



Reconstructing Material History in the Samuel Greenberg Manuscripts

Henry Cole Smith

MA English, Spring 2025

MLIS, Certificate of Rare Books and Manuscripts, 2025

*CITATION: Smith, Henry Cole. "Reconstructing Material History in the Samuel Greenberg Manuscripts." *Bridging Fields*, no. 1 (2023-2024). <https://doi.org/10.33682/432k-xyyiw>.

Introduction

When I applied for the library science LIU-NYU dual master's degree program, my other degree being English, I knew there was one project I wanted to undertake which would involve both disciplines. Whether or not I pursued it for coursework, a thesis, or merely a personal project alongside my studies, I was going to look at the manuscripts of the poet Samuel Bernard Greenberg held in the Fales Manuscript Collection at NYU. Here, then, is a brief entry in a research diary of sorts, as I have begun and continue to be engaged in work on Samuel Greenberg, whatever form it may take in the future.

Who Was Samuel Greenberg?

But first, a sketch of his life and circumstances. Samuel Greenberg was born 1893 in Austria, and emigrated with his family to New York in 1900, where they lived on the Lower East Side. Greenberg attended public school until around 14 years old he left school to work, first at embroidering with his father and later at his brother's leather bag manufactory; the working conditions at the latter may have contributed to his contracting the tuberculosis that would eventually kill him. His first hospitalization was in 1912, at the age of 19, and for the rest of his life he would be in and out of hospitals, returning to work when he was well enough, until a final stay at the Manhattan State Hospital on Ward's Island in 1917. He died August 16, 1917, only 23 years old.

In the early 20th century, tuberculosis was still decades from an effective drug treatment, the primary prescriptions being confinement to a sanatorium, and rest. Greenberg's still-youthful and clearly highly-active mind reacted to such rest cure by seeking compatible outlets, and happily, he hit on poetry. In an extreme burst of creativity beginning around 1913 and tapering only in his final months (a period of hardly four years in all) Samuel Greenberg scribbled into at least a dozen notebooks plus myriad and multifarious scraps of paper some 600 poems, several plays, and diverse other jottings and sketches. To inform his writing, he supplemented his incomplete public school education with voracious reading at

the public library as well as in the dictionary, visits to the Metropolitan Museum and classical music concerts, and intellectual and aesthetic conversation with a coterie of acquaintances he met through his brother's music teacher. Consequently his poetry is an uneven surface of poetic imitations and archaisms, obscure words and idiosyncratic usages, misspellings and neologisms, a wavering commitment to meter and rhyme, and an overall pureness of inspiration and originality of expression which has made him a (very occasional) *cause célèbre* among later modernist and experimental poets.

These would be the writings—the sum of a brief but beautiful life prostrated to poetry—which are housed in the Fales Manuscript Collection as part of the special collections at NYU. And despite their merits and 100 years of percolation, they have never seen publication in their entirety, nor anything approaching it. It was with great anticipation therefore that I began work on the manuscripts, not only because of the aura which any original draft of a great work possesses, but because there was also certain to be much in the archives which I, and indeed all but a select few of Greenberg's already-small cult of devotees, would not have ever seen or read in any form.

But as I have come to learn, Greenberg's manuscript poems do not come in just “any form.” Since his circumstances often obliged him to write on anything he had to hand or to reuse pages for multiple drafts, his manuscripts rather often take particular—one might say pressured—forms. In fact the specific manuscripts I want to discuss appear in—or on—a very particular form indeed, namely, a Bellevue Hospital patient intake form.

“The Birds That Lost Their Trees”

BELLEVUE AND ALLIED HOSPITALS			7-53-16-12,000 (N)
BELLEVUE HOSPITAL		C-I-U-D	SERIAL No. _____
NAME _____	M. S. W. NATIVITY _____	SURGICAL DIVISION, WARD _____	
OCCUPATION _____	AGE _____	ADMITTED _____ 191 _____	DISCHARGED _____ 191 _____
DIAGNOSIS _____		COMPLICATION _____	
VISITING SURGEON _____		HOUSE SURGEON _____	
FAMILY HISTORY Gout, Rheumatism, Syphilis, Tuberculosis, Alcoholism, Nervous Affections, Cancer and Family Deaths.	PREVIOUS HISTORY Habits, Occupation, Diseases of Childhood, Venereal History; Rheumatism, Gout, Tuberculosis, Malaria, Typhoid, etc.; Previous Similar Attacks, Previous Injury (Dates), Complications and Sequels.	PRESENT ILLNESS OR INJURY Disease: Time and Mode of Attack; Injury: Time, Part or Parts, Mode of Production, Symptoms (Shock, Deformity, Impairment or Loss of Function, Hemorrhage), Ability to Walk. Other Abnormal Conditions: Time and Manner of Occurrence, Course, Treatment Previous to Admission.	
<i>The birds that lost their trees</i> <i>Early morn</i> <i>Blasphemed gods</i> <i>Spent for minutes</i> <i>in</i> <i>a cage named</i> <i>rust stained and died</i> <i>then lost a wing</i> <i>So alone a victim</i> <i>So pure a victim</i> <i>Spoke nothing</i> <i>Full of fear</i> <i>Clung the deep</i> <i>As if no world can help</i> <i>The little creature shone</i> <i>It sang no song</i> <i>O lonely song!</i> <i>It made its own too clear</i> <i>Its song did slip between</i> <i>To stalk the bird down here</i> <i>stop</i>			

Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 5, "MSS. B," NYU Special Collections

The particular hospital form is typical of its time and its use: miscellaneous, haphazard, and misaligned typography speak to its intended life as a piece of utilitarian, bureaucratic stationery from a period after the advent of modern typestyles but before that of modernist design principles, while the “admitted” and “discharged” fields pre-printed with the year to the tens place (“191_”) attest to its presumed ephemerality.

