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Introduction: Poetries of England 2000–2040

Contemporary poetry from Britain, that is verse composed and published in the last two decades, has inevitably not generated an extensive scholarly literature. Writing about verse now is a risky business and is likely to give too many hostages to fortune. There are serious and insightful studies, such as Fiona Toland’s *New Directions: Writing post 1990. Texts, Contexts, Connections* (2010) and Nerys Williams’s *Contemporary Poetry* (2011). Our own volume in the Wiley Blackwell Companion series, while containing several essays that cover 21st-century verse, does so in the context of work done in the previous forty years. Thus, much of the contemporary analytic and interpretative writing on contemporary verse is limited to the review pages and interviews with poets in poetry journals, available in the invaluable files of the National Poetry Library at London’s South Bank Centre. This collection of essays is an attempt to add to the discussion of contemporary poetry, although it does so from a particular angle.

The title of this gathering of essays needs to be explained. The plural word “Poetries” is motivated by a sense that there is no one poetry of a country or a collective, and, indeed, there never has been. The essays that follow discuss poetry that employs traditional metrical and rhythmic patternings, and those that deviate radically from those. Some discuss free verse; others discuss fixed forms (traditional and non-traditional). Others consider verse that is best seen as akin to concrete poetry and land art. Some of the verse discussed is clearly meant for public performance; other texts are meant for private reading. Subject matters are similarly diverse: war, the surveillance state, ecology, working-class lives, Black experience, private reflection, and public anger.

“England,” too, needs glossing. The use of the term by the guest editors, an Austrian and a Scot, is deliberate. It certainly does not subscribe to any nationalist agenda, as we hope will be apparent in the essays that follow. The use of the term

“England” is born out of the logic of current terminology. If there is a category of verse that designates Irish or Welsh or Scottish poetry, and this is the case and is widely accepted as such, then it must be possible to discuss English verse. The English do, after all, make up the vast majority of people in the British archipelago. But just as with the Irish, Welsh, or Scots, the term “English” is far from monolithic. Regional, ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic differences are apparent among those who can credibly be classed as English. One must also always allow for overlap. As they always have, writers often embrace dual affiliations: for instance, English and Caribbean, English and continental European, English and Scots. In this collection of essays, we have operated with a perhaps reductive but practical set of criteria. An English writer is one who by place of birth or residence, by choice of publisher, by choice of topic, by choice of locale, and by self-identification (or lack of any other self-identification) can clearly be classed, to some degree, as an English poet. In 1982, in their anthology *Contemporary British Poetry*, Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion made the adjective “British” expansive and controversial. Our use of the word “English” is modest and, we hope, uncontentious. It certainly allows for other identifications and self-identifications. It is not exclusive or constricted.

The dates given in the title may give the reader pause. The opening one – 2000 – should be uncontroversial, although a calendar date does not necessarily mark a significant literary one. However, James Byrne and Claire Pollard in their anthology *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (2009) clearly see the new millennium as marking a noteworthy shift in poetry, and such a sense that a new century brings a new literature is widespread. Just as with the 20th century, one can and should discuss when the century begins in literary or cultural terms, so with regard to the present century debates will and should continue as to when it actually began. This observation brings us to the second date in the title: 2040. The choice of a *terminus ad quem* is, to a degree, an arbitrary one. By placing 2040 in the title, we wish to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that the tendencies and processes observed in the essays gathered here are not completed. We can, in truth, have no idea how poetry will develop over the next few decades. But we might be able to speculate based on what we can observe now. Hard scientists do this all the time. We invited authors to speculate in this way. Some have done so; others have perhaps wisely restrained themselves. But even so, we invite readers to think about what kind of future might emerge out of what is observed here. What topics will endure? What writers look like they are destined to be remembered in twenty years’ time? What technical configurations will survive or return?

The essays collected here certainly point to varied and sometimes surprising features of contemporary English poetry. In “Beyond ‘for ever England’: Contemporary British Women’s War Poetry and the First World War Canon,” Sofia Permiakova points to a revival of poetry about warfare and about England’s (and Britain’s) wars in the 21st century, but one written from different perspectives

(female, post-colonial) from that of the traditional war poetry of the previous century. In “‘He’d seen it in the words of Owen and Brooke’: The Influence of Great War Poetry on Post-Millennium Soldier Poets,” Felix Behler discusses a related tendency in early 21st-century verse, in the poetry written by soldiers on active service in the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan, and how such poetry connects with earlier soldier poetry. Conflict, too, is the subject of Juha Virtanen’s essay “love: necessity: anti-fa”: Hostile Environments and Necropolitics in Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*,” in which he discusses politically engaged poetry on state sponsored exclusion, surveillance, and violence in the early years of the present century. Legacies of previous political and economic conflicts are addressed in Matthias Fechner’s “The Unaccompanied: Poetic Expressions of the Working Classes in England,” which considers poetic responses to the erosion and some might say the deletion of the traditional English working class in the late 20th and early 21st century. Different political concerns, that is ecological issues, loom large in Tymon Adamczewski’s “(im)Material Geographies: From Poetics of Terraforming to Earth Scripts,” which looks at contemporary poetic responses to the current ecological crisis facing England, Britain, and the world.

Technical and formal developments in verse, in some cases clearly aimed at reader accessibility, are discussed in the above essays, especially in Virtanen’s and Adamczewski’s pieces, but these form the central focus of the three remaining essays. Jerzy Jarniewicz’s “Translation-Poems: Blurred Genres and Shifting Authorship in Contemporary English Verse” considers what is already and what he thinks will be an important category of poem in the 21st century, that is one that blurs the boundaries between translation and original creation. Peter Hühn’s “Forms of Sequentiality in Contemporary English Poetry: Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell” looks at the work of poets whose poems are discussed elsewhere in our collection, but which he approaches within a rigorous narratological framework. This is the kind of analysis that we, the editors of this collection, consider to be particularly valuable, and one that that we can only hope becomes more widespread in the new century. Technical features of 21st-century verse figure prominently in David Malcolm’s “Brand New Oldies: Recent English Narrative Verse,” which discusses a recent resurgence of longer narrative poems, a resurgence that, as with Jarniewicz’s translation poems, blurs borders and categories. The formal focus of these three essays, in conjunction with aspects of the more thematically focused pieces, marks out a direction which the editors believe will prove very valuable in future work in the field of poetry.

Despite their diversity of focus and topic, the essays echo each other. Crisis, new and angry voices, the prominence of Black women’s voices, a desire to reach new audiences (to democratize poetry, as one commentator puts it), and transgression and blurring of boundaries (thematic and technical) run through all of them. The reader is left to draw her or his conclusions about the shape of things to come. To what extent the thematic and technical configurations pointed to in the essays

are specific to English as opposed to wider British poetic interests is an issue that requires further critical reflection.

As always, after editing a collection of essays, the editors are aware of what more there is to say and do. Topics immediately suggest themselves as valuable research areas for 21st century verse. For example, there needs to be a thorough investigation of the institutions associated with poetry in the early 21st century. By institutions we understand, for example, the publishers of poetry, the publishing houses that still have poetry lists, both large presses and smaller ones. We mean, too, the journals and magazines, still often ephemeral, online and off-line, that concentrate on verse. The prize system, which is important for poetic careers, needs close scrutiny, as do the links between publishers and major prizes. The publishing opportunities for non-white poets in the new century should be addressed. Creative writing courses now play a vital part in developing young poets' careers. The impact of such courses on subject matter and technique is worth looking at. Equally worthy of attention are the institution of the Poet Laureate and the influence that organizations such as the Poetry Book Society and The Royal Society of Literature, to name just two, as well as libraries, most prominently the National Poetry Library and the British Library, exercise on the development of poetry. These should be thoroughly studied.

It is certainly worth documenting and analysing the role of poetry in other media than print. Electronic ways of delivering and producing poetry offer new possibilities. Google poetry, spam poetry, the use of the internet as a collage-building machine – are these or similar developments here to stay? They should certainly be documented and discussed. Developments in performance poetry and the integration of verse with music (dub poetry, for example), while not new, may show innovative tendencies. The use of poetry in theatrical performance has not vanished, but still offers poets new kinds of audience.

Other topics also suggest themselves. England is rich in dialects, and there is a long tradition of dialect poetry. Are dialect verse traditions – Black Country, North-east, Liverpool, Mancunian, Cumbrian, West Country – alive and vibrant? Has a metropolitan norm crushed them and marginalized them? Other questions can be asked. Have traditional fixed forms vanished from contemporary English verse? Does a kind of loosely iambic free verse dominate journals and publishers' lists? And what of religious poetry? Is it still alive or is it absent in what is usually seen as a secular time in a secular society? Readers will doubtless be able to ask other questions. If this collection prompts such reflections and research, it will have served one of its purposes.

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Beyond “for ever England”: Contemporary British Women’s War Poetry and the First World War Canon

Abstract: Turning to the First World War patriotic narrative of “for ever England,” epitomised by Rupert Brooke and his writing as the point of departure, this paper investigates 21st century commemorative women’s poetry written during the First World War centenary years and its subversive interaction with this traditional war narrative. This article argues that while the public discourse on war memory often turned to the idea of a “shared past” between the UK and former colonies, thus “sanitising” the history of colonial violence (as argued by Santanu Das), poems by Yrsa Daley-Ward, Malika Booker, Imtiaz Dharker, and Jenny Lewis written for commemorative anthologies effectively de-colonise the narrative(s) of the First World War by opening up the space for new voices and construing the image of England beyond “for ever England” in its relation to other spaces and other wars.

Keywords: women’s war poetry, the First World War, Jenny Lewis, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Imtiaz Dharker, Malika Booker, Rupert Brooke, colonialism

1. Introduction

The title of this paper is cited from arguably the most recognisable First World War poem, “The Soldier” by Rupert Brooke. Published and canonised immediately after Brooke’s death in 1915, the poem emerged as a “nostalgic motif of England and Englishness” (Rutherford 8). The famous patriotic image of the “English heaven,” described at the end of the poem, is central to Brooke’s other writing, too: in his short prose text “An Unusual Young Man,” published in 1916, Brooke writes how

[The] word “England” seemed to flash like a line of foam. With a sudden tightening of his heart, he realised that there might be a raid on the English coast. [...] The

idea sickened him. He was immensely surprised to perceive that the actual earth of England held for him a quality which he found in A-, and in a friend's honour, and scarcely anywhere else, a quality which, if he'd ever been sentimental enough to use the word, he'd have called "holiness." His astonishment grew as the full flood of "England" swept him on from thought to thought. He felt the triumphant helplessness of a lover. (177–178)

In both texts – "An Unusual Young Man" and "The Soldier" – England emerges as giving, fertile, maternal, and peaceful, thus brushing aside the history of the country's colonial violence. The starting point of this patriotic sentiment is the fear of "warfare on English soil" (177). The image of England embodied as a woman in sudden need of protection exhilarates the speaker and ultimately opens up the possibility of a masculinist, traditionalist, patriotic voice.

This, however, was hardly a new voice: as Rutherford writes, at the end of the 19th century, observing the negative impacts of modernity and social instability, many British writers and intellectuals turned to "rural England as a symbol of the country's unchanging essence," as "an Arcadian idyll" (51). This narrative was set to "reinvent the English nation in an age of imperialism" (50–51). Despite its focus on (an imaginary) England, it was simultaneously embedded in colonial thinking: in his seminal work *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell writes that "the special British ruralism is partly the result [...] of a tradition of Imperialist exile from home" (252). Fussell based his argument on Raymond Williams, who argued that the romantic idea of "home" emerged prominently among Britons living in the colonies. Their "ideal of rural England" opposed the "strangeness" of the colonial spaces: "[England's] green peace contrasted with the tropical or arid places of actual work; its sense of belonging, of community, [idealised] by contrast with the tensions of colonial rule and the isolated alien settlement" (405). These patriotic feelings embedded in the idealised image of the rural English countryside only intensified with the start of the First World War. As Craig argues, "in reaction to the external threat [...] England was recreated between 1914 and 1918 as the site of rural holiness" (131). Perfectly placed in this narrative, the image of "for ever England" became a convenient source of patriotism during the First World War, and a source of nostalgia thereafter (Rutherford 8).

In this article,¹ I am turning to Brooke as a starting point, against which contemporary commemorative poetry will be analysed. His famous poem epitomises a British, or specifically English, heroic war narrative, which still exists in various forms in commemoration and the popular memory of the First World War, manifesting itself most evidently in the cultural centrality of the figure of the 'soldier boy' or soldier-poet. For a long time, the centrality of British male soldier experience signified the marginality and exclusion of the colonial voice as well as voices of women, conscientious objectors, and other non-combatants, both immediately after the First World War and in the decades to come. In this paper,

I offer a comparative close reading of commemorative poems written by Jenny Lewis, Yrsa Daley-Ward, Malika Booker, and Imtiaz Dharker. These texts present different strategies of writing war beyond “for ever England.” Daley-Ward and Booker oppose the colonial narratives by creating a strikingly different image of England in war poetry, and by introducing new speakers. Lewis and Dharker turn to other wars and non-European spaces while remaining within the commemorative framework. In my analysis of these contemporary texts, I will also occasionally return to the figure of the soldier-poet, because, as my analysis shows, tension with original First World War writing, as well as its well-established iconography, remains at the core of the 21st century commemoration.

2. The First World War Centenary: Poetry and Commemoration

Over the past decades, the centrality of the white English soldier narrative has been continuously challenged by cultural historians and literary scholars of the First World War. Remarkable scholarly work has been done by Santanu Das (*Race, Empire and First World War Writing*), Richard Smith (*Jamaican Volunteers in the First World War*), Catherine Reilly, Nosheen Khan, Margaret Higonnet (in the anthology *Lines of Fire*), and others. In this academic and cultural context, some changes have finally started to take place in the public discourse surrounding the First World War and its commemoration. In his most recent article “Colonial Commemoration in a Time of Multiculturalism” (2021), Santanu Das writes that something was different about the First World War centenary celebrations: the programme set up between 2014 and 2018 was conceptualised as “the grand-stage to play the theme of multiculturalism” with a strong focus on “diversification” (22). However, Das convincingly argues that in terms of public memory “diversification” did not lead to “decolonisation”: on the level of the political discourse, the narrative of the “shared past” was often instrumentalised (29–30). A narrative was constructed that was supposed to unite the 21st century UK and its former colonies in the process of commemoration, circumventing the “shared past” of centuries of colonial violence and oppression (Das 2021, 21–22).

