribed as participating in, rather than merely observing, the labourers’ unspeakable suffering at the hands of economic change and work’s crushing mental duress. In this scenario, opaque description is regenerated as an empathetic link between past and present pains. Its ornamentation and potential for arbitrariness are mirrors of a fading local world, momentarily brought into collusion with the writer’s. By the same token, description’s potential for conceit clarifies the text’s project. Willard Speigelman argues that ‘description completes’ and ‘reveals … only throughfiguration’.\(^{43}\) Going a step further, Roland Barthes takes adjectives—‘great’, ‘watery’, ‘long’ to name a few from the passage—as ‘funereal’.\(^{44}\) Their bond with the world, he claims, is delusional. Within that fallacy is the text’s recognition of what delusion means for inheritance as elegiac labour. Not everything is carried forward; some parts are simply lost. The ice-farming passage reflects on how to leave those things behind while elegising them. Refrigeration’s answer to dangerous and highly romanticised labour is desirable but it does not remove the imaginative and affective texture of ice-farming. This texture inhabits properties that move the text to work at elegy’s outer limits.

Ice also includes metaphysical properties. As it appears and disappears, something—that something after ecstasy—is ‘revealed’. The suggestion elevates past labour towards the sacred, for ice’s smoothness resembles the image of Christ’s seamless robes. Barthes re-invents this image of Christ’s clothing for the mechanised world in his ‘phenomenology of assembling’.\(^{45}\) He suggests that technology too is made seamless by a society that wants to transcend the welded lines of manual labour. Hall adapts the logic of such a phenomenology to agriculture. Ice’s surface is labour’s seams of assembling that tether man to soil. In his version, technology’s revision to surfaces also promotes manual labouring with the land. He supplies

\(^{42}\) Hall, Life, p. 37.


\(^{44}\) Ibid., p. 5.

inheritance’s ‘wonderous shape’ by keeping the friction between labours in balance—the ‘long lines’—while disputing the mythic scale of an untouched landscape by the local proportions of human touch. Touch involves the pressure of stillness and the motion of sensing in and over time. The writer attempts to make Eagle Pond touchable in the text, while remaining curiously preserved along the seams of archival discovery.

Beyond mourning for a lost agricultural world, Hall also mourns text itself. Life Work’s subject is constantly self-referential in its repeated descriptions of writing routine. It also unfolds the collective effort of writing, one dependent on a network of typists and researchers who prop up the notion of a singular writer or textual locale. In other words, the text discloses its enmeshing in a climate of production. Its diminishment is a challenge to the familiar story of printing presses as fixing devices and copyright laws that, as Modernists argued, freeze a text’s ‘protean development’. Life Work’s acknowledgement of fluidity resembles the condition of oral poetic traditions that memorised and changed poems—one work with multiple texts—to becomes one text with multiple works. Such thinking thus also reclaims the text’s place in a larger cycle of creation—in oral traditions, crafting labour, and archival resources—and scatters memory amid a holistic plateau of potential recovery-sites. The act of remembering, which a fixed text negates, is arrested as action between these sites. To continue with ice’s properties, this is not an unfreezing or melting of the text. Memory works here as an eccentric refraction in which each of its modes hold their own while reflecting one another to condition new forms of clarity. The process mirrors the strange and estranging solidity of frozen water in its moveable, useable ‘oblong chunks’.

In one way the text’s elegiac labour is a recognition of language and form’s unsettlement. Life Work creates its own smoothness—its legitimacy as a singular object—only by handling, being handled by, and being a part of, other modes of communication and arrangement. Hall inherits such notions from a tradition of New England poetry that concerned itself with various mnemonic sources. In ‘Huswifery’, Edward Taylor wants ‘memory’ spun from the ‘Loome’. While Lydia Sigourney wills her ‘shred of linen’ to

46 Ibid.
48 Edward Taylor, The Poems of Edward Taylor, ed. by Donald E. Stanford (Chapel Hill:
emerge from the ‘paper-mill’, renovated, ‘[s]tainless and smooth’ as a shiny
token reflecting the past.\textsuperscript{49} The work’s loosening of these tightly woven
designs lends itself to Taylor’s call: ‘My Conversation make to be thy Reele/
And reele the yarn thereon spun of thy Wheele’.\textsuperscript{50} Conversation’s etymolo-
gy yokes the Latin \textit{cum}, meaning together, with \textit{versus}, a row or furrow of
earth. Its place-binding roots in community and land forge a connection
with the text’s threaded themes by the suggestion of increased sociability.
In one example of a conversation in \textit{Life Work}, Hall remembers an Indian
CEO asking him, ‘what is contentment’. ‘He told me that story’ he says, ‘to
bring up a subject’.\textsuperscript{51} The text too brings up many subjects from the past,
raising them to a level of possible conviviality, and in doing so invites fur-
ther dialogue.

As Gibbons writes, poems are ‘abstract artefacts’; they are ‘cultural en-
tities that depend on the intentions of those embedded in their cultures
to come into existence, and to continue in existence’.\textsuperscript{52} But as inheritance’s
elegiac tone implies, there is no guaranteeing their continuity. Hall titles
his 2006 selected poems \textit{White Apples and the Taste of Stone}. Its ambigu-
ous hope is alluded to in the ‘ice-slabs’. Stone, as he writes in \textit{Life Work}, has
a nature to ‘press downwards’ like a reposing soul.\textsuperscript{53} But it shifts with the
stonemason’s hands which solve ‘problems that change with every stone’.
\textsuperscript{54} Its smoothness is in flux: it forms a solid, tactile yet oddly ineffable and
plaintive (for a stone is also a grave or tomb) connection to the past. And
like speech, it is fleeting as well as sedimented, geological, genealogical.\textsuperscript{55}
If Eagle Pond is Hall’s destination as a writer, then the text’s destination is
a social infiltration of the place between memory and history. This is an el-
egiac place filled with the past’s communicative methods which are avail-
able for reuse and transformation. Operating at a negative, \textit{Life Work} both
mourns and envisages the place of language in the material attachments
between people and place. At least in part, its labour of talking about the

\begin{itemize}
\item Lydia Sigourney, \textit{Poems: by Lydia H. Sigourney} (University of Michigan: Humanities
\item Taylor, \textit{The Poems}, p. 343.
\item Hall, \textit{Life}, p. 23.
\item Gibbons, \textit{How Poems Think}, p. 140.
\item Ibid., p. 122.
\item Ibid., p. 32.
\item Susan Stewart, \textit{Poetry and the Fate of the Senses} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
\end{itemize}
past, in the present’s voice, offers the glimmer of a possible destination for future communities.
LABOURING DESTINATION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Primary**


**Secondary**