Yet Samuel Greenberg seized on this transitory sheet to inscribe a thing potentially immortal, in the following poem:

The Birds That Lost Their Trees

Early morn Blossomed gold Spread o’er a River City a call aspired that slaved and died Was but a tiny cheepy So clear a voice So fine a noise Spoke pattering bells afresh Chip tip chip tip As if no world can slip The treble creators choice It sang no song O lowly soul! It made its own too clear Woe and love did slip thereon To steal the birds own fear

While Greenberg has dated the poem, at least, to 1916, it is difficult if not impossible to say definitively whether he penciled these verses during a stay at Bellevue (though I have since discovered that there is a compelling reason, beyond his being in possession of the forms themselves, to believe that Greenberg was admitted there for a procedure). The succession of images in the poem, at least, seem to call up a scene of the young poet gazing out his hospital room window at sunrise. After all, the “morn” is said to have “Blossomed gold” over a “River City”—which is rightly how New York might impress one from Bellevue’s location on the East River, looking across to Brooklyn. Greenberg’s manuscripts also contain a handful of other poems as well as diaristic prose passages which are more explicitly occasioned by looking idly out of hospital windows—apparently a favorite pastime in his periods of confinement—so that the poem’s spreading dawn, “pattering bells,” and “chip tip” of a bird could easily draw from the same inspiration.

A final detail before turning to the verso, where we can see Greenberg has written another poem. The dotted fields at the top of the form are left unfilled, per se—but that “Age” is followed by a faint cloud of scribbled pencil.

BELLEVUE AND ALBANY

BELLEVUE HOSPITAL

NAME..... M. S. W. NATI.....

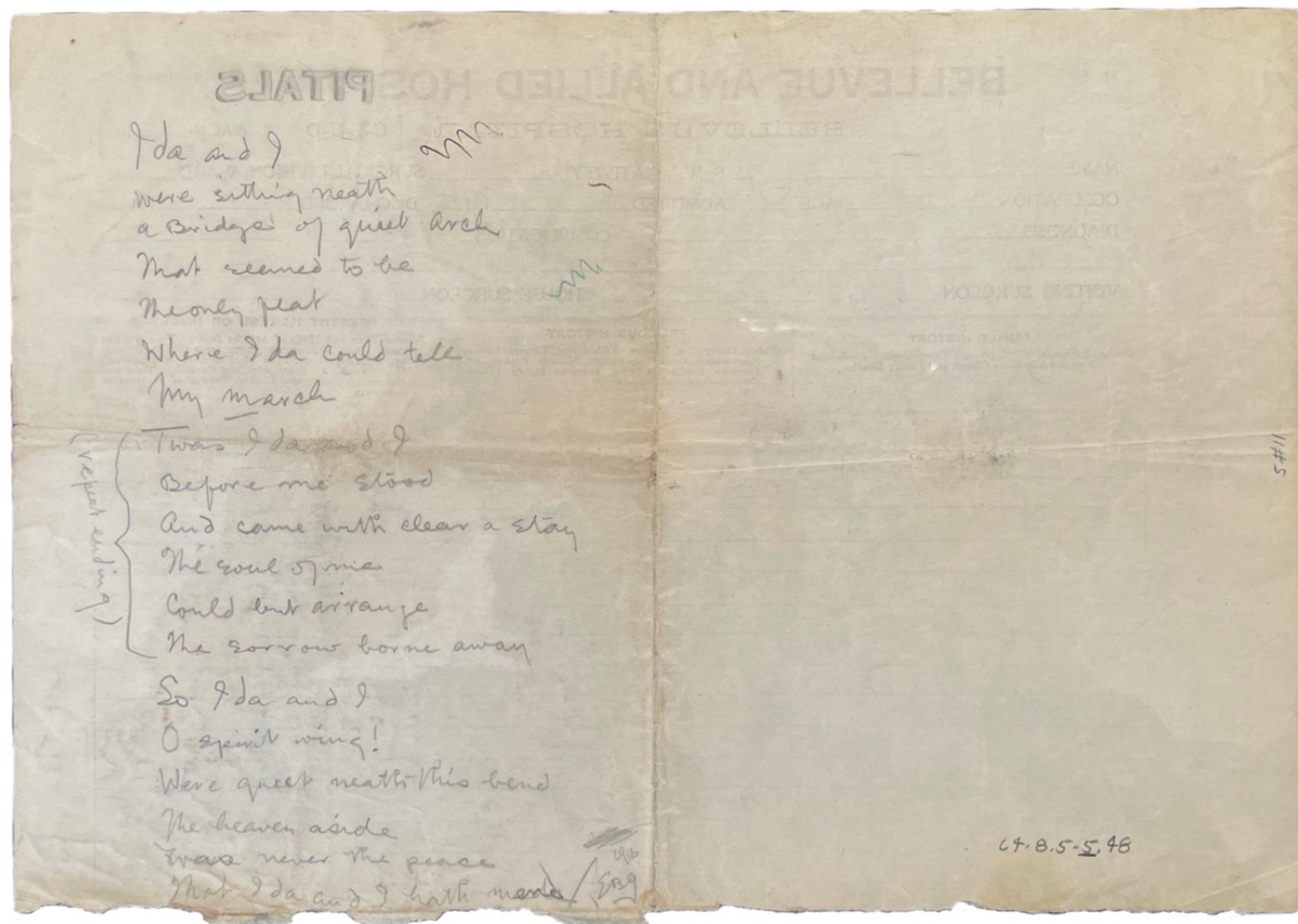
OCCUPATION..... AGE..... ADMITTED.....

DIAGNOSIS.....

Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 5, "MSS. B," NYU Special Collections

Perhaps Greenberg meant nothing by it, was only idly testing his pencil, but the reader in the archive who is aware of Greenberg's all-too-early end in just such a hospital cannot help but sense an eerie premonition, or a quiet indignation at a life cut short before its flourishing.