In this complex commemorative framework, poetry remained one of the central forms in which commemoration was ‘performed’: new poems emerged in large numbers – commissioned for anthologies, war documentaries and performances. Some anthologies commemorated particular poets (*Peace Poetry: RSL Poets Mark the Centenary of Wilfred Owen’s Death*, 2018), others turned to international examples of First World War poetry for inspiration (*1914: Poetry Remembers*, 2013). Other anthologies addressed experiences that were never represented in the First World War canon (*Unwritten: Caribbean Poems After the First World War*, 2018). The scope of poets and poetries represented there was very diverse, which is essential to acknowledge in a field historically dominated by white male

voices: many women poets, poets of colour, and poets of migration background were commissioned to contribute. Similarly, while big names (such as Carol Ann Duffy, Jackie Kay, Simon Armitage) were represented, these anthologies also gave a platform to a new generation of (performance) poets, such as Yrsa Daley-Ward or Warsan Shire. Among these responses, the centrality of Duffy's, as British Poet Laureate at the time (2009–2019), has to be addressed: throughout the centenary years, Duffy edited several commemorative anthologies and wrote commemorative poetry which was widely represented in the UK media as well as integrated into the commemorative events. For instance, Duffy's poem "A Wound in Time" was part of "Pages of the Sea" (2018), a UK-wide commemorative event conceptualised and curated by Danny Boyle. Her editorial efforts to bring together a diverse group of contemporary voices to comment on the First World War opened up the space of war writing. Namely, she expanded the field of who is encouraged to write about the events of public importance of such scale and significance in the UK and within the UK commemorative framework.

While the poetry that was commissioned in the commemorative context might also be instrumentalised by political discourse, it certainly generates more nuance, and, I would argue, does the work of "decolonisation" that Das deems necessary. Many contemporary poets writing in a commemorative context today also effectively subvert the expected forms that commemoration can take and change the perspective on who gets to be commemorated and how. In this essay, I will turn to selected poems written by women poets in the context of the 2014–2018 First World War centenary celebrations. In these new texts, the questions of Black, colonial or female agency become central, as women poets write work that challenges the established narratives of the First World War.

3. England From Far Away: Colonial Speakers, Post-Colonial Perspectives

It is not accidental that the poetry anthology which was published in 2018 focussing on the Caribbean experience of the First World War was called *Unwritten*. In the absence of the 'original' colonial soldier poetry in the canon, poets such as Karen McCarthy Woolf, Malika Booker, Jackie Kay, Yrsa Daley-Ward and others are doing the work of writing 'into the void'. In their works, these poets reimagine what this body of writing might have looked like had it existed. Very often this writing is based on stories of soldiers and their families who left some form of a written trace: for instance, Kay wrote poems for a BBC Four documentary about a Black Scottish soldier in the First World War whose diary was accidentally found in Glasgow in 2004 (Kay). Booker's poems published in the anthology *Unwritten* were inspired by a story of a young soldier displayed at the Jamaica Military Museum (Booker). Charnell Lucien's poems "Broken Letters" were also "inspired by real correspondence during the war found in the Imperial Museum" (Lucien). In

other words, there is a record of these Black and colonial experiences in the context of the First World War, but that record was rarely made available in the context of the UK commemoration, or rarely became the subject of commemorative literature or poetry. As a result, these poets introduce new speakers and new voices into the established commemorative narratives. While England as the metropole inevitably appears in these texts, it is represented in a way that is far removed from if not directly opposed to an Anglocentric version of the First World War.

“When Your Mother Calls You, Come” (2016) by Yrsa Daley-Ward was a part of the commemorative multimedia project *Fierce Light*. The poem follows a Black Jamaican man who volunteers to fight for England in the First World War. The text is submerged in conflicted contexts of masculinity, colonial patriotism and violence, and the underrepresented Black and colonial experience of the war. The tension between the colonial sense of duty and colonial oppression emerges early on in the poem. The second stanza reads: “If your mother was stolen / Or you never had one / You go to the one who calls you / Even if her voice comes through far away / And she doesn’t know your name” (2016a, 9). The reference to imperial Britain as a mother(-land) is related to the traditional iconography of Britannia, especially in the context of patriotic verse. However, here the image of the “mother” from “far away” is opposed by the image of the “stolen mother”: a metaphor of the colonial order’s distorting a sense of belonging in the colonies. The image of the “stolen mother” may also be linked to narratives of slavery, thus referring to earlier storylines that are an integral part of British imperial history.

To oppose the voice of England, the mother from “far away,” Daley-Ward introduces a second voice in the poem, the voice of the soldier’s grandmother, who laments:

Your grandma said, “Don’t
you go. This war that isn’t
ours will take the best of us
and the worst of us
[...]
Our men too black so they send dem
away Our men try back again dey send
dem away Some of dem too soft and
dey run them ‘way most they a guh lose
and few they take why our boys a run
guh foreign to be German bait?” (2016a, 10)

What stands out is the ‘foreignness’ of this war, referred to twice in this excerpt: “war that isn’t ours” and “why our boys a run guh foreign.” This stance effectively opposes the narrative of a shared war that, as Das argues, commemorative and political discourse has embraced. The narrative of the imperial duty ‘calling’ its

colonial subjects, which emanates from the estranged and distant ‘mother,’ therefore clashes with the familiar voice of another female ancestor, the grandmother. It is especially interesting to hear Daley-Ward read the last section: she intones it differently from the rest of the poem, emphasising a distinctive rhythm and melody, making this stanza stand out (2016b). This is the case of ‘giving voice’ in a very literal sense: not only through the choice of a character/speaker who is completely absent from the ‘grand narrative’ of the war, but also by representing Caribbean English in melody and print in the texture of the poem (“dey,” “dem,” “guh” etc.). In the case of Daley-Ward, it is also the language that embodies her own family history, as a daughter of a Jamaican woman.

However, Daley-Ward also complicates this anti-colonial sentiment by writing about a protagonist who, in fact, volunteers to fight, believing in a version of imperial patriotism and duty. Within this complicated context, it is significant that one of the means that is instrumental in creating this false sense of shared identity is English poetry, which appears in the poem as means of colonial propaganda:

and when your mother calls you
 you come swiftly
 [...]
 come half-reciting
 parables you learned
 as a child
 running over fields
 with pans of water
 quoting English verse (2016a, 11)

In this section of the poem, “English verse” can be read as a metonymy for colonial education, which encouraged such men to fight under the British flag. “English verse” becomes synonymous with the image of good colonial Britannia, instrumentalised for the purposes of propaganda. It provides colonial subjects with a false sense of common cultural space they are meant to protect and fight for, but of which they are in no way a part.

Malika Booker’s poem “Her Silent Wake” was written for the anthology *Unwritten: Caribbean Poems after the First World War*. The poem was inspired by a story of a seventeen-year-old Jamaican soldier Herbert Morris, who was court-martialled for desertion. “Her Silent Wake” focuses on his grieving mother: Booker writes in her author’s note that her work “often focuses on the lives of black women and on making them visible and heard, particularly in the narratives in which they are absent” (Booker). The poem therefore should be read at the intersection of race and gender, with a postcolonial lens: it focuses on the Other twice excluded – as a woman of colour and a colonial subject. In the poem, the woman encouraged her son to enlist (which allows Booker to represent the ambiguous

sense of duty to the metropole), but the death of Herbert results in vocal and explicit anti-colonial protest. The speaker spells out her hatred against the metropole:

The motherland had called our sons to her bosom
Come sons come
fight
for your motherland
 she said
 that bitch, pressed her calloused feet
 onto our boys’ backs, until spines
 cracked,
 then grind those broken
 bones into pieces and did
 not send their crumbs back. (Booker)

In the final, fifth part of the poem, the curse is repeated, when the speaker calls England “that bitch of a stepmother England built a forest of bones for rats to feast on succulent black men” (Booker). As in Daley-Ward’s poem, England is seen as a wicked (step-) mother figure, a “mother-land” – placed in direct opposition with the mother-speaker of the poem – benefitting from its colonial subjects, even feasting on them like prey. It is important to note that this loud grieving as well as the use of taboo lexis is an important divergence from the British First World War narrative: women were expected to mourn their family members in silence, since “[r]evealing one’s unhappiness” as well as grief “[was] unpatriotic” (Plain 47). Therefore, the anticolonial aspects of the poem are revealed even in the form of the speaker’s grief – loud, despite the poem’s title.

Throughout the poem, Booker represents grief in violent descriptions of pain and acts of self-harm. The speaker’s own body and physicality are central because what drives her mad is the inability to physically bury her son, whose body was never returned to her:

she bent her back and crawled in the dirt pushing in the seeds [...]
 howling her son Herbert’s name, like psalm, like hymn,

like scripture. It would be said that in the absence of a body she had to
 bury something (Booker)

The absence of the body, and therefore complete disappearance of the speaker’s son invites comparison with Brooke’s “The Soldier”: the speaker of Brooke’s poem famously imagines the site of his death or burial as “some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England” (111). In this context, this thought can be read as a colonising gesture in itself: the body of the soldier is “A body of England’s,”

and it is colonising the space of a “foreign field” by converting it into “for ever England.” Unlike in Brooke’s text, in Booker’s poem the body is absent; it is immaterial, precisely because it was taken away and never returned home: “I think about how they take you whole and send / you back an inked name on paper”; “what mother does not want the crumpled / dust of her son instead of nothing?”; “now she is making him a garden / of flowers, a monument, a way of burying something into this island’s earth” (Booker). The image of the “crumpled dust” in Booker’s poem also links to and opposes Brooke’s “richer dust [...] A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware” (111). Brooke’s image of dust thus continues to, metonymically, stand for England, as if its “Englishness” were part of a traceable provenance, while the mother of Booker’s poem wishes to receive the “dust” of her dead son as proof of his materiality – of his ever existing. It is significant that in the poem, it is the British army that killed the woman’s son for deserting and never returned his body. His body, unlike Brooke’s soldier’s, does not colonise space; it was colonised. Thus, colonial violence and the violence of war intersect to destroy the body of the speaker’s son without a trace.

Both Booker’s and Daley-Ward’s poems turn to the First World War to introduce a different kind of speaker that is absent from Anglocentric war writing. Most significantly, in these contemporary poems, the legacy of the First World War is not treated as separate from the legacy of colonial violence, slavery, and racism: the complicated history is often masked by the “sterile” narratives of the “shared past” and “fighting side by side” that can be still observed in commemoration today (Das 2021, 21–22). As a result, these poems are as much about the First World War as they are about the absence of Black and colonial commemoration in the 21st century UK.

4. Far Away from England: From WWI to Other Wars

Despite writing (or being commissioned to write) in the specific context of the First World War commemoration, many poets made a decision to extend their commemorative verse to other wars. It is not coincidental that in these texts poets turn away from the UK to non-European, non-white spaces. Without doing this overtly, these texts effectively argue that war is not only something that happens to white bodies on the European continent. The fact that these texts appear in the context of the First World War commemoration can therefore be interpreted as a subversive and political gesture: the subversion emerges as a result of a tension between text and context. A radical example of this tension is “War Poem” by Warsan Shire. Shire was commissioned to contribute to the Poetry Society’s anthology devoted to the centenary of the First World War (*The Pity*, published in 2014), yet chose not to refer to that conflict. Instead, she writes about the war in Somalia, police brutality in the United States and elsewhere, the refugee crisis

and the instrumentalization of refugee narratives by the UK media, as well as about conflict’s effect on the (female) body. The fact that Shire’s “War Poem” was published in an anthology devoted to the First World War effectively opens a debate on what commemoration consists of, and which wars and conflicts can be addressed in a commemorative framework. Two poets discussed in this final part of this essay, Jenny Lewis and Imtiaz Dharker, inspire a similar debate while, unlike Shire, still turning to the iconography of the First World War.

Jenny Lewis’s poetry collection *Taking Mesopotamia* was first published by Carcanet in 2014, and the collection presents a contemplation on war as exemplified by two conflicts set largely in the same geographical space almost a hundred years apart: the Mesopotamian campaign in the First World War, in which Lewis’s father participated, and the Iraq War. The two conflicts emanate from a very different set of contexts: the discourse around the First World War has been formed by decades of school education, the literary canon, and ‘respectful’ commemoration (often heroic, tragic, patriotic narratives), while the Iraq War is too recent and controversial to allow for any mode of commemoration to ‘settle.’ In the collection, the parallels between the two wars are initially created by the placement of pairs of texts, which should be read together. The book is punctuated with dated poems: “March 1916” is followed by “March 2003,” “April 1916” by “April 2010,” and so on. Most of the First World War poems are written from the perspective of Tom, Lewis’s father. In the Iraq War poems, the speakers change: sometimes they are American or British soldiers, men, women and children from Iraq, refugees, witnesses of the war, or their family members. The conflict or connection of each pair of poems is noticeable when one reads them together: through time, they seem to mirror each other, creating a dialogue between the Mesopotamian Campaign and the Iraq War beyond the identity of geographical location. For instance, in the poem “November 1916” the speaker Tom contemplates the violence his army is inflicting on the civilian population:

[...] it’s almost beautiful, yet moments
 later, we are shelling a village with women and
 children on fire, running for their lives. I weep.
 Christ said *suffer the little children to come to me*
 yet how we make those little children suffer. (Lewis; original emphasis)

The responding poem from the Iraqi campaign, “November 2009,” is written from the perspective of “Khwater Sadeq, aged 13, a Muslim orphan (interviewed in the *Guardian* [sic], 2009)” (Lewis; original emphasis). These notes, explaining who the speakers of Lewis’s poems are, form another important feature of the Iraq war texts. Her speakers are often traceable, documented persons whose life was destroyed by the wars. In some cases, the lines and phrases uttered by the speakers can be traced to actual interviews, as in this case. Such modified direct speech gives

these characters agency. Khwater tells the story from a perspective that was not available to Tom: “My name is Khwater Sadeq, when the war came / we had terrible suffering, / shelling from the air, / explosions, tanks, suicide bombers: all the time / fear for me and my seven sisters” (Lewis). In the sections of the poem quoted above, Tom is the agent of violence and Khwater (or his double nearly a century earlier) is the victim of violence. Because of the placement of these two texts, it almost appears as if Tom is the one inflicting violence on Khwater through time.