“Ida and I”



Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 5, “MSS. B,” NYU Special Collections

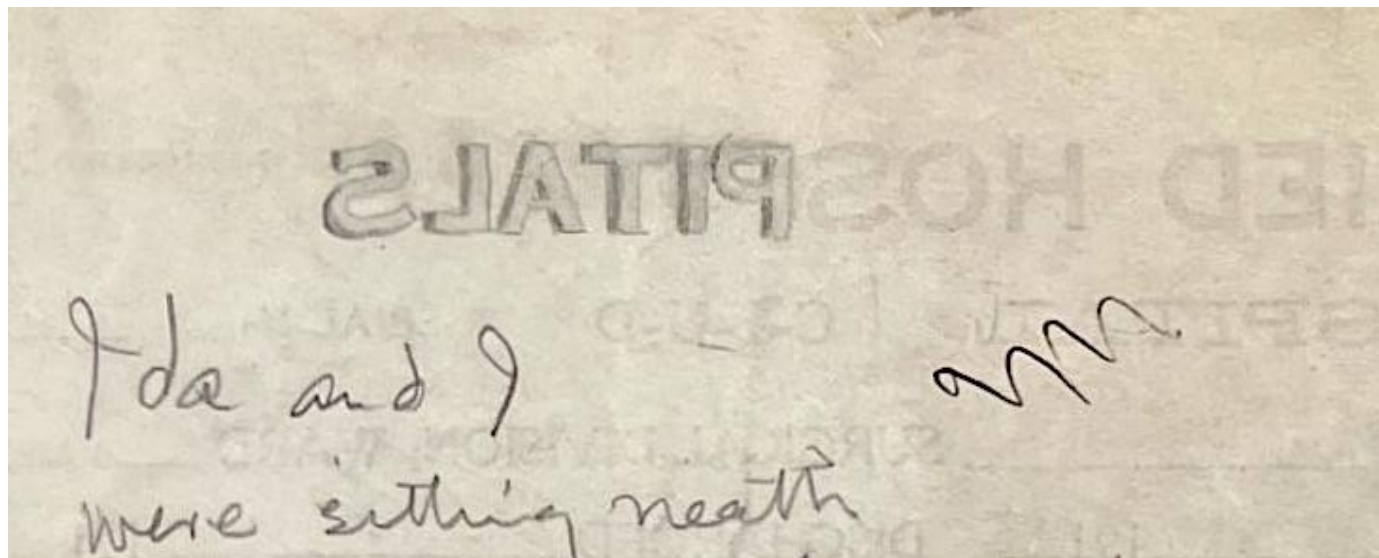
On the verso of the same sheet, Greenberg wrote another poem, which we can call “Ida and I” after its first line:

Ida and I

were sitting neath a bridge of quiet arch That seemed to be The only feat Where Ida could tell My march
 Twas Ida and I Before me stood And came with clear a stay The soul of me Could but arrange The sorrow
 borne away So Ida and I O spirit wing! Were quiet neath this bend The heaven aside Was never the peace
 That Ida and I hath mend Twas Ida and I Before me stood And came with clear a stay The soul of me
 Could but arrange The sorrow borne away

This typesetting of the poem being my interpretation of Greenberg's unrealized intention—without enough space by the bottom of the page, he drew a curly bracket around the whole second stanza, with a parenthetical note to “(repeat ending).” There is pathos in Greenberg's intentional negotiation of, and

play with, the constraints of his materials, as in this instance, or in the previous poem on the recto where he drafts the poem perpendicular to the printed lines of the form, they being too horizontally-oriented for the vertical tendency of a lyric. And yet he uses them quite neatly for a left margin, and the margin of the form to set off his title from the body of the poem. He has also seemingly, in a moment of idleness, traced over some of the printed letters of “HOSPITAL” visible through the back of the form, and given them a shadow.

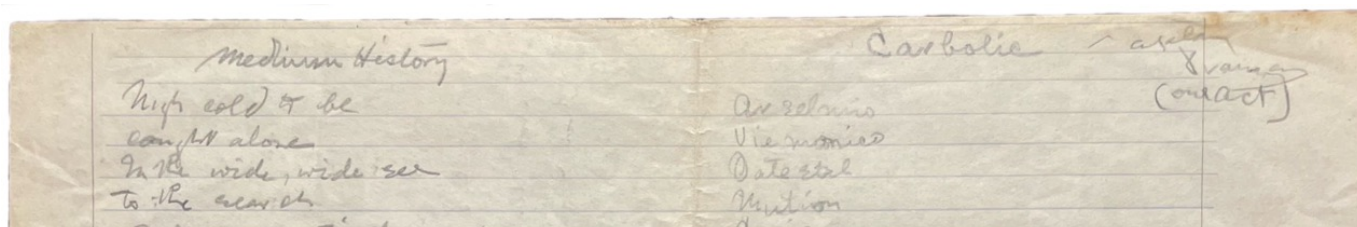


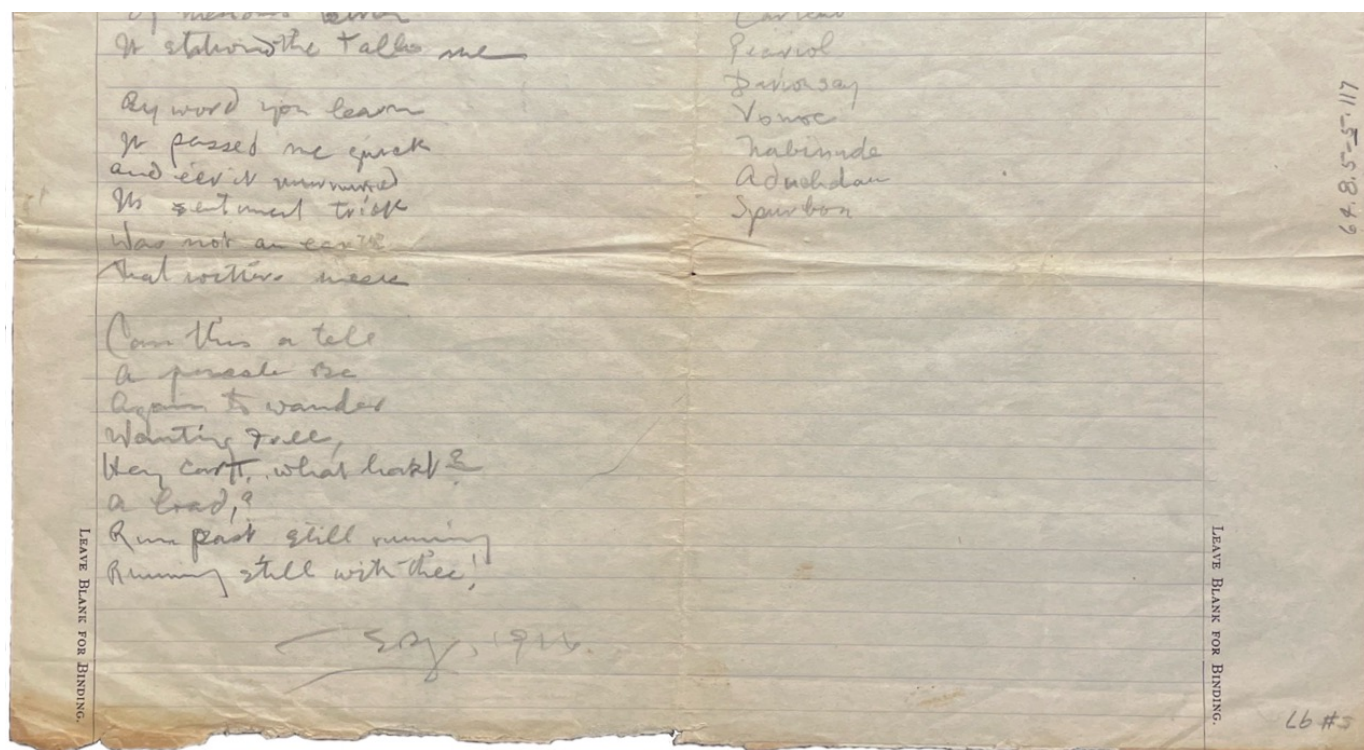
Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 5, “MSS. B,” NYU Special Collections