What does this sense of continuity achieve? On the one hand, it suggests that two different conflicts, almost a hundred years apart, are in fact deeply intertwined – through the dialogue of the texts, the space-time of both wars (a Bakhtinian chronotope) merges into one. It is also significant that the Iraq War allows Lewis to introduce a polyphony into the collection that is otherwise centred on the figure of her father: the singularity of the First World War voice, that of the British soldier, matches the canonical and singular status of the texts written by soldiers, and as the reader moves between the early 20th century and the 21st, the change of voice to that of ‘Others’ becomes more and more apparent. It is especially significant that the collection does not only speak with its reader in English, as several poems have been translated into Arabic and published in the volume (and the first poem of the volume is dedicated to Lewis’s translator, thus creating a sense of dialogue from the start). This bilingual element makes possible a different creation of space and readership: this is not poetry written about the ‘Other’ for British audiences or the UK commemoration alone; it is a poetry that wishes to represent the Mesopotamian and Iraqi experience as a dialogue across space and time.

Another example of a text linking the commemorative context to a different, more contemporary conflict is Imtiaz Dharker’s poem “A Century Later,” which was published in the anthology *1914: Poetry Remembers*. In her poem, Dharker responds to one of the most canonical First World War texts by Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” Owen’s famous first line “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” (73) turns into Dharker’s “The school-bell is a call to battle / every step to class, a step into the firing line” (71). In this way, Dharker alludes to one of the most famous and recognisable first lines in war poetry, which helps connect her text to an established First World War narrative. However, she refers to a different battlefield: the school.

As the poem develops, it becomes clear that Dharker has a very particular protagonist in mind, and a specific battlefield: she is writing about the Pakistani activist for women’s and girls’ education Malala Yousafzai, who in 2012 survived an assassination attempt, being shot on her way from school. The poem does not refer to her directly, but in context the connection is apparent:

Surrendered, surrounded,
she takes the bullet in the head
and walks on. The missile cuts

a pathway in her mind,
 to an orchard in full bloom,
 a field humming under the sun,
 its lap open and full of poppies. [...] (71–72)

Here, and in other parts of the poem, Dharker uses a vocabulary of militarism and war. This vocabulary is rarely used to describe the war experience of women, who are usually imagined away from the frontlines. By employing this language, Dharker establishes women’s struggle for education as a battlefield of its own. Another notable feature in the excerpt quoted above is how Dharker describes the mind of her protagonist as “an orchard / in full bloom” (71). Besides the reference to poppies as a very recognisable symbol of war and commemoration, it is perhaps more striking that the poet describes the inside of the girl’s mind in the same terms as in First World War writing rural England was described: as a utopian ideal at home worth fighting for as “the site of a rural holiness” (Craig 131). Dharker utilises this metaphor to mean something else entirely: the complex mind of her protagonist, also as an ideal worth fighting for.

Dharker’s poem, therefore, shifts the focus from a male English perspective on the First World War to a very contemporary experience of Pakistani women and girls in the context of their battle for education. Because she is responding to Owen’s poem, Dharker writes her own “Anthem for (Doomed) Youth,” except that her ‘soldier boys’ are young women and girls in Pakistan. In doing so, the poem ‘decentralises’ the European, soldier-centred vision of what defines war. Similarly, in Lewis’s collection, the transition of focus from England to Mesopotamia and Iraq, and from a single soldier voice to a multitude of voices, linking all through time, allows the poet to problematise the singular status of the Great War in the commemorative imaginary.

5. Conclusion

I opened this paper with several quotations from Rupert Brooke, a canonical voice in the First World War narrative, which, in public memory, is still largely predicated on the stories of soldiers and located in European spaces. This version of the war narrative largely ignores other stories: those of continued colonial violence, for instance, as Claire Buck convincingly argues in her essay “Reframing Women’s War Poetry” (2011): “From the perspective of the colonial or postcolonial writer, conventional British spatial and period classifications of 20th war – the First World War and the Second World War – operate as convenient national fictions organized around the disavowal of Britain’s imperial history” (26–27). In this context, annual commemorative ceremonies and events play a large role, as they either keep perpetuating or challenging these ‘national fictions.’ Due to the significant role

which poetry has always played in British commemoration, contemporary poets can also access and shape this narrative.

In his introduction to *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Das writes: “The contours of the ‘Great War and modern memory’ start to look different if instead of the writings of an ordinary European soldier, [...] we take the memories of an Indian sepoy, a Chinese worker or an African askari” (2014, 1–2). This is true not just for cultural and historical research: as the poems analysed in this paper look beyond “for ever England,” they search for new protagonists beyond the European soldier and spaces beyond Western Europe, and thus complicate the existing mainstream narratives and oppose the “sanitisation of the violence” which Das comments on in relation to centennial celebrations (2021, 22). The tension with the commemorative context within which these texts emerge is therefore of utmost importance.

Poems by Daley-Ward and Booker turn to England as a centre of colonial violence in and beyond the context of the First World War: both poets chose to give voice to colonial soldiers and their families, whose critical perspective on Britain, as well as their struggle with a version of imperial patriotism is far removed from the patriotism of “for ever England.” Lewis and Dharker write to remove the focus from the “Great War” and exclusively white, European, British spaces, and turn to other wars, such as the Iraq war, where the British involvement resulted in a commemorative narrative that is very different from that of the First World War. At the same time, both poets turn to the First World War for images and allusions, thus making the parallels between the different wars more pronounced. These four poems are only a small selection: writing about the First World War, poets also turn to distinctly Scottish and Welsh voices, embody experiences of women during the wars, write about the experiences of the ‘Other,’ racism and sexism, and comment on the legacies of Empire. While it is hard to predict whether these poems will also become part of commemorative ceremonies and school curricula in the future, they are representative of what is happening with commemorative poetry today: diversification and decolonisation of the war narrative – something that is surely long overdue.

Notes

1. The analysis of the poems presented in this paper is based on my doctoral thesis preliminarily entitled “A Century Later: Twenty-First-Century Women’s War Poetry and First World War Commemoration in the UK” (to be submitted by the end of 2023).

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“He’d seen it in the words of Owen and Brooke”: The Influence of Great War Poetry on Post-Millennium Soldier Poets

Abstract: To this day, the term “soldier poetry” is still predominantly associated in popular perception with the 1914–1918 trench poets, such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, or Isaac Rosenberg. And yet, the dawn of the new millennium, marked by the rise of the global War on Terror, saw a significant revival of the genre in Britain. One of the most noteworthy indicators of this is John Jeffcock’s anthology *Heroes* (2011), which has collected a hundred poems written by British soldiers who fought in recent conflicts – Iraq and Afghanistan in particular. While these poems are framed within the shifting military, socio-demographical, and political dimensions of war in our time, they simultaneously exhibit strong roots within the context of a specific literary tradition that originated in the First World War. This article sets out to analyse a selection of poems from *Heroes*, focusing on the way these poets construct a network of intertextual citations, borrowings, and allusions to connect their texts – quite deliberately – with the much acclaimed generation of poets from the Great War. The article argues that, by doing so, the poets facilitate the transposition of a set of broader myths and emotions that are typically associated with the Great War onto the new (con)text, thereby adding new literary, cultural, and social meanings to the texts.

Keywords: contemporary soldier poetry, the Great War, the War in Afghanistan, intertextuality, mythical transposition

1. Introduction

In the first two decades of the new millennium, there has been a significant resurgence in the publication of British soldier poetry. There are several online blogs that feature poems written by contemporary soldiers, such as *All Poetry*,

War-Poetry LiveJournal, or *Leaves and Pages*.¹ Soldier poems have been posted on social media, twittered, and circulated via email (Kiesel para. 6; “British Soldier’s Scathing Poem” para. 1). Other poems have also appeared in newspapers and magazines, albeit only occasionally.² Surely, the internet has become a major distributor for that kind of poetry. However, the bulk of contemporary soldier poems stems from a handful of seminal anthologies. One of the most noteworthy examples of this is the former British Army Captain John Jeffcock’s *Heroes: 100 Poems from the New Generation of War Poets*.³ The poems in *Heroes* were written by members of the British Armed Forces who fought in the Falklands (1982), Northern Ireland (1969–1998),⁴ Bosnia (1992–1995), Iraq (2003–2011), and, most prominently, Afghanistan (2001–2021).⁵ In *The Telegraph*, former Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, who was also engaged in the editing process, advertises *Heroes* as “a humbling project, allowing the voices of those whose lives have been changed by war to speak to us with the raw directness of feeling and experience” (qtd. in “Modern War Poetry” para. 6). And yet, despite the poets’ undeniable focus on personal “feeling and experience,” these poems are not *sui generis*. As already indicated by the subtitle of the collection, they set out to rejuvenate a literary tradition that is not exclusively but is most commonly associated with the First World War.

This article explores the connection between this “new generation of war poets” and their well-known predecessors from the First World War, whose lyrical accounts of the trench war continue to influence and shape British memories until the present day. As I intend to show, the poems in *Heroes* often bear distinct markings of reference to the Great War canon, both explicit and implicit: ranging from the naming of specific authors to the presence of certain features of poetry that either originated in or took on new significance between 1914–1918. In so doing, the poems unravel a network of intertextual motifs, poetic tropology, and lyrical modes traceable to the absorption of the so-called poetry of the Western Front while referring to other contexts. While the old-style romantic eulogies of the Georgian poets who wrote at the beginning of the Great War – Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Lawrence Binyon, etc. – maintain some influence, contemporary soldier poets show themselves particularly drawn to the unapologetic realism of poets like Owen and Sassoon. Former SAS Officer Theodor Knell, who contributed a number of poems to *Heroes*, underscores this impression when telling *The Independent*: “Most of us [sc. the soldier poets] have read our Wilfred Owen, our Siegfried Sassoon” (qtd. in Duerden, para. 7).

Given the fact that remembering World War I has arguably become a fundamental aspect of the national identity of all of these poets, their tendency to borrow from the poetic vernacular of the Great War poets may seem little surprising. Nonetheless, considering the striking political, military-strategical, and topographical disparities between the First World War and the conflicts of the present day, the poets’ distinct use of Great War templates warrants further discussion. Therefore,

this article pays attention not only to the way these poems integrate the poetic language of the First World War into their depictions of wars that are in many respects different from large-scale mass-slaughters of 1914–1918, but also discusses the broader implications of the intertext for the wider meta-textual efficacy of the poems. I argue that the poetry of the First World War has not only become one of the most readily available linguistic repositories for contemporary soldier poets but, by aligning themselves with the Great War tradition, the poets also enhance the socio-cultural authority of their texts within their wider framework of war remembrance in the present day. Yet, in order to be able to properly evaluate the way intertext adds an additional layer of meaning to the poems at hand, it seems helpful to establish a brief intertextual catalogue of the discursive practices of the new soldier poets, based on the analysis of chosen poems from *Heroes*. The article conducts a close-reading of the poems “Courage” (written by an anonymous British Army Major who served in the Royal Artillery Regiment), “Remembering” (by Corporal Cameron Jowett of the Mercian Infantry), “The Journey” (by Dave Stenhouse, a Sergeant in the Light Brigade Combat Service), and “The Last Supper” (by Captain James Jeffrey of the Queen’s Royal Lancers). All of these authors have served in Afghanistan at some point during the last two decades. However, to broaden the scale of the analysis, the article also references a selection of other soldier poems that pertain to similar issues.

2. In-Between Rupert Brooke’s Patriotism and Wilfred Owen’s Poetry of Pity

In the anonymous “Courage,” the speaker’s reflection about the legitimacy of young men’s dying on the battlefield of Afghanistan is accompanied by a clash of intertexts. Out on the battlefield, he begins reminiscing the “words of Owen and Brooke, the toil of war / and the life it took” (55), thus juxtaposing two of the most acclaimed representatives of antagonistic literary ideologies that formed during the First World War: i.e., Rupert Brooke’s perception of the war as patriotic and glorious versus Wilfred Owen’s poetry of terror and pity. The allusion to the opposing lyrical worlds of Owen and Brooke sets the stage for a poem that is primarily marked by an inherent undecidability on how to interpret the nature of war. The speaker navigates back and forth between his first-hand observation on the battlefield in Afghanistan and pre-existing scripts. The second verse continues the Owen/Brooke dichotomy: whilst starting off with an emphatic tribute to “Brave young men in far-off lands,” the concept of bravery is instantly toppled by the insinuation of battlefield-anxiety as implied in the phrase “praying to keep their legs and hands” and the oxymoron “exhausted courage” (55).

The impact of Owen looms up in multiple ways during the first half of the poem and is furthermore bolstered by a series of embedded allusions to some of

Owen's most famous poems. The speaker repeatedly invokes the myth of doomed youth in relation to the war in Afghanistan: "Young Tommy Atkins," "brave young men," "for one so young a / dreadful cost" (55–57). In addition to that, he borrows Owen's imagery of toxic gas from "Dulce et Decorum Est" in order to illustrate the angst-ridden atmosphere of the battlefield: "A constant air of toxic fear, the unseen threat ever near" (55). By extension, the way he describes the "rattle" (56) of the machine-guns echoes Owen's use of onomatopoeia in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" (1917): "only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (1965a, 44). One might even go as far as to characterise the middle section of the poem as little more than a wild paraphrase of Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," in which seeing the plight of the battlefields makes the speaker wonder about the morality and legitimacy of the war. Reminiscent of Owen's poem, "Courage" reaches its lyrical summit in the description of the painful death of a young soldier on the battlefield. Again, there is no exultation, only the "dreadful [...] scream" (56) and blind panic of a young soldier in agony. These are brought to life in the speaker's unflinchingly vivid depiction of the protagonist's dying breath:

Then the dreadful sound of his mate's scream, that one day will
 haunt his once sweet dreams,
 Young Tommy Atkins has lost a leg, "I wanted my mum" he hears
 him beg. (56)

As in Owen's palimpsest, the sight of the slow death of his comrade makes the speaker scrutinise the reasonableness of battlefield sacrifice. However, formulated as a question, the verse: "Is it worth it, this human cost" (56), lacks the matter-of-factness of Owen's scathing condemnation of the prevailing patriotic doctrine.

As opposed to the trench poets' vilification of the patriotic Victorian/Edwardian "lie" (Owen 1965b, 66), "Courage" depicts the supposed moral fibre of War on Terror as simultaneously more complex and more opaque than ever, exceeding the relatively simple virtue of fighting for proverbial "King and Country":

And then he thinks of Tommy's wife and wonders if it's worth
 the price,
 Is it about defending against evil creed, or drugs or money
 or human greed,
 To make this country a better place, or defend corruption
 and avarice? (56)

Here, the speaker ponders several socio-political subtexts of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, such as humanitarianism, liberation, capitalist ventures, and corrupt politics; and, similar to poets like Owen and Sassoon, the verses reveal significant disbelief in the political and ideological backgrounds of the campaigns.