There are definite creases in the paper where it has been folded in both directions, and the orientation and placement of the poems suggests that they were written after the folding, on the resulting quadrant or half-page. This may explain why “Ida and I” does not continue in another column in the ample empty space apparent on the unfolded sheet—when folded, this would have been the back of the page, and perhaps he wanted to save the space for drafting another poem, thus the notation simply to repeat the second stanza at the end, and his signature and date crammed to the right of the final lines at the bottom of the page, separated by a slash. Whereas for “The Birds” he was unable to avoid printing the final line over the fold with a heavy underline, again perhaps to set off a potential separate poem to be written on the other quadrant.

While he was not to fill these empty spaces, I did wonder as to the fate of the other half of the Bellevue intake form; the bottom edge is clearly torn, and the lined space for writing appears to continue beyond it. The format of even the torn half is nearly letter size, so it’s no wonder Greenberg saw fit to tear it, and then fold it, into more manageable and economical segments. But I couldn’t imagine he would have wasted good writing paper, especially the lined recto and blank verso which the other half promised to be. Further into the archive, I found it.

“Medium History” & “Carbolic”





Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 9, "MSS. E-F," NYU Special Collections

Here, on a sheet which must be the bottom half of the Bellevue form, the only evidence of its original function are the continuing (misaligned) ruled lines, as well as a clue in the margins: printed text reading "Leave Blank for Binding" implies that these forms would have been collected and bound together such that the wide inner margin would become the gutter of the bound volume. Comparison of the torn page edges—which I was only able to do after the fact, from the images I took—shows that they join, and the pattern of creases matches as well, implying they were kept folded together for some time.

On this side of the sheet, the one printed with ruled lines, are two more manuscript drafts. The first a poem:

Medium History

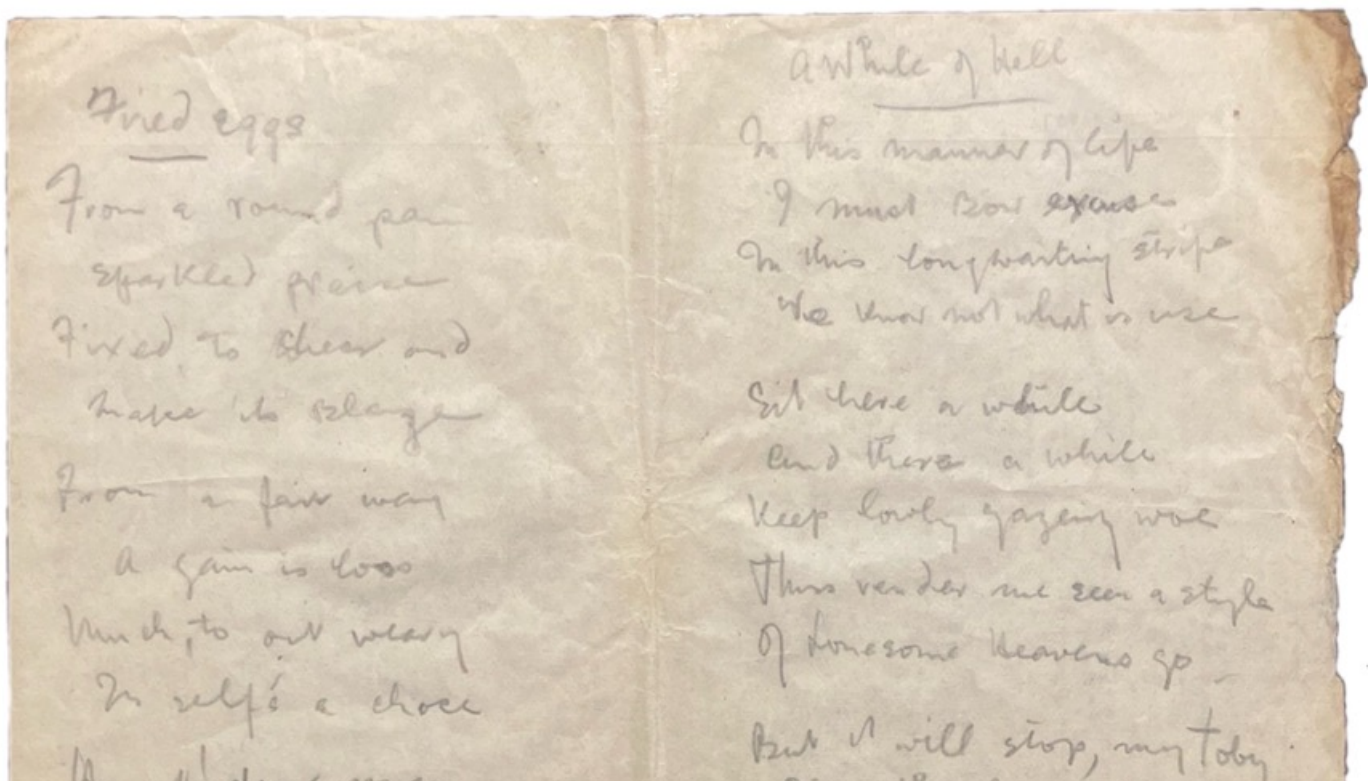
Nigh cold to be caught alone In the wide, wide see To the search Of memories birch It stationed the talls me By word you learn It passed me quick and e'er it murmured Its sentiment trick Was not an earth That withers meek Can this a tell A puzzle be Again to wander Wanting free, Hey cart, what hast? A load? Run past still running Running still with thee!