There is no doubt that Owen, whose “words” the speaker recollects at the outset of the poem, have imprinted heavily on the poet’s consciousness. And yet, the conclusion seems to abandon the previous alignment with Owen’s uncensored realism, being instead more evocative of Brooke’s laudations to the grand-sacrifices of the British, which the speaker recalls equally in the beginning of the poem:

Innocence, youth and friends he’s lost; for one so young a
a dreadful cost.
No medals or money he will expect, just what he merits,
your respect.
For he has done this for you and I, to keep us safe in this
precious isle,
And when it comes to next November, be sure to ponder and
the lost remember. (57)

Praising, to an extent, the unrecognised heroism of the British soldier, the ending of poem appears somewhat anachronistic. The speaker gets past his previous wonderings about the greater causes behind the soldiers’ agony by embarking on a well-trodden path: interjecting the notion of fighting for the safety of Britain and urging the reader to honour the fallen in November, which is a reference to the annual Remembrance Day ceremonies. In effect, the poem reimagines the death of its protagonist as a patriotic sacrifice. Like in Brooke’s “The Dead” (1915), the loss of innocence and youth seems to become more acceptable when viewed against the backdrop of a higher collective cause: “For he has done this for you and I, to keep us safe in this precious isle” (57).⁶ In that sense, the speaker’s noisy admiration for the selfless deeds of British soldiers on the battlefield – the display of affection rather than pity – effectively supplants the sinister resonance of “the words of Owen” (55).

The impact of Georgian poets like Brooke reflects occasionally in other poems. Cameron Jowett, for instance, closes his poem “Remembering” (2011) by quoting Lawrence Binyon’s conclusion of “Ode of Remembrance”:⁷

I try my best to think about why they were such good friends,
I think about what I would say if we could meet again,
But I won’t tell you what I’d say, it’s ‘between me and them.’

We will remember them. (Jowett 157)

Jowett maintains the patriotic flavour of the template, dedicating the poem to the memory of his fallen comrades, “Sandy,” “Wrighty,” and “Hilly,” and praising their sacrifice, bravery, and fighting spirit (156). As in “For the Fallen,” there is no regret, just a deep sense of affection for the soldiers’ dutiful sacrifice. This is underlined,

amongst other things, by the speaker conjecturing: “He tried hard whatever he did; he’d always go the extra mile / but it’s bye for now young comrade, until I meet my ‘fate’ / just promise me one thing Tom, you’ll meet me at the gate” (156). Furthermore, the repeated references to “St Peter’s Gate” (156) support the poem’s effort to imbue the soldiers’ death with deeper heroic meaning, exhibiting a firm conviction in the righteousness of the War on Terror.

One of the most distinct counter-narratives to the Georgians’ enduring belief in the meaningfulness of sacrifice was the myth of a generation of doomed youth, which has been etched into the British national memory by Owen’s celebrated “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” Admittedly, the notion of doom, which usually requires a kind of intangible force and a sense of involuntariness, might have less foundation in the reality of a Britain that has moved on from the military draft to having a professional army of volunteers. However, the motif routinely emerges in the texts of the new soldier poets: “Is it worth it, this human cost, young blood spilt and / innocence lost,” (56) wonders, for example, the speaker of “Courage.” Dave Stenhouse succinctly underpins this impression in “The Journey” (2011), a ballad about the death of a young soldier in the Afghan desert:

The young soldier you see
 Has been cut down in his prime
 Hit by an explosion
 He hasn’t got much time
 [...]
 He’s crying for his mother,
 Daughter and wife
 Far away from his family
 Only moments left of his young life. (84–85)

Similarly to Owen’s “The Young Soldier” (1915), the incessant emphasis on the soldier’s youthfulness, which is repeated no less than four times throughout the poem, seems almost obtrusive; yet, the idea of squandered youth serves to intensify the poem’s overarching sense of tragedy, and places this new generation of British soldiers crucially in the tradition of the much revered young men who followed the country’s call to arms in the war of 1914–1918.

3. The Use of Traditionalised Imagery and Symbolism

Along the lines of the grand-narrative of doomed youth, the poppy, with its connotations of slaughter and remembrance, turned into one of the most striking and persistent symbols of the First World War (Bellamy 300). As demonstrated by Isaac Rosenberg’s in “Break of Day in the Trenches” (1916), the Flanders poppy

became a telling symbol for the colossal bloodshed during the war: “What quaver – what heart aghast? / Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins / Drop, and are ever dropping” (2004, 128). It was equally identified with commemoration, a connection which John McCrae established as early as in 1915 in his famous poem “In Flanders Fields”: “In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place” (173). Whilst, interestingly, the literature of the Second World War became almost entirely devoid of this symbol (Bellamy 301),⁸ contemporary soldier poets have recently re-introduced the poppy in the context of Afghanistan, where a different type of poppy is a characteristic feature of the landscape as well. “Courage” harks back to the poppy as a metaphor for bloodshed when metonymizing the battlefield as a poppy farm: “Adorned like some medieval men at arms, to run the gauntlet in the poppy farms” (55). Even though the Afghan opium poppy does not feature the blood-red colour of its European relative, by drawing deliberately on the pre-established literary connection between poppies and death, the speaker turns the Afghan battlefield, yet again, into the locus of futile tragedy. This notion of senseless slaughter is further emphasised by the use of the idiom “to run the gauntlet” (55), which accentuates the idea of soldiers marching into certain, unnecessary death.

Furthermore, Corporal Danny Martin, who served two tours to Iraq during Operation Telic, returns to the poppy as an emblem of remembrance in his anti-war poem “Lessons” (2008), published on the *Leaves and Pages* blog on Remembrance Day 2012. The poem sets out to desecrate the symbolic value of the poppy, turning it into little more than a postposterous cliché of sentimentalised traditions:

Do away with medals
Poppies and remembrance parades
Those boys were brave, we know
But look where it got them. (para. 2)

Albeit not denying the bravery of the men who have died for their nation, both in the past and in the present, the speaker disparages the poppy as part of an (over-)romanticised remembrance cult that tends to undermine the tragic aspect of war – of young men being “reduced to line after perfect line / Of white stones” (para. 2).⁹ Martin twists McCrae’s idea of the remembrance poppy and directs his ire at the civil sector and their perpetuated belief in commemorative propaganda, which may prompt us to recall Sassoon’s lambasting over whitewash-remembrance practices in later poems such as “On Passing the New Menin Gate” (1927) or “At the Cenotaph” (1933). Against the grain of so-called “poppy fascism,”¹⁰ the speaker of Martin’s poem reminds us that “kids [...] haven’t yet learned / That bullets don’t make little red holes [here alluding to the wearing of poppies on a garment] / they rip and smash and gouge / And drag the world’s dirt behind them” (para. 2). He thereby debunks the poppy as a dangerous euphemism for the physical and psycho-emotional wounds inflicted by war.

Nevertheless, although perceptions of war as useless slaughter grew implacably during the Great War, the era also saw, as Dawn Bellamy notes, the reformulation of Christian myth, particularly the old theme of sacrifice and crucifixion (301). For example, in his late 1918 poem “Spring Offensive,” Owen identifies the presence of “thousands” of Christ-incarnates on the battlefields. Halfway through the poem he echoes the words of Christ at the Last Supper, when saying “earth set sudden cups / In thousands for their blood,” before letting his soldiers be sacrificed “on that last high place” (1965c, 52). The image of soldiers dying on a high ground might also be read as a reference to the hill Golgotha, which the Gospel of Mark identifies as the place of the crucifixion of Christ (*The Bible* Mark 15, 22–24). The crucifixion trope turned into commonplace analogy. As Hilda D. Spear puts it in her study of the poetry of the First World War, *Remembering, We Forget* (1979):

The soldier victims were identified with Jesus; His lot was theirs: they suffered agony, bore their crosses, frequently endured a cruel and undeserved death; the older generation were identified with God and the Pharisees; they believed in the need for sacrifice and by their acts enforced it, yet it seemed not to touch them personally. (101–102)

Again, contemporary soldier poets have demonstrates the continued relevance of the biblical imagery of sacrifice and crucifixion, such as James Jeffrey in his elegy to an unknown bomb disposal engineer titled “The Last Supper” (2011). As already suggested in the title, the poem allegorises its protagonist, who has already died but is implied by means of apostrophic address (“you”), as Jesus. The first stanza continues the title’s allusion to the last supper, describing a group of soldiers dining “[s]ecure beside the bomb-blast walls” (170). Putting himself into the position of a disciple, the speaker perpetuates the allegory of the story of Christ’s passion: from bearing the cross, which is referenced during the second stanza: “I remember your humour the polite bearing / Explaining that insane job with zeal / Each day spending hours defusing bombs / Lying on dirt tracks, staring through sweat at wires,” to the protagonist’s ultimate (self-)sacrifice in the course of “protecting others”: “All the way to where you could not turn back / From blinding hot blast demanding sacrifice / Taking away the scruffy cheerful calm” (170). However, the last verse, singled out from the preceding quartet verse paragraphs by a blank space, exposes a rather ambiguous stance on the idea of sacrifice. Emphasized through their position as a coda, the speaker’s final words: “Leaving another picture in a morose mosaic” (170), emerge like a saddened restatement rather than a benign conclusion of the preceding homage to the saviour-like stoicism of the soldier(s). That is to say that the ultimate insinuation of deceased soldiers as nothing more than another number in the statistics contrasts with the biblical salvation trope, foregrounding instead the futile aspect of military conflict.

4. Pastoral Recourses: Horror and Romanticism

The affinity between the new soldier poets and their Great War predecessors further reflects in the adoption of certain more general lyrical modes of representation. One of the most characteristic examples of this is the somewhat counterintuitive juxtaposition of the poets’ depictions of realistic horror and neo-Romanticist imagery in the context of the battle. Although the soldier poets of the modern age began to concentrate more closely on the gruesome actualities of war and its effects on the individual, their texts often reveal a strong penchant for rewriting Romantic concepts in the context of battle. The use of pastoral technique became a somewhat oxymoronic feature of industrial war literature. Being convinced that the ‘myth of the War’ was at least in part the result of it being written in the English Pastoral tradition, Paul Fussell comments on this inherent contradiction in his chapter on “Arcadian Resources”: “If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral. Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral” (231). Yet, every so often, the descriptions of the Great War poets appear to withstand the ultimately anti-pastoral nature of war.

Typically, the Great War poets’ detections of beauty amidst the bedlam of battle took two principal forms. The first was the sublime. Elaborating on the 1st-century philosopher Longinus’ initial discussion of sublimity, the sublime has been defined by early-modern theorists as an artistic effect: a complementary, and sometimes an antithetical, category to beauty. In difference to critics like Joseph Addison or Immanuel Kant, who focused more on the overwhelming sensation of magnitude, scale, and incomprehensibility, Edmund Burke, in his classical theory of aesthetic sensualism, emphasises the idea of sublimity as a somewhat anti-thetical pleasure derived from “danger and pain” (27). Inspired by John Dennis’ description of the sublime as “a delightful Horror, a terrible Joy” (qtd. in Ashfield and Bolla 59), Burke identified terror as “the ruling principle of the sublime” (41). In his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), he summarises this as follows: “When danger and pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving delight and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications [...] they are capable of producing delight [...] a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror” (27). Through his emphasis on “distance” and “modification,” Burke turns the sublime into a representational type – “a tribute to the power of mimetic art” (346), as Andrew Sanders puts it in *The Short Oxford History of English Literature* (1994).¹¹ Following that, the soldier poets’ lyrical recollections of World War I often evince distinct traces of Burkean sublimity, unearthing a somewhat odd fascination with the terrors of the war. This is shown, for example, by Ivor Gurney’s description of a “strangely beautiful entry to war’s rout” (198) in “First Time In” (1916), or Owen’s oblique mesmerisation with the destructive forces of modern

war-technology in “Dulce et Decorum Est,” which manifests itself, amongst other things, in the speaker’s picturisation of the vapor of toxic gas as “thick green light, / As under a green sea” (55).

Secondly, to return to Fussell’s thesis, many trench poets seemed to watch out for a piece of Arcadia on the battlefields. In that sense, the poets’ falling back on pastoral modes of depiction also became a prominent expression of escapism, trying to drown out the noise of battle. Owen, for example, displays this in his appraisal of the spontaneous beauties of spring amidst the “superhuman inhumanities” (52) of the war in the aforementioned “Spring Offensive”; and some of the most telling examples of this derive, of course, from the pastoral meditations of Edward Thomas. Further adapting the lyrical catalogue of the Romanticists, the sudden appearance of birds turned into a popular motif of natural beauty on the battlefields, which is exemplified by poems such as Rosenberg’s “Returning, We Hear the Larks” (1914), Sassoon’s “Before the Battle” (1916), or Grenfell’s “Into Battle” (1915). In Rosenberg’s poem, the speaker returns to pastoral modes, contrasting chaos with quiet. The poem describes the battered soldiers’ trance-like enchantment with the calming song of larks:

Death could drop from the dark
As easily as song –
But song only dropped,
Like a blind man’s dreams on the sand
By dangerous tides;
Like a girl’s dark hair, for she dreams no ruin lies there,
Or her kisses where a serpent hides. (2012, 80)

Whilst birds have attained various connotations in literature – from Chaucer to Shakespeare – one might argue that Rosenberg’s mindful listening to the birds typifies particularly a recontextualization of the Romanticist tradition: for British Romantics, the song of bird became not only a “personification of the idea of spontaneous creativity” (Doggett 551), but also a symbol of liberation and salvation from the physical world, allowing the poet to explore themes of restriction, freedom, and spirituality. In that sense, reminiscent of, for example, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820), Rosenberg’s speaker appears to seek temporary relief from the harrowing, physical reality of battle in the “unbodied joy,” the “unseen, but yet [...] shrill delight” of the birds’ song (Shelley 35).

Such bizarre, sometimes even sardonically-mannered pastoral recourses, becoming an element of either sublime sensation or longing for Arcadia, resound with similar poignancy from the works of the new generation of soldier poets. Aptly enough, of all of the British wars of the post-1945 era, the conflict that is perhaps most apt to evoke pastoral imagery in a more tangible connection to the battlefields is Northern Ireland. As a case in point, birdsong remains a popular means to

illustrate soldiers’ desire for imaginary respite. For instance, in Lt. Colonel Roger Ayer’s “Incident Report” (2011), which was inspired by the author’s deployment in “The Troubles,” the speaker likewise returns to the pastoral mode when balancing his portrayal of the drastic consequences of a “bomb’s burst” (79) with a number of allusions to the pristine beauties of spring and the song of a bird:

We stopped, and getting clear
Of vehicle and headphone noise
I stood and listened to a bird that sang.
The notes rang
Quelled, and then dispelled
Clouds in my mind.