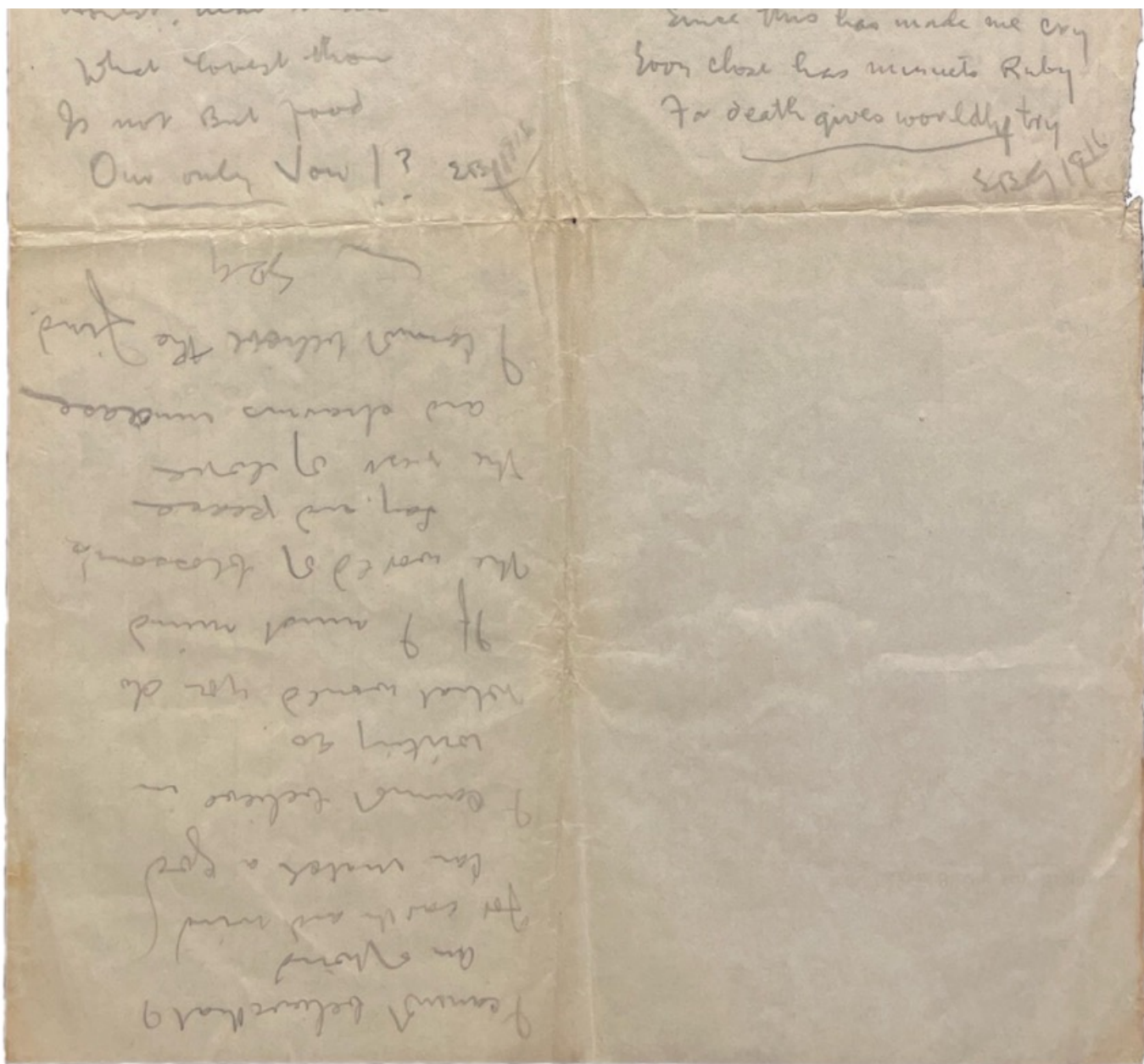
I am not satisfied with the transcription of the last two lines of the first stanza, but the handwriting is difficult to make out and it seems to me there may be a missing or transposed word in the last line—the above is my best read of the letters at the moment, though several times in other manuscripts I have been able to discern a word which first eluded me after more time, research, or experience with his handwriting. "Puzzle" in the third stanza is Greenberg's frequent way of rendering "puzzle," one of his characteristic spelling quirks along with swapping the "e" and "i" in words like "reign" and "feign." I hope to resolve my doubts about the first stanza, because the poem interests me from the title, and I enjoy the conclusion with its question and non-answer (what is the cart carrying? "A load"), and delightfully repetitive final couplet.

Across from this poem is an instance of a form common in the Greenberg manuscripts: a sketch for a play, ultimately unwritten. These will sometimes include a brief synopsis of plot, or descriptions of scenery, but this one, “Carbolic - a play drama (one act)” consists only of that title and designation, and a list of characters. Nevertheless these lists of character names are some of the places that Greenberg gives most license to his fanciful imagination. The present list, from what I have been able make out, includes such examples as “Avselmio,” “Mution,” “Peaviol,” “Vonoc,” “Nabinude,” and “Spurbon.” In some cases he is evidently distorting existing names or appears to evoke them (“Avselmio” for Anselmo, “Peaviol” suggests Percival), some he derives from words (“Mution” from such as motion or munition, “Spurbon” from bourbon), and others apparently invented out of whole cloth. At first blush the play’s title, too, “Carbolic” appears to be such as these. In the case of our frequently hospitalized poet, however, its origin is easily guessed at. Carbolic acid, also known as phenol, was a common antiseptic and also lent its name to carbolic soap. Perhaps Greenberg, always on the lookout for new and strange words, read it out of a medicine cabinet and found it exotic and evocative, and spun out this list of character names on that impulse.