The sky, too, cleared and the bird sang on, while
The ground, green dressed,
With recent rain caressed,
Warmed in the sun’s slow smile. (78)

Hyper-aware of his natural surroundings – the blue skies and green pastures of the Northern Irish landscape – the speaker configures an idyllic peacefulness within the desolation of the battle-zone. Once again, attentive listening to the soothing song of the birds constitutes a bucolic escape, counterbalancing the noise of the headphone, which, in this case, functions as an extension pipe to the turmoil of battle. And yet, by the time the reader hears the birds clearly, they are already gone: eclipsed by “the ops room telephone,” “radio chatters, and shatters,” “The ready engines roar,” and, eventually, the smell of “Fresh / Dead flesh” (78–79) – which may remind us also of the fading song of the nightingale at the end of Keats’ famous poem ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819), throwing the speaker back into a world of mortal existence.

Aside from pastoral escapism, contemporary soldier poetry likewise saw the return of the sublime as a prominent literary *topos*. For example, in “Daisy Cutters” (2009), Jeffcock metaphorically reworks bombs that are dropped during an airstrike in Iraq as “asteroids” and “stars [that] jump down and wreck the earth” (25):

Tomorrow is G+3
When we must cross the Rubicon of War
Tonight the stars jump down and wreck the Earth
Like Samson, blinded, or the fatal asteroids
That bring destruction to the worlds that will not change
It was tonight the Daisy Cutters fell.(25)¹²

Besides stressing the extra-terrestrial force of industrial weaponry, the speaker’s use of stellar imagery reveals a somewhat cathartic attraction to the scene of

destruction; the supernatural power of the bombardment, absorbing all earthly physicality, engenders – to recycle Rosenberg’s words – a “strange joy” (2012, 80) that enthralles the speaker and captivates his gaze.

5. Mythical Transposition

Besides occasional references to other canonical texts of English literature,¹³ and the adoption of certain themes that have been more relevant in the poetry of the Second World War, such as the impact of war on romantic relationships, the poetry of the First World War remains undoubtedly one of the most important touchstones for soldier poets today. At first glance, the reasons for this may seem relatively straightforward: as already insinuated above, the poetry of the First World War has long become an indispensable constituent of English literature and retains a central place in the national memory. Moreover, as Robert Jeffcoate reminds us, a selection of poems from the Great War remains “a staple of the national curriculum [...] at least [since the 1960s]” (151).¹⁴ Jeffcoate even goes as far as to state that “[t]he poetry of the First World War may be virtually the only serious adult poetry many pupils encounter in the classroom” (152), which turns these texts into the most accessible resource for present-day soldier poets. By extension, contemporary culture has done much to construct and preserve the status of chosen war poets as potent symbols of a “cultural trauma” that – to cite Jeffrey Alexander’s definition of the concept – has left “inedible marks” upon the British national consciousness, “marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1). Building up to the grand centennial of the First World War, the last two centuries have seen yet another wave of historical publications on the subject – in literature, cinema, television, etc.

In line with that, also the unprecedented literary output of the First World War has been constantly reworked in contemporary memory. For instance, while almost entirely ignoring the soldier poets of World War II, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (2012) dedicates a whole section to the “Voices from World War I” (Greenblatt and Abrams 24-27).¹⁵ There are numerous individual collections of Great War soldier poetry available on the market: Jon Stallworthy’s *Three Poets of the First World War* (2012),¹⁶ Time Kendall’s *Poetry of the First World War* (2014), or *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (2007) are just some noteworthy examples. Apart from the school curriculum, the poets’ position as “a sacred national text” (Motion xi) is underscored, amongst other things, by a memorial stone in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, which features the names of the sixteen most memorable soldier poets of the Great War.¹⁷ Museums, such as the Imperial War Museum, have staged special exhibitions on Great War poetry on a regular basis (Lyon 4–5). Poets like Owen and Sassoon have repeatedly featured in recent (historical) fiction, as shown, for example, by the British novelist Pat Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*

(1991–1995) and its film adaptation (1997), or Terence Davies’ latest filmography of Siegfried Sassoon called *Benediction* (2021).¹⁸ Thus, given the fact that the current generation of soldier poets has been virtually brought up on the images of the Great War as conveyed in the poetry of Brooke, Owen, or Sassoon – not only in school, but also in various other cultural contexts – drawing on their poetic bequest might appear almost instinctive, if not habitual for them.

It is certainly important to understand the empirical manifestations that enable this close intertextual relationship between contemporary soldier poets and the poets of the Great War in order to gain deeper insights into the historical and imaginative consciousness of the poets, and to place them within the context of a broader cultural framework of remembrance. However, it might be even more important to evaluate the effects of this extensive, and sometimes slightly anachronistic network of intertextual referencing, and to interpret the way in which the intertext adds a new layer of meaning to the texts. Without doubt, remembering World War I has become an essential element of national identity not just for the soldier poets but also for many potential readers of contemporary soldier poetry. That being granted, recent reader-response-theories of intertextuality and adaptation provide additional insights into why contemporary poets might seek to connect their works – quite deliberately – with the Great War tradition: i.e., in an attempt to reshape and refocus the public memory of the so-called “New Wars”¹⁹ and to put the spotlight (back) on the sacrifices of soldiers in our times, the poets seem to not only adopt specific linguistic, semantic, or semiotic patterns that sprang from the poetry of that era; they also demonstrate a strong resolve to imbibe the durative cultural and historical legacy of the Great War generation of soldiers. This process of mythical transposition, as we might call it, can be explained best with regard to Linda Hutcheon’s *Theory of Adaptation* (2006).

It might be generally wrong to use the terms “intertextuality” and “adaptation” interchangeably, as the latter is usually considered to be a more specific form of the former (J. Sanders 1; Hutcheon 8): “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works [...] with variation” (Hutcheon 7–8); and whilst certain poems may seem indeed very close to becoming mere adaptations, contemporary soldier poetry cannot be classified as adaptation in the proper sense of the word. Nevertheless, by examining the poems through Hutcheon’s lens, particularly through her principle of “interpretive doubling,” we can gain a deeper understanding of how the concept of mythical transfer operates. In her theory, Hutcheon moves beyond common fidelity theorems of adaptation and characterises adaptations and appropriations quintessentially as an “ongoing dialogue with the past” that “creates the double pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced” (116). In other words, the mutual engagement between the two texts, the present and the past, becomes an indispensable part of the reader’s experience with the former. Furthermore, underlining, as Leo Braudy puts it, the “continuing historical relevance [...] of a particular narrative” (311), adaptation and/or appropriation

also allows for the transmission of myths that are originally connected with the source texts onto new (con)texts. In accordance with that theory, it can be argued that by aligning themselves – often quite overtly – with the Great War tradition the poets incorporate broader national memories that originate from the Great War as a central element into their texts, thereby adopting both the suffering and ultimate sacrifice of the Great War generation as their own and potentially moving the audience to an inherited set of hermeneutical and emotional responses.

To be more precise, whilst the 19th century already saw the slow rise of a cult of the soldier in Britain, the First World War has been the first to properly turn simple soldiers into the heroes of realistic catastrophe. Unlike the Second World War with its marked focus on the home-front and the just cause of the war, the memory of the First World War has always been to a great extent centred around the torment and bravery of the soldiers in the trenches. In the introduction to *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1990), Samuel Hynes succinctly summaries what he calls the “myth of the war”:

A brief sketch of that collective narrative of significance would go something like this: a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory, and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (10)

Hynes’s emphasis on the evolution of the “generation of innocent young men” underscores the notion that, in contrast to other wars, the story of the First World War could only be told from the perspective of those who went to fight in it; and, surely, the fact that this was the first time that poetry from soldiers in the war really resonated with huge swathes of the population has played an important part in the creation of that memory. In that sense, aiming to form a similar kind of “myth of the New Wars” and to (re)direct attention to the soldiers who are, once again, bearing the brunt of oftentimes questionable political decisions, the poets’ intertextual evocation of the “sacred national canon” of Great War soldier poetry appears to crucially augment the socio-cultural bearing of their texts. Doing so, the poets foster the transfer of a specific collection of traditionalised myths and meta-narratives that are typically associated with the Great War onto the 21st century: the tragic slaughter, heroic suffering, stoic endurance, ultimate martyrdom, and eventual rejection of the home-front. This, by extension, is likely to facilitate the projection of certain internalised reactions and emotions on the part of the audience, inviting the reader to develop similar feelings of grief and appreciation for those who serve today.

6. Conclusion

This article has aimed at providing a brief overview of how the famous soldier poets from the Great War have become an integral part of contemporary soldier poetry, visible through a close-knit network of intertextual citations, borrowings, and allusions. The article has furthermore argued that this impression of affinity between the “new generation of war poets” and the much remembered and revered poets of the First World War is likely to manipulate the hermeneutical act – the precepts that drive textual reading and interpretation – to the extent that it guides the reader into a prescribed realm of interpretation. This might also give a hint at the broader social and political objectives of these poets: based on what has been analysed before, it feels safe to state that the poets’ ability to invoke internalised myths and emotions while referring to different contexts becomes a powerful tool to increase public empathy for soldiers in the present day. This unearths an overarching desire to reclaim the soldier’s place in an age that is incrementally marked, as scholars have constantly reminded us, by a decreasing taste for militarism and patriotism, as well as profound political ambiguities (see also: Coker; Pickarill and Webster; Scheipers 2014; Shaw).

Nevertheless, one might be also tempted to ask in how far the poets’ appropriation of canonical registers affects the aspired originality and authenticity of their text as testimonies of current reality. That is to say that even though the overall effects of war on the individual might stay the same, sometimes the use of conventionalised codification seems to obscure the resemblance between the texts and the reality of the historical field. As a case in point, one could easily associate Royal Nursing Corps Officer Barry Alexander’s description of the post-millennium battlefield, which he metaphorizes as a “gallery of hellish images” (30), with the chaos of the 1914–1918 trench war; an uncoordinated attack in one of the Great War “No Man’s Lands” rather than a war fought by highly trained professional troops:

The village is shrouded in smoke as the company fights
for its life
Surrounded by comrades in this maelstrom of battle I am alone
Sheltering in the lee of a compound wall as if from a mighty
storm, ignoring the chaos
I kneel between the two living corpses and start my battle for
their lives. (31)

The speaker’s depiction of the “hell” of the battlefield, the “maelstrom of battle,” the “chaos,” and the “mighty storm” seems, again, starkly imbued by the representational vernacular of the Great War (30–31). However, while the fragile existential dimension of war, including the terror, fear, and pain, may remain constant, the shifting nature of contemporary warfare challenges the applicability of that sort of traditionalised

imagery: i.e., the poet's seemingly unfiltered use of canonical language evokes the impression of a large-scale, "mighty" fight between mass armies rather than of what some people might refer to as "Small War," operated by means of thoroughly coordinated "small unit tactics" (Hoyt 439; see also Scheipers 2018).²⁰

One might therefore argue that the overall efficacy of the texts hinges not only on the reader's capacity to connect them to an established literary tradition, but also on his/her ability to recognise their relevance within the historical context from which they originate. Following that same logic, Hutcheon, too, locates the special appeal of adaptation "in the mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (114). It is only fair to say that while often relying heavily on inherited myth, the new soldier poets have equally set out to generate new myth and to offer an original take on the soldier's experience of war in the present age. This becomes manifest, for example, in their strong focus on PTSD and trauma. As Jones et al. explain in an article on *Shell Shock and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury* (2007), even though combat trauma might be as old as war itself, PTSD has somewhat become the "signature injury [...] of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts" (1641). Additionally, the analysis of "Courage" has also given a preliminary insight into the way contemporary soldier poets react to the changing political dimension of war in our time. In line with that, while patriotism prevails as a literary motif, many of these poets also evince traces of an incessant cosmopolitan ideology, in which "international commitment has replaced patriotic duty and loyalty as a primary civic ideal" (Frisk 910). Sergeant John Lewis demonstrates this in "Shame," which was also published in *Heroes*, when characterising the soldiers as the "liberators of Iraq" who "forced the change of regime" (130) – albeit with a doubtful undertone. And there are numerous other examples of such more contemporary themes, discourses, and discussions in the collection.

Notes

1. To view blogs, visit: www.allpoetry.com, www.war-poetry.livejournal.com, and www.leavesandpages.com. While the former examples focus more specifically on poetry, *Leaves and Pages* is an anonymously run blog on a variety of subjects that on the occasion of Remembrance Day in 2012 released, amongst others, two poems by the contemporary soldier poet Danny Martin, who was also published in John Jeffcock's *Heroes*.
2. Amongst these were, for example, Lt. Colonel J. B. Brown's "The Great Debate" and "The Promise of to Come" (*The Sunday Times*), an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's famous marching song "The Young British Soldier" (1895), (re-)written by an anonymous British combatant, and another poem called "Repatriation," in which British staff sergeant Andy McFarlane points an accusatory finger at the fatalities of both campaigns by portraying the return of a British soldier's coffin to a small-town in Wiltshire (*Daily Mail*).