“Fried Eggs” & “A While of Hell”

Why was this manuscript page separated from its other half in the archive? For the most part, manuscripts in the Samuel Greenberg boxes, like the other manuscripts in the Fales Manuscript Collection, are organized alphabetically by title. As with any standardized rule applied to an unruly body of work, there will inevitably be exceptions, best-guesses, either/ors, and tough choices. Alphabetizing by title makes the Greenberg manuscripts more usable in one sense, for finding particular poems and grouping multiple drafts if they exist. But with difficult handwriting, torn pages, ambiguous titling or separation between works, and many instances of multiple works on a single page, it is not a perfect system (nor is there likely to be one). Thus the top half of the Bellevue form is found in the folder “MSS. B” according to “The Birds That Lost Their Trees” on the front of the page, and this bottom half of the form, with “Medium History” and “Carbolic” on the front, is found in the folder “MSS. E-F” for the poem “Fried Eggs” on the back, one of three more on this side





Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 9, "MSS. E-F," NYU Special Collections

Fried Eggs

From a round pan sparked praise Fixed, to sheer and make its blaze
From a fair way a gain is loss Much,
to out weary In self's a choce Honest! dear man What lovest thou Is not but food Our only Vow!?

If this piece records mealtime at the hospital, it would not be the only one in the manuscripts. Or perhaps it longingly recalls a domestic scene missed; "From a fair way / a gain is loss." I read "choce" in the eighth line as "choice" (not a characteristic misspelling, so probably just a scribal error), reflecting the relativism of gain and loss in the same stanza. The affirmation of intention sets the stage for the admonition (of self?) in the final stanza, against the lapse of conviction (weariness, seeing gain as loss) in the second.

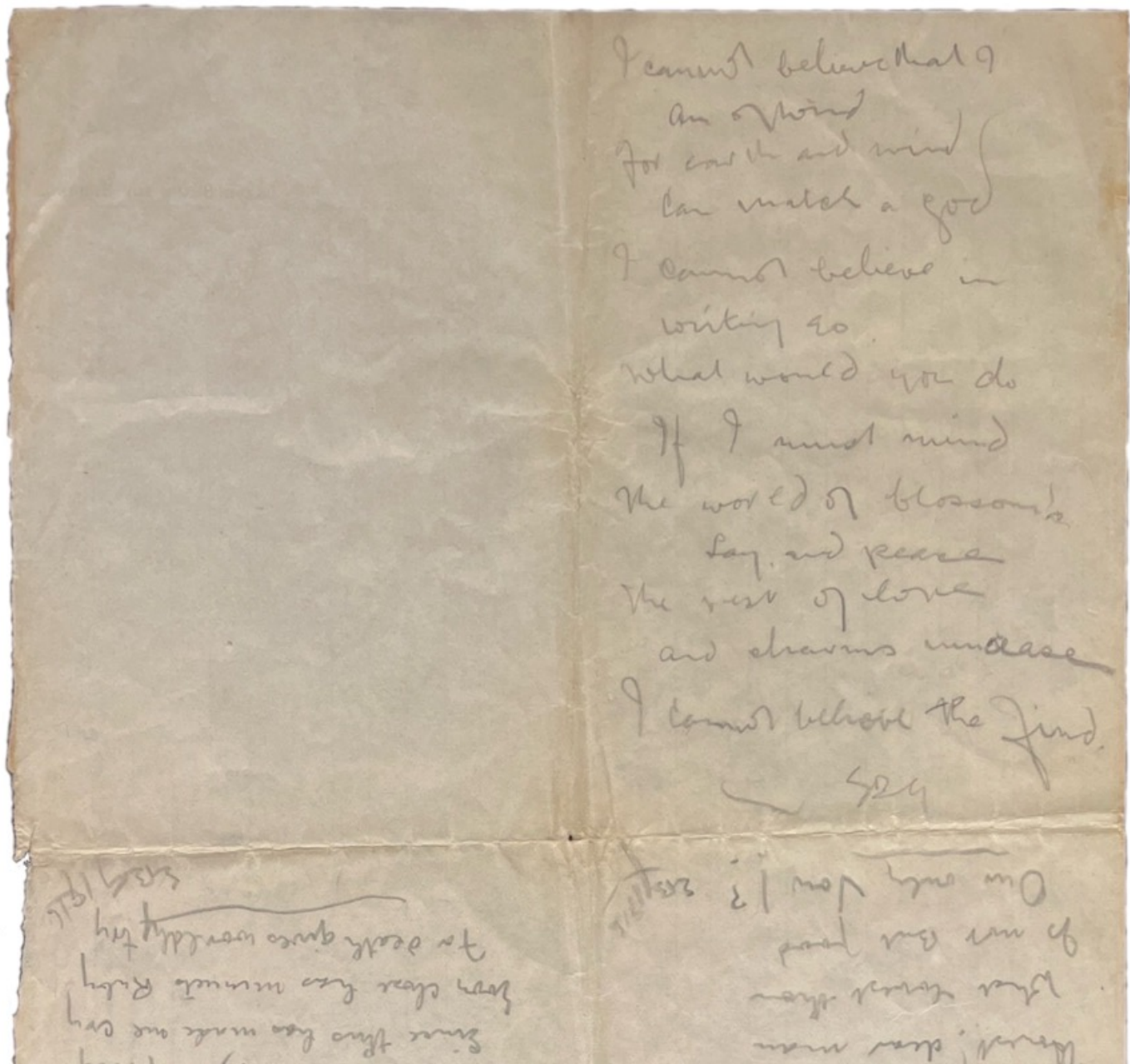
Next to "Fried Eggs," "A While of Hell" is bleaker. It seems to evoke the long periods of waiting entailed in hospitalization:

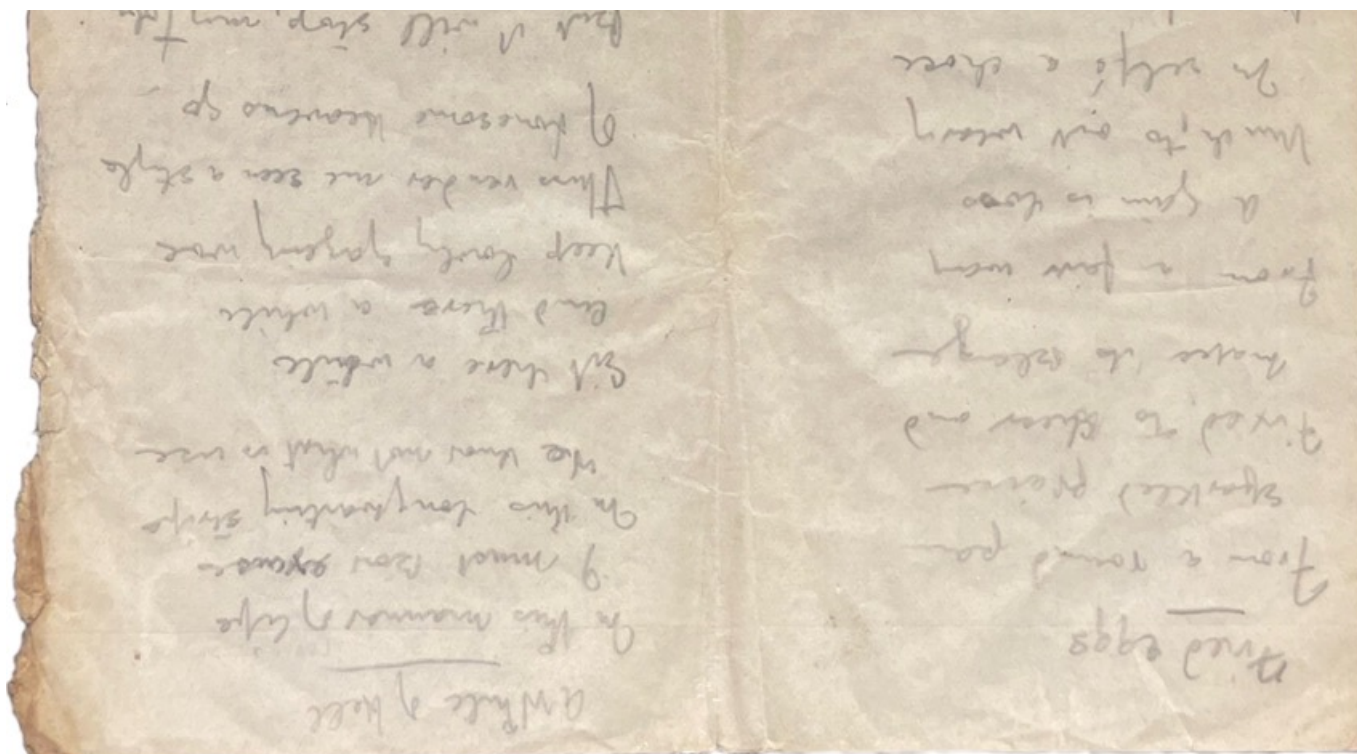
A While of Hell

In this manner of life I must bow excuse In this long waiting strife We know not what is use Sit here a while
And there a while Keep lowly gazeing woe Thus render me seen a style of Lonesome Heavens go
But it will stop, my Toby Since this has made me cry Soon close has minuets Ruby For death gives worldly try

The speaker's attempt to shake their gloomy feelings in order to console loved ones is made the more striking by the pair of off-rhymed proper names—though I take them to be poetic inventions—from a poet whose verse more often spins off into abstraction or language play. There seems a pun (though difficult to say how intentional) when a poem about waiting gives “minuets,” a dance, instead of “minutes,” which goes toward uplifting the sentiment of the final lines, up from “Sit[ting] here a while / And there a while / ... lowly gazeing.”

“I cannot believe...”





Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folder 9, "MSS. E-F," NYU Special Collections

If "A While of Hell" began in melancholy and torpor, the poem in the third unfolded "quadrant" as it were on this side of the page—which must be flipped to read it—and the final one on this sheet, continues the uplift of that poem's conclusion and reflects a state of metaphysical transcendence:

I cannot believe that I am of wind For earth and wind can match a god I cannot believe in writing so
What would you do If I must mind The world of blossom's Lay and peace The rest of love and charms
uncease I cannot believe the Find.

The handwriting can be ambiguous, and initially I thought (even wanted) it to read "mind" rather than "wind" in the second and third lines, but have decided that the latter is accurate to the manuscript version, and thus that the pairing is not one of matter and spirit (earth and mind) but two elements of matter, the most dense and the most rare (earth and air/wind). Still, I think the specter of "mind" hovers behind the words, since the "mind" does indeed appear later, and because it would form an alliteration with "match," and continue the rhyme which continues through the final line with "Find" (for which "wind" is an off rhyme).