- 3 Similar anthologies include Ryan Gearing’s *Enduring Freedom: An Afghan Anthology* (2011), Susie Campbell’s *My Teeth Don’t Chew on Shrapnel’: An Anthology of Poetry by Military Veterans* (2020), and Gina Allsop’s *Military Memories* (2021).
- 4 Periodisation is disputed among historians. These dates refer to the first official deployment of British troops in 1969 and the so-called “Good Friday Agreement” of 1998.
- 5 The collection also includes a number of poems written by veterans of the Second World War and soldiers stationed abroad during the Cold War.
- 6 Brooke ponders similar thoughts in one of his most famous poems when saying: “But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold. / These laid the world away; poured out the red / Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be / Of work and joy, and that unhop’d serene”; Brooke 81.
- 7 “The Ode,” commonly refers to the fourth stanza of “For the Fallen” (1914).
- 8 The lily has come to play a more important role in this.
- 9 An allusion to another aspect of commemorative practice that originated in the Great War: i.e., the burying of dead soldiers on military cemeteries made up of uniform gravestones placed in regimented lines.
- 10 The term was coined by the Chanel 4 newsreader Jon Snow in 2006 and has since become a popular trope that criticises the (felt) obligation to wear poppies during public performances and remembrance events.
- 11 Other relevant theories referenced in this paragraph include Longinus: “On the Sublime” (*Peri Hupsous*; first-century BCE); John Dennis: “The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry” (1701) and “The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry” (1704); Joseph Addison: “The Pleasures of the Imagination” (published as a series of articles in *The Spectator*, namely the articles no. 411–421; 1712); Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*; 1790).
- 12 Military code for a particular type of bomb.
- 13 Shakespeare and Kipling range among the most prominent examples of these.
- 14 The original quote runs “at least as long as I have been involved with secondary schools, which is now getting on for thirty years,” which translates to 1960–1990.
- 15 The section includes Brooke, Thomas, Sassoon, Gurney, Rosenberg, Owen, Cannan, and Jones.
- 16 The anthology focusses on the poems of Gurney, Rosenberg and Owen.
- 17 The memorial bears the names and life-data of Richard Aldington (1892–1962), Laurence Binyon (1869–1943), Edmund Blunden (1896–1974), Rupert Brooke (1887–1915), Wilfrid Gibson (1878–1962), Robert Graves (1895–1985), Julian Grenfell (1888–1915), Ivor Gurney (1890–1937), David Jones (1895–1974), Robert Nichols (1893–1944), Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), Sir Herbert Read (1893–1968), Isaac Rosenberg (1890–1918), Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), Charles Sorley (1895–1915), and Edward Thomas (1878–1917).

- 18 Baker's novel series consists of the novels *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995).
- 19 The term "New Wars" was coined by Mary Kaldor in her study *New and Old Wars* (1999) to distinguish a series of wars that emerged during the post-Cold War era, from the Gulf War and the new outbursts of violence in Northern Ireland to the global War on Terror.
- 20 The term "Small War" was coined by Carl von Clausewitz in a series of lectures and essays that focus intensely on the manoeuvres of small units and the proper use of infantry in defensive tactics in the 19th century. Today, the term has obtained a variety of meanings, one being wars that "are most often waged between asymmetrically empowered adversaries – one larger and more capable, one smaller and less capable when measured in traditional geostrategic or conventional military terms – [and often involving] limited resources and small units"; N. Williams para. 2.

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“love : necessity : anti-fa”: Hostile Environments and Necropolitics in Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*

Abstract: The UK’s legislation on immigration in the 2010s has been defined by a hostile environment. This essay traces the ways in which two poets in the UK have responded to, and intervened in, this violent political climate. Through a close examination of Nat Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and Jay Bernard’s *Surge*, the essay demonstrates how both poets understand the present hostile environment in a wider historical context, and how they consequently make possible a new understanding of our contemporary moment, as well as possible pathways towards resisting the UK’s necropolitical immigration policies.

Keywords: Nat Raha, Jay Bernard, the hostile environment, necropolitics, the New Cross Fire, the Grenfell Tower fire

1. Introduction

The question of borders, and that of immigration, defined many of the most seismic political moments in the UK throughout the 2010s. Of course, both borders and the public perceptions around immigration have a much longer and more complex history across the 20th century – one that would require another article to fully address it. However, by opening with such a statement, I want to highlight how the issue of borders and of immigration looms large in the background of recent history that has shaped the country. To name but a small selection of indicative examples, the UK’s national obsession with borders and immigration conditioned the trajectory of the 2015 parliamentary election; the debates of the 2016 Brexit referendum and the UK’s subsequent departure from the European Union; the policies that produced the Windrush scandal of 2018; the numerous incidents of

refugees tragically drowning whilst trying to cross the English Channel; and the UK government's recent (unlawful) efforts to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. Even from this brief account, it seems safe to conclude that the contemporary conditions of the UK would now appear dramatically different were it not for the continued presence borders in its public imagination over the course of the recent decades.

In addition to highlighting the role of borders and immigration as a consistent concern for the UK's recent legislative history, the above summaries also highlight the fact that a fuller understanding of racist culture within the country must not simply look to its "most overt manifestations"; rather, it is of equal importance to carefully observe how the questions of borders and immigration in the UK have been driven by numerous "shifting practices of a security-oriented state seeking legitimacy in times of unbearable economic uncertainty" (Bhattacharyya et al 1). The following summary provides a broad but nevertheless useful picture of these recent developments:

The austerity [...] which followed the 2008 financial crash has brought increased frustration, through both lack of services and cuts to public sector jobs. On top of this, a deregulated labour market, zero-hours contracts and the gig economy mean that work [...] is precarious and low paid. In this context, reactionary nationalism is mobilised for political gain, and migrants, whether constructed as workers or scroungers, documented or illegal, have shouldered the blame for finance capitalism's fiscal calamities [...]. The crisis of legitimacy for governments that cannot provide the [...] prosperity promised by market-led growth has been partially reconciled by new [...] promises to protect the nation from violent crime, terrorism, and immigrants. (Bhattacharyya et al 2)

In other words, while it may be overly simplistic to suggest that the British public has been guided to blame the economic hardship of the country on racialised outsiders, it is nevertheless true that the UK's national legislation in areas such as immigration, counterterrorism and criminal justice has been configured to operate in precisely this manner.

The ideology behind one nebulous piece of such legislation was summarised by Theresa May during her time as Home Secretary, from at least 2012 onwards: "The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants" (May; qtd. in Hill, n.p.). The phrase "hostile environment" became a staple part of May's rhetoric, and in many ways it defined her six years as Home Secretary, during which she spearheaded seven separate immigration bills and forty-five thousand changes to immigration rules. As such, the legislative practice of the hostile environment can involve a sprawling web of different immigration controls, but it fundamentally means that the government has made proof of legal immigration status a mandatory requirement for accessing the most basic means of existence within the UK: "employment, housing, healthcare, education, a bank

account, a driving license” all require evidence of one’s immigration status; therefore, the hostile environment might be briefly defined as “the system of immigration checks and data-sharing that saw the expansion of everyday, everywhere” border controls (Bhattacharyya et al 21).

The consequences of such a hostile environment must not be underestimated. In 2019, the Human Rights organisation Liberty warned that the UK’s hostile environment policies meant that “undocumented migrants” now found themselves “criminalised for doing what they must to survive” (7). The legislative creation of hostility thus hinges on eroding the potential of survivability. In this respect, Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics” – as articulated in his 2019 book of the same name – provides an apt framework through which to understand the hostile environment. In brief, Mbembe describes a set of mechanisms in social and political power that understand the ultimate expression of sovereignty as determining “who is able to live and who must die” (66). The term expands upon and revises Foucault’s ideas of biopower, which Mbembe argues are no longer sufficient to fully account for “contemporary forms of the subjugation of life to the power of death” (92). This is because our contemporary systems of political and social power are capable of not only deploying weapons designed for “maximally destroying persons and creating *death-worlds*”; crucially, those systems of power also organise “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*” (92; original emphasis). As the above warning from Liberty already indicates, the UK’s hostile environment policies are tantamount to this latter condition described by Mbembe. Indeed, his book is explicit in identifying borders as “the name used to describe the organised violence that underpins” contemporary capitalist states (99). Because policies such as the hostile environment view migrants as “surplus, unwanted, or illegal,” the UK’s continuous demands for proof of immigration status are tantamount to an incessant requirement to prove that one is “a human being,” that one merits “being taken for a fellow human” (Mbembe 96, 132).

Considering these dehumanising and violent consequences, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that the hostile environment has also become a persistent concern in contemporary UK poetry. For instance, the 2018 anthology *Wretched Strangers* collected work from 125 poets, whose work – in various ways – addressed the “vulnerabilities and contingencies” of living in hostile environments, where “anxieties are manifest in dreams and nightmares of borders and walls, passport offices and authorities that arrive without warning” (Lehóczky and Welch 8). While it is not an exhaustive compendium on the topic, the scope of the anthology usefully indicates the frequency with which borders and necropolitical violence preoccupy present poetic discourse. But it is equally important to observe how these concerns might be articulated by writers not featured in anthologies such as these. This article therefore examines two contemporary poets whose respective works present a highly attentive critique of the nebulous necropolitical violence arising from

the UK's hostile environment: Nat Raha and Jay Bernard. Raha is – in addition to her work as a poet – a queer / trans* activist scholar who is currently based in Edinburgh, Scotland, but previously lived in South London for several years. In addition to several pamphlets, she has published three book-length collections of poetry, the most of recent of which is 2018's *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*. The volume comprises work that was written between November 2012 and May 2017. Bernard is – in addition to their work as a poet – an artist, film programmer and activist based in London. Their 2019 collection *Surge* was shortlisted for multiple prizes including the T.S. Eliot prize, and it also won the 2020 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. In the sections that follow, I will try to unpick the connections between the poetics of these two collections – which range from collaged visuality to archival elegies – and the political realities they depict and elucidate. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that Raha and Bernard's respective works are united in their deep political engagement that offers not only an incisive analysis of the multifarious ways in which the UK's hostile environment makes itself present in everyday life; moreover, their poems also understand this hostile present in relation to a broader historical framework, and work carefully towards possible strategies of resistance against such necropolitical violence.

2. From House Fires to Deportation Vans: *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*

Although his scholarship on Raha's work – including the poems in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* – is more focused in ideas of philology and time, Edmund Hardy's observation that Raha's "poetry of borders" pays attention to "every street and every hour" to present the reader with something akin to a "queer necropolitics" or "a slow necropolitics" is an apt description. But whilst Hardy is keenly perceptive in identifying the "fragmented, part crossed out, indented self-commenting" qualities of Raha's lines, his article does not greatly touch upon the visual appearance these fragmented methods produce on the page (Hardy n.p.). There are multiple moments in Raha's book where the fragments of poetry are presented almost as if they were cut-ups (but not in the traditional sense of the term, as Raha predominantly works with her own words), often collaged together with visuals such as photographs. In this sense, then, the visual appearance of many of the pages in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* calls to mind Allen Fisher's reflections on the visuality of Burrough's cutups as being less about the fiction, but more about the "damage [and] destruction" that was "displayed [in] the cut-ups" themselves (Fisher; qtd. in Virtanen 172). That is, if the queer necropolitics articulated in Raha's work are registered in a way that is "felt and read, taken into the body, its breath and blood and oxygen, line by line" then the damage and destruction indicated by the fragmented and collagic visuality of the page is representative of a state of brokenness taken into the body as well (Hardy n.p.).

I use “brokenness” as the term here to draw a link between the visual qualities in *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and what Raha has – in her scholarly work – called Transfeminine Brokenness. To put it briefly, the “states of brokenness” described in Raha’s essay pertain to states where “bodies are jammed, depowered, isolated” in “states of anger, distress, and depression,” and where “community and cohesion do not materialize into socially reproductive sustainable care” that reaches any further than the intimate connections of “lovers and individual friends” (2017, 633). The brokenness Raha describes is therefore defined by states of extreme vulnerability, which bears a resemblance to Judith Butler’s description of precarity as a “politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability [...] for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression [...] against which states do not offer adequate protection” (ii). It therefore follows that the fragmented damage and brokenness that we encounter on the pages of *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* – in its gut-wrenching, slow necropolitics – conveys the vulnerability of bodies placed in the hostile environments that characterise the United Kingdom’s border policies and their wider implications.

One two-page spread from *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* serves as a good indication of Raha’s complex analyses of these concerns within her poetry itself. Beginning with “the production of scorched earth,” the fragmented lines of poetry circle across the page in a vertical arrangement, as if turning around the centrifugal centre of the page, which is represented as an archival photograph positioned towards the top – or righthand – margin (Raha 2018, 44). The vertical arrangement of the page is the result of needing to replicate the A4 layout of previous iterations of the text, first published as a zine via Raha’s own Sociopathetic Distribution imprint in 2015 and subsequently re-printed by Veer Books later that same year. But whilst the vertical turn is in this instance out of requirements for typesetting, it nevertheless produces a notable effect: a straightforward progression of linear readership is quite literally turned on its side and thus skewed and made more complex.

This skewedness of linearity mirrors certain aspects of how the poem across the two-page spread thinks about time. The centrifugal photograph positioned to the right depicts a protest vigil in the wake of the New Cross Massacre (also known as the New Cross House Fire) of 1981. The fire occurred at No. 439 New Cross Road, during a house party celebrating the birthdays of Yvonne Ruddock and Angela Jackson. Thirteen young Black people lost their lives during the fire, with a fourteenth victim dying by suicide a short while later; although no official cause has ever been established for the origins of the fire, the local community at the time “widely believed” the fire was caused by a “racist-motivated arson attack,” and this remains a view held by many to this day (Austin 117). The subsequent tensions between the local community and the Metropolitan police can be noticed in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem “New Craas Massakah,” which derides “di police an di press” for their attempts at stopping the local community’s “ques fi di trute” (2006, 55). Indeed, more recent analysis – including comments from Johnson

himself – have drawn a link between the aftermath of the New Cross Massacre and the “uprisings which began with the Brixton Riots” in April 1981 before spreading “to inner cities across the country” (Johnson 2011, n.p.).

But the photograph around which Raha’s poetic fragments are positioned makes an additional charge. One of the protestors in the image holds up a placard which reads “BRITISH LEADERS INCITE RACIALISM” (qtd. in Raha 2018, 44–45). This is significant because the placard does not simply view the fire as a solitary racist-motivated arson attack, but rather an atrocity that arises from a wider set of prejudices that are sanctioned, condoned, and perhaps even provoked by the national government. The sentiment expressed in the placard is easy to understand when one considers that a mere month after the fire had occurred, Jill Knight – the Conservative MP for Birmingham Edgbaston – took time in the House of Commons to criticise loud house parties in notably racialised and derogatory terms. For instance, she spoke of revellers as a “seething mass of people” and implied that a “Rastafarian” appearance was somehow inherently “frightening” (HC Deb 11 February 1981). At best such comments, coming so quickly after the fire at 439 New Cross Road, would have been unforgivably insensitive; at worst, Knight’s vilification of Black neighbourhood parties does indeed sound like an incitement of racism – as the placard in the photograph suggests.

At the time of writing the poem in 2014, Raha lived around the New Cross area herself, and it is therefore easy to understand why the poem from *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* would seemingly centre on an interest in the 1981 house fire massacre and its aftermath. Certainly, there are elements in the poetic fragments that are easy to identify as bearing a relationship to the contexts highlighted above. There is a direct reference to the date “1981 april 11th” – which was the most active and violent day of the Brixton Riots; in addition, the poem features references to sites associated with the riots such as “railton | road,” which was the street where crowds first started resisting police on 10 April and where some of the riot-related looting took place on 11 April (Raha 2018, 44).

But at the same time, it would be erroneous to read the poem solely in terms of its historical references. As with the vertical turn of the pages themselves, this kind of easy linearity in the interpretation quickly gets skewed by other details of the poem. For instance, an early line in the fragments makes reference to “rubble & drones,” thereby alluding to the more contemporary military practice of conducting air strikes with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles [UAVs]; likewise, the poem also includes lines such as “territorial support invest,” which features an oblique criticism of the Territorial Support Group – the unit of London’s Metropolitan Police that specialises in public order policing (such as protests or riots), and which replaced the Special Patrol Group in 1987 (Raha 2018, 44). Both references, and others like them, would seem rather out of place in a poem that was solely interested in exploring the 1980s context indicated by the photograph.

Instead of a single interest in the 1980s, I would like to suggest that the poem

is interested in a kind of non-linear temporal meshwork; an interlaced network in which numerous connections between the present (i.e., for the poem, 2014) and the past (1981) are formed. This relationship becomes clearer in the latter parts of the poem, which increasingly take shape as notational “alerts” (Hardy n.p.). One illustrative extract reads:

suspensions in/ordinate 10
 .42pm cut rest GN14 DWD 9.22
 am start sirens unmarked new
 cross road follows FT63 NYA
 9.25 unmarked follows GY63
 YPZ 9.28 sirens unmarked escort south east
 Old kent 9.39am three riot vans old kent south
 against these days number
 DZ62 WZE lewisham way 4.01pm DZ11
 OZT 9.18 unmarked EA63 EEL unmarked 9.28 patrol south amersham [...] (2018, 45)

The recorded observations are difficult to parse, but readers such as Hardy identify Raha’s alerts as involving a “possible deportation van” (n.p.). The details of the above quotation lend some support to this possibility. The license plates are clearly contemporaneous to the writing of the poem: within the current system of British license plates the number eleven (as seen in, for instance, DZ11) serves as an age identifier used between March and August 2011; likewise, the numbers sixty-two and sixty-three (as seen in DZ62 and GY63) denote plates produced between September and February 2012 and 2013, respectively. In other words, the license plates locate us in a specific period, whilst the other details – such as New Cross Road and Lewisham Way – locate us in a specific place: the area of New Cross immediately in the vicinity of the New Cross Gate train station.

But although we know these details to indicate a contemporary specificity pertaining to the 2010s, why might the license plates belong to deportation vans operated by immigration enforcement officers? The key context for this question is the way in which “immigration control systems of developed states are today frequently characterised by strategies of ‘extraterritorialisation’” (Ryan 3). Although the term extraterritorialisation is commonly used in reference to immigration controls that take place outside of a national territory – such as in the territories of other states, or in international waters – the hostile environment in the UK has ensured that borders contract inward as much as they project outward. That is, while there are extraterritorial controls in place to prevent individuals from entering the country, the territory behind the border hosts numerous control mechanisms as well. This internal extraterritorialisation of the border is, in essence, one representation of the necropolitical “system of immigration checks and data sharing” that was outlined in the introduction to this article (Bhattacharyya et al

21). Raha is keenly aware of these developments as well. In “Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism” she notes how legislation such as the “Prevent Duty (part of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015) and the Immigration Act 2016” – both of which were spearheaded by Theresa May during her times as Home Secretary – made “immigration enforcement a statutory duty of employers, universities, schools, and landlords.” Such policies, Raha observes, amount to a material border in the workplace, the home, the school, the university, at the Jobcentre, in the hospital, the marriage registry, and the street (634–635). Given these concerns in Raha’s scholarship, as well as the proximity of the legislation and the date the poem was written in 2014, it seems reasonable to assume that the license plates in the above passages belong to deportation vans. Raha’s poem is, at one level, witnessing and recording the intrusion of border controls across various streets in the New Cross area.

Consequently, to borrow from Danny Hayward’s writing on Raha’s poetry, the lines across this two-page spread are “an invitation to a closer and more sustained attention” to the different ways in which British leaders incite racism (124). While the placard in the 1981 photograph featured in the poem was pointing out a connection between political statements in Parliament and racist violence in the street, Raha’s present moment is even more aggressive and direct. In the poem, the legislative authority of immigration acts and the violent intrusion of deportation vans represent two sides of the same coin: “an increased policing at the level of one’s citizenship [...] both rhetorically invoked and practically implicated across all spheres of public and private life” (Raha 2017, 634). In other words, the examined extract from Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* features an archival document, in the form of a photograph, from the New Cross Massacre and the subsequent protests and riots in 1981. This document is included in order to think through and map out the meshwork of connections between this historical event and the contemporary hostile environment within the UK. In both the past and the present of the poem, it is the British government that is ultimately held responsible for acts of racism – whether through complicity, condoning, or legislatively enforced necropolitical violence.

3. From New Cross to Grenfell: *Surge*

One year after the first zine versions of *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* were published in 2015, Jay Bernard was working as a writer in residence at the Geogre Padmore Institute – an archive, library and research centre dedicated to radical black history in Britain – and producing poems for their 2019 collection *Surge*. Although Bernard knew early on in their residency that they were interested in the New Cross Massacre, the process of researching the archival materials around the fire at 439 New Cross Road was nevertheless an eerie experience for them. As they

started their residency soon after the Brexit vote of 2016, they were struck by the extent to which their present moment resembled “the events up to and after the New Cross Fire.” Consequently – especially after the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and in light of the Windrush scandal of 2018 – Bernard began to understand the archival materials they were consulting as “a mirror of the present, a much-needed instruction manual to navigate what felt like the repetition of history” (xi).

It might be tempting to think about Bernard’s idea of the archive as a mirror and an instruction manual as being representative of some of the ideas in Arlette Farge’s *Allure of the Archives* – a text that Bernard has acknowledged as a partial influence on their poetics (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). For Farge, an archival document allows us to see a “tear in the fabric of time, unplanned glimpse into an unexpected event,” which allows one to find “not only the inaccessible but also the living” (6, 8). In other words, Bernard’s experience of a repetition of history could be understood as akin to Farge’s tear in the fabric of time, which – in turn – can be better understood through accessing to the previously inaccessible mirror or instruction manual that the archive provides. But there is also a crucial difference at play here. Although Bernard acknowledges the influence of Farge on their poetics, they also feel – as an artist and writer – at odds with Farge’s view that the only way to do justice to people’s lives is by writing history (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). Indeed, Bernard’s comments in interviews are often keen to point out that they are not a historian and thus not “trying to piece things together as they were”; instead, their engagement with sources such as the archive are really about “listening to the present, listening to echoes of the big bang [...] ripples that are still perceptible” (Bernard; qtd. in Lowe 9).

Due to this insistence of working with the archive so that they may listen to the present, Bernard – like Raha – is not interested in linear accounts of history, but instead in a non-linear temporal meshwork, an interlaced network in which numerous connections between the present and the past are formed. Both poets therefore relate to the archival document (the photograph in Raha; the materials in the Geogre Padmore Institute for Bernard) in a manner that echoes Kate Eichhorn’s writing in *The Archival Turn in Feminism*: in establishing links between past hostile environments and the present day via the archive, Raha and Bernard look to “the archive’s ability to restore to us what is routinely taken away under neoliberalism,” that is, “not history itself, but rather the conditions of our everyday lives” (6).

In the case of Bernard’s *Surge*, one explicit connection between the archival past and the conditions of the present day is the echo of the New Cross Massacre in the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017. Grenfell Tower was a 24-storey block built as social housing in the 1970s. In the early hours of 14 June 2017, a fire that initially began from a refrigerator malfunction quickly spread upwards on the exterior of the building, owing to the recently installed cladding and external insulation that had left an air gap between them. At least seventy-two residents of the Tower were killed, and at least another seventy were injured. Subsequent reports have indicated

that a considerable number of those who died in the fire were from minority backgrounds (Rice-Oxley n.p.). Many consequently refute the view that the fire was an “unforeseen accident”; rather, it can be seen as the “result of a long history of violence” that includes multifaceted forms such as “the logics and legacy of colonialism, racism and xenophobia”; the structural issues that prevent “classed and racialised people” from accessing “legal justice”; issues of “housing justice” and “human concern”; as well as “the national and international spatial politics and neoliberal economic forces of cities and states” (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany xiii). To allude back to Mbembe, Grenfell marked a moment in 2017 when British sovereignty was demonstrated through “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (66). The injustice of Grenfell haunts every aspect of Bernard’s poem “Sentence.” In the “Notes” section that concludes *Surge*, we are informed that the poem is “after Khadija Saye, a victim of the Grenfell fire” (55). Saye was a Gambian-British artist who died in the fire, aged just 24. But despite her young age, Saye had already achieved a great deal of recognition for her work. For instance, she was the youngest exhibitor included in the Diaspora Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennale, where her contributions explored the migration of traditional Gambian spiritual practices as a part of a wider investigation of Saye’s identity, heritage and background (Estate of Khadija Saye n.p.). In this context, the “after” in Bernard’s note for the poem operates under a dual meaning. On the one hand, we could understand that “after” in the manner of ekphrasis, whereby Bernard is writing in response to some of Saye’s work; but at the same time, the poem is also – in a very real sense – after Saye had died. The poem therefore operates as both a response of respect, as well as a work of mourning.

However, by articulating the ‘afterness’ of Saye in Bernard’s “Sentence,” I do not wish to simply frame the poem as an elegy. Rather, if “Sentence” is read as an elegy, then its elegiac qualities must be understood in terms of Eleanor Perry’s recent critique of elegies as reflecting a form of “necropoetics: a system of principles, precepts and techniques [...] which serve to establish and maintain whose lives are publicly grievable and whose losses are noteworthy” (19). In other words, Perry notes that the traditionally canonical works of elegy frequently tend to only celebrate and commemorate “whiteness, patriarchal forms of masculinity” and “heteronormative binaries.” Instead, working from the theories of Mbembe and Judith Butler, Perry seeks to reframe our understanding of elegies by calling attention to poems that “challenge a necropoetic understanding of whose lives may be grieved; elegies which articulate the various ways in which political and social power render certain lives precarious, unstable and disposable” (20). Therefore, rather than cohering under any traditional elegiac form, “Sentence” operates akin to the radical modes of elegy that Perry outlines in their book.

The opening of the poem serves as a useful illustration of the ways in which Bernard explores the violence of political and social power upon precarious lives:

If mum is in the living room / sister in the bathroom / then sentence
says / morning / the two have not yet / said their first words –

If mum is in the bedroom / sister in the bedroom /
then it is evening / and sentence says / sister is leaning against the
door, cross-legged / drawing – (45)

Cathie Kanagavalli Lakshmi Jayakumar-Hazra has previously noted how the slashes and dashes that populate these lines serve as typographic devices that signal the “inconclusiveness of the hypothesis made in relation” to the last moments of Saye and her mother, who also died in the fire (376). From this reading, Jayakumar-Hazra suggests the intimacy depicted in the lines can only be inferred indirectly, as the “government, the town council, and the industry executives took away Khadija and her mother’s sense of being ‘at home’ and the protection provided by their home” (377).

In addition to these typographic details and their implications, one of the key phrases in these fragmented opening lines is “sentence says.” The phrase is repeated twice in the extract above, and it appears for an additional third time later in the poem. In each instance, what the sentence says appears as the second part of a hypothetical syllogism: if this is the situation, then sentence says that. In other words, each “sentence says” is written as a working component of deductive logic. On one interpretation, Bernard’s use of deductive logic in structuring these lines could highlight the grievous untruth in the hypotheses offered: the mum and the sister cannot be in the living room or in the bathroom, because both Saye and her mother are dead. Thus, each sentence is a contradiction: they cannot in fact say anything, as the conditions for that saying have now been rendered forever invalid by the Grenfell fire. A similar interpretation could also be formed by thinking about the role of a “sentence” in language. That is, Bernard’s poem reveals the idea of a set of words that is complete in itself to be in fact an impossibility, as demonstrated by the fragmented and inconclusive structure of these lines and the absent presences of Saye and her mother.

But as with the dual meaning of “after” in the poem’s notes, the idea of “sentence says” carries at least one further significance. Etymologically, sentence derives from the Latin *sententia*, meaning opinion or maxim. In this sense, then, “sentence” is never fully removed from authoritative pronouncements – as its continued present-day use in legal contexts attests. In other words, although the typographic and the syntactic arrangements of the poem tend towards fragmentation, the key phrase repeated three times points towards rigid and authoritative structures. The poem – and therefore its imaginary snapshots of Saye and her mother – are caught in a tension between fragile intimacy and structural constraints. And that intimacy cannot be fully realised, as it is rendered inaccessible and impossible by the structural constraints around them.

It is worth noting that this pattern of fragile intimacy and structural constraint seems especially pertinent for a poem about victims of the Grenfell fire. As noted earlier, the fire is easy to understand as result of numerous structural issues. In the enquiry that followed the fire, it was established that while the tower was originally constructed with fire safety as a priority, the subsequent refurbishments introduced unsafe structures such as flammable cladding, ill-fitting windows, unspecified fire doors, poor access for emergency vehicles and equipment that was not suitable for fire fighters to use (Lane n.p.). Moreover, the fateful cladding on the exterior of building had been installed in part to make its appearance “more acceptable to rich neighbours” across the road (Bulley, Edkins, and El-Enany xxi). Thus, the structural issues that led to the Grenfell fire are inextricable from the deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities within the UK. In a very real sense, Saye and her mother were ultimately killed by structural inequality: indirectly “sentenced” to death by British society. That “sentencing” may not have taken place in a court, but it took place at each instance when unsafe refurbishments were carried out, and when concerns about the safety of the building were ignored.

The end of Bernard’s poem provides another direct link between the Grenfell fire and the UK’s structural inequalities. In one of the only lines to feature a full stop, the final words of the poem state: “not rivers, towers of blood” (45). The line features an unmissable echo of the infamously racist “Rivers of Blood” speech delivered by the Conservative MP Enoch Powell in 1968. Powell’s speech was a key-piece of anti-immigration propaganda, which claimed that if Commonwealth immigration to the UK continued, there would be rivers of blood on the street. While the oblique nod towards Powell in the poem is another instance, like in Raha’s poem, in which British leaders “incite racialism,” it is equally important to note that Bernard’s line is precise in its updating of that 1960s sentiment. The blood does not flow because of overt racial warfare and violence on the streets, as Powell’s speech implied; rather, the blood is shed as a result of structural inequality, neglect of safety standards, and government rhetoric that –during and in the runup to 2017 – repeatedly centred on hostile environments, immigration numbers, and so-called citizens of nowhere. Of course, one might not immediately connect the fire with the rhetoric of hostile environments – especially if the term is understood strictly in terms of immigration laws. But as the beginning of this article pointed out, reactionary nationalism is insidious, and it seeps beyond its most “obvious manifestations” (Bhattacharyya et al 1). The same legislative context that informs the hostile environment also paved the way to 14 June 2017. In other words, like the deportation vans at the end of Raha’s poem, “Sentence” understands the Grenfell fire as an act of state violence against its racialised citizens.