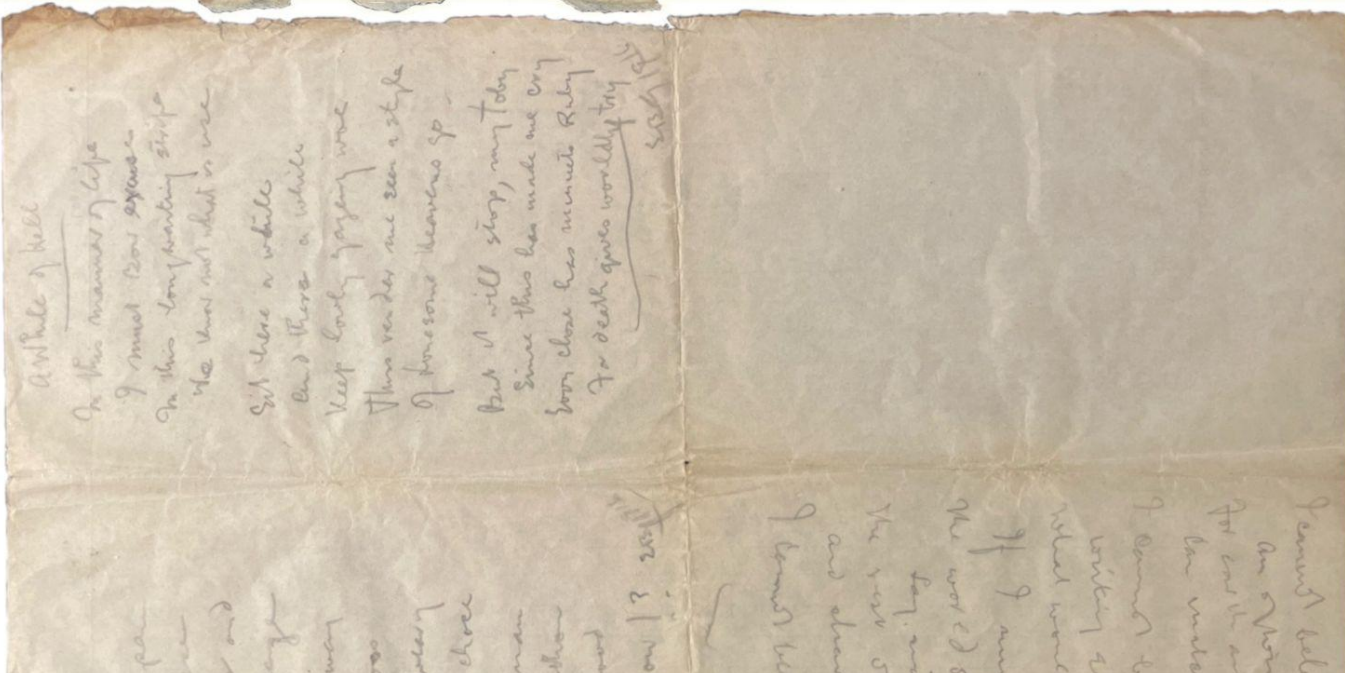
In this poem, as several times elsewhere in the manuscripts, the poet doubts the power of writing, or his own abilities to express himself in it. And yet, "What would you do" asks the acquisitive mind in a frail body laid up in a hospital bed with an incurable illness. Finally, the beauty of the world—its earth, wind, and blossoms; its peace, love, and charms—seem an impossible gift, for however long we are permitted to "Find" them, or as "A While of Hell" put it, to give them "worldly try."

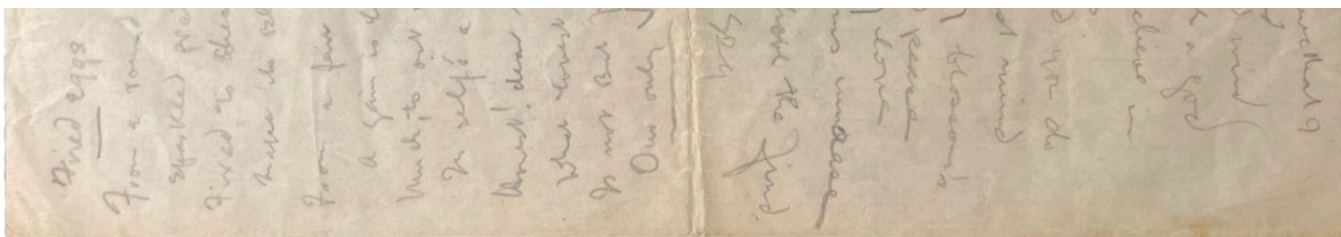
I, too, can hardly believe the find. Working with the Greenberg manuscripts has been, and promises to continue being, an astonishing journey of discovery—of the poems themselves and his other writings, but also of poignant biographies, of both the poet and his materials, hidden therein.

Bellevue Hospital Form, Reconstructed

Because the manuscript pages I have discussed above are housed in separate archival folders—only one of which may be viewed at a time in the NYU Special Collections reading room—I include them here as they would join together, front and back, from my digital images. Possibly this is the first time since the manuscripts arrived at NYU in the 1960s, if not longer, that they have been reunited.

BELLEVUE AND ALLIED HOSPITALS		
BELLEVUE HOSPITAL		C-I-U-D
NAME		SERIAL No.
M. S. W.		NATIVITY
OCCUPATION		ADMITTED
AGE		DISCHARGED
DIAGNOSIS		COMPLICATION
VISITING SURGEON		HOUSE SURGEON
FAMILY HISTORY Gout, Rheumatism, Syphilis, Tuberculosis, Alcoholism, Nervous Affections, Cancer and Family Deaths.	PREVIOUS HISTORY Habits, Occupation, Diseases of Childhood, Venereal History; Rheumatism, Gout, Tuberculosis, Malaria, Typhoid, etc.; Previous Similar Attacks, Previous Injury (Dates), Complications and Sequela.	PRESENT ILLNESS OR INJURY Disease: Time and Mode of Attack; Injury: Time, Part or Parts, Mode of Production, Symptoms (Shock, Deformity, Impairment or Loss of Function, Hemorrhage), Ability to Walk. Other Abnormal Condition: Time and Manner of Occurrence, Course, Treatment Previous to Admission.
<i>Early morning</i> <i>Blasphemed, yelled</i> <i>spread his arms</i> <i>a case of</i> <i>restlessness and died</i> <i>was last a thin skeleton</i> <i>so close a friend</i> <i>so you a witness</i> <i>spoke of the</i> <i>ship the ship the</i> <i>do it no world can sleep</i> <i>the trouble creature choice</i> <i>He says no sorry</i> <i>O lovely soul!</i> <i>He made us own the clear</i> <i>the sea) and did ship - person</i> <i>To start the freedom part</i> <i>He looks that last part</i>		
<i>64855-57117</i> <i>64855-57117</i>		





Fales Manuscript Collection, MSS.001, Box 74, Folders 5 & 9, NYU Special Collections