4. Towards Counter-Hostility: Tenderness, Care, and Survival

The incisive analyses that both Raha and Bernard outline through their respective meshworks between the New Cross Fire and the 2010s are undoubtedly radical, precisely in the sense that Perry specifies in relation to radical elegies more broadly: each poet writes “in resistance to necropolitical mechanisms” in which certain lives are rendered “precarious, unstable and disposable,” and only some lives are seen as “publicly grievable but not others”; both poets instead insist upon the “grievability of lives that [...] have been erased and marginalized by necropolitical systems” (22).

As a synthesising gesture, I think it is important to think more specifically about the resistance that is articulated in Raha and Bernard’s respective works. What drives their resistant qualities? And what direction does that resistance pursue? These are not easy questions to address. Bernard has been explicit in stating that they would not “claim to bestow something as lofty as justice on the victims of the New Cross Fire,” and – presumably, by extension – the fire at Grenfell; indeed, they go as far as to say that the bestowal of justice is a “temptation” they “actively avoided” whilst writing the book (Alsina Rísquez and Massana 228). Consequently, although poems such as “Sentence” are driven by a “violent condemnation” of the UK’s political landscape, Bernard’s work in *Surge* is also deeply reflective of its anger (Jayakumar-Hazra 377). “Ark,” the second poem in the collection, casts a critical eye on its archival methodology. Right in the first line, Bernard questions how one should “consult the life of a stranger” (2). That is, instead of the imagined intimacy in the depictions of “Sentence” this earlier poem appears more distant and tentative. Here the deceased person is identified as something not known. But even in this distant phrasing, Bernard is already incorporating the possibility of intimacy. While rarely used in the most intimate exchanges, “consult” nevertheless denotes an interaction; it is a discussion or a seeking of advice. Indeed, the prefix that opens the word signifies a being together or being with.

This is significant, because at the end of this archival poem, Bernard decides to file the materials they have consulted under “*fire, corpus, body, house*” (3; original emphasis). There is an element of subtle repetition in these categories. Although corpus normally refers to a collection of written texts, its literal meaning in Latin is body. So, in effect, the word body is included twice, the second time immediately after the first. Consequently, the archival corpus – a collection of written documents – is also understood as a collection of bodies. As a space where one can be together – to be with – the deceased, the archive becomes at least momentarily a space through which intimacies may be formed and strangers would become more known than before. It is important not to overstate the argument here: I am not suggesting that the traces of a life as reflected in the archive are equal to the body or the life of the deceased. But nevertheless, Bernard’s sensitivity to the bodily quality of being with the lives of others in “Ark” remains significant. Sarah Ahmed

has argued that feelings can “make ‘the collective’ appear *as if* it were a body”; that is, the experience of bodily others allows the “emergence of ‘feelings-in-common’ (27; original emphasis). From this perspective, whether it is through the fragments of lives examined in an archive, or through imagined intimacies as is the case in “Sentence,” Bernard does not simply make impressions of the deceased. The deceased also leave Bernard with an impression. The dead impress them (Bernard) and impress upon them. Therefore, the rage that we find in sections such as the final line of “Sentence” arise from a space of tenderness, from the bodily impressions left by feelings-in-common. For Bernard, then, the resistance of *Surge* both arises from an experience of collectivity, and it also works towards further expanding and protecting that collectivity in the face of the UK’s hostile environments.

Similar tones of collectivity, tenderness and resistance can also be found in Raha’s *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines*. One particular fragment in the text opens with a puzzling tripartite line: “love : necessity : anti-fa” (42). That is, the line comprises three individual terms, each separate by both spaces and colons. Raha’s work in 2014 experimented with punctuation in various ways: when she performed at the London Poetry Festival at Birkbeck College, University of London, in the summer of that year, she would often incorporate a cough into her performance as a way of vocalising specific punctuation marks. But even with this practice in mind, the typographic and syntactic structure of the above line is nevertheless perplexing. It is difficult to make sense of it solely as providing notations for vocal effects.

Although the point may seem obvious, it may nevertheless be helpful to highlight that colons have three common grammatical uses: they introduce lists, separate two independent clauses, and provide emphasis. And while the tripartite structure of Raha’s line does function as a list, there also appears to be more at work within it. When a colon separates two independent clauses, it normally does so because the second clause either explains or illustrates the first. In this sense, then, perhaps all three words in Raha’s line should be understood as clarifications or illustrative extensions of one another. That is, we might read this line as stating: love is necessity is anti-fascism. The three terms, rather than being fully independent *per se*, are instead offered as definitions of one another. Each emphasises the next.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the colons in Raha’s line are not set in a traditional fashion. Rather than following directly after each preceding word, the colons are separated by an additional space. Each colon is effectively placed at an equidistance from the word that precedes and the one that follows it. That equidistance in turn places the three terms at a certain equilibrium with one another. Therefore, while each subsequent term might offer a definition or an explanation of the one that precedes it, this does not mean that there is a hierarchy between them. Love does not necessarily take primacy over necessity and nor does necessity take primacy over anti-fascism. Held in an equidistant equilibrium to one another, the terms can equally be understood in reverse order: anti-fascism is a necessity, and this type of resistance is an act of love.

To clarify, Raha’s typographic and spatial specificity allows the three terms in the line to be understood as equal and non-hierarchical definitions of one another. The care of love is a necessity, and the resistance towards racialised oppression is both an act of necessity and an act of love. But it is also important to observe that the forms of resistance mentioned in Raha’s line are very specific: it is not anti-fascism or anti-racism in general that is mentioned, but rather “anti-fa” specifically. Therefore, the specific form of anti-racist resistance highlighted here relates to – at least in a UK context – broadly anarchist-oriented groups whose actions often include direct physical resistance to far-right groups that try to intimidate multicultural communities. What Raha’s line identifies as an act of love and necessity is therefore direct political action that often requires one to place one’s body in such a way as to physically block the oppressor’s progress – whether that oppressor be a far-right activist or an immigration enforcement officer.

Crucially, Raha’s equal and non-hierarchical definitions of love, necessity and anti-fascism carry a distinct connection to the notions of collectivity and feelings-in-common we find in *Surge*. In her critical work, Raha has said that “desire and need and love emerge only through the inauguration of worlds that do not yet exist” (2017, 633). In other words, Raha sees the “struggle against the world that breaks us” and the struggle for “a world of mutuality and support where we can begin to live and thrive” as being “always in progress” (2017, 643). This in turn means that a true sense of collectivity – of community and cohesion that materialise into sustainable care – is always at a point of potential emergence. And as Ahmed reminds us, the emergence of feelings-in-common can at times arise through the bodily experience of others. The collective and direct acts of anti-fascism that are registered as a necessity in Raha’s work are therefore necessary precisely because they are an expression of, and a precursor to, a more loving society. It is an act of radical care that helps communities survive periods of crisis and thus “contains a radical promise through a grounding of autonomous direct action and nonhierarchical collective work” (Hobart and Kneese 10). To borrow from Ahmed once more: “it is not just that we feel for the collective [...] but how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically ‘takes shape’ only as an effect of such alignments” (27). Both Raha and Bernard’s respective poetries understand this. *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* and *Surge* meet the hostile environment of the UK with an equally hostile resistance; a resistance that rightly understands its counter-hostility as an act of tenderness, care, and survival.

5. Conclusion

This article began by observing how the political climate of the UK was, throughout the 2010s, shaped by the hostile environment – a trend that has continued to this day. Although the term might at times be narrowly understood in terms of immigration

policy alone, a fuller understanding of the culture the hostile environment instils must look beyond these most overt manifestations. On a deeper level, the legislative creation of hostility hinges on eroding the potential of survivability. The hostile environment must therefore be understood as a form necropolitical power that, in Mbembe's terms, forces communities to "living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (92). The scale and consequences of that necropolitical hostility have been mapped out in multiple examples of contemporary poetry, and the respective works of Nat Raha and Jay Bernard provide incisive analyses of this current moment.

In the case of Raha, the discussions of the article moved through the aesthetics of collage, archival photography, and brokenness to chart the ways in which her 2018 collection *Of Sirens, Body & Faultlines* creates a meshwork of connections between the hostile environment that surrounded the New Cross Fire in 1981 and contemporary realities of deportation vans in the New Cross area where Raha lived in the 2010s. While the activists campaigning for justice following the New Cross Fire in 1981 often drew a connection between political statements in Parliament and racist violence in the street, Raha's poetry depicts a necropolitical reality that is even more aggressive and direct. In her work, the legislative authority of immigration acts and the violent intrusion of deportation vans represent two sides of the same coin: "an increased policing at the level of one's citizenship [...] both rhetorically invoked and practically implicated across all spheres of public and private life" (Raha 2017, 634).

Jay Bernard's *Surge* also looks back to the New Cross Fire but does so in part to map out the meshwork connections between this event and the Grenfell fire of 2017. In particular, the poem "Sentence" – which is written after the artist Khadija Saye, who died at Grenfell – presents a radical form of elegy that challenges "a necropoetic understanding of whose lives may be grieved" and instead articulates "the various ways in which political and social power render certain lives precarious, unstable and disposable" (Perry 20). In doing so, Bernard conducts a sensitive analysis that establishes a clear connection between the events at Grenfell and the hostile environment. The end of their poem suggests that the loss of lives at Grenfell occurred due to structural inequality, neglect of safety standards, and government rhetoric that – during and in the runup to 2017 – repeatedly centred on hostile environments, immigration numbers, and so-called citizens of nowhere. While others might miss the connection between Grenfell and the hostile environment, Bernard's poem understands the fire as an act of state violence against minority communities.

But the two poets also go beyond their respective incisive critiques. Their poetries also think through forms of counter-resistance. While Bernard and Raha pursue this counter-resistance through different routes, they both understand that a true sense of collectivity – of community and cohesion that materialise into sustainable care – is always at a point of potential emergence. In other words, their poetries meet the hostile environment of the UK with a counter-resistance that understands how our strategies for survival must be militant, tender, and caring.

Conclusions are difficult in our contemporary moment. How do we conclude when the subject matter is still ongoing? Any conclusion would, at best, be provisional in the extreme. As such, it seems inappropriate for this article to offer concluding remarks that go further than the above summaries. Except, perhaps, to say: in a present of enclosures that condense multiple intersecting communities deeper and deeper into the centre of a dying star, Raha and Bernard can offer voicings where something unenclosed might potentially emerge. Their respective poetries are ones we can trust.

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The Unaccompanied: Poetic Expressions of the Working Classes in England

Abstract: Since the lost labour struggles of the mid-1980s, (working-class) poets like Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage have progressively asserted their themes across the social strata. Hence, four of their poems are put to closer scrutiny. Especially Armitage's verse mirrors a tendency in contemporary working-class poetry – frequently located in the North and the Midlands – to reflect on endangered traditions, with no small amount of nostalgia. Yet, its issues – solidarity, equality and historical consciousness – have also been taken up by black and female lyricists. Consequently, the poetry of the new working classes includes the concerns of all disadvantaged people of England (and the world).

Keywords: working-class poetry, contemporary poetry, Carol Ann Duffy, Simon Armitage, North of England, Midlands.

1. Introduction

What is the English working class? Since Friedrich Engels' epochal description,¹ the members of this social class defined themselves more or less rigidly. Until the second half of the 20th century, it was dominated by males and was white, as a matter of course. However, differentiations were made, for example by excluding Irish immigrants (cf. Hickman and Bronwen). In his study on contemporary white working-class attitudes, Harris Beider corroborates this assumption for the early 21st century: "White working-class communities [in England, M.F.] are commonly reduced to a negative rump most typically by media commentators, politicians and academics; an undifferentiated block who are welfare-dependent, leading chaotic and dysfunctional lives, and resolutely against social and economic change" (1). The occupations belonging to the English working class were permeated by sweat, dirt and an apparently healthy rigour. Miners and steelworkers were part of it, football and

rugby players, too; as long as they earned their living by practicing the sport.² Janitors and taxi drivers were already operating in a transition zone. Office workers, however, regardless of their position and income, were not. And the English working class saw itself as a collective, belonging together from the cradle to grave. Its members lived in the same (back-to-back) houses, in the same neighbourhoods, spoke the same regional dialects, interspersed with the same phrases of friendly irony, frequented the same (corner) pubs, preferred the same (caloric) food, went on holiday together, to the same places at the same time, almost always to English seaside resorts: to Brighton or Great Yarmouth, and to Blackpool (Cross; Barton 213).³ Only sometimes did they travel abroad, for example to Pwelli in North Wales. In times of war, its young men were even allowed to enlist in the army together, ensuring that local communities would not be separated (Silbey 69–81).

Individualism held no place in this world of community. Literature – as an individual expression of personality – hardly played a role. In fact, it was suspect because it took readers into other worlds, began to detach them from their class. Prose and drama were slightly less suspicious than poetry. In both kinds, a clear class point of view could be represented. However, such texts were mostly written by members of the English middle and upper classes, whose ability to articulate was favoured by the English school system. At the same time, the sociological investigations of George Orwell or the films of Ken Loach – despite their unambiguous positioning – have reached a high artistic level that arises, above all, from the precision and authenticity of their depiction. Poetry, however – with its inherent ambiguity – seemed excluded from this cosmos for decades. From the perspective of English workers, it was considered the realm of effeminate public schoolboys and spinsters (Reay 222). Moreover, the very activity of writing (ambiguous) poetry was seen as unsuitable, inaccessible, almost immorally subversive⁴ (Lock 2021, 2). When members of the working class did write verse, it was very often – in the second half of the 20th century – in an intersection with popular music and politics, as in the songs of Billy Bragg and, to a lesser extent, of groups like “The Housemartins” (though not the “Sex Pistols” or “The Clash,” who could be categorised as middle-class projects). Towards the end of the 20th century a growing number of poets also belonged to an ethnic minority, living cheek by jowl with the English working class, e.g., dub poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, Benjamin Zephaniah, and countless ska lyricists.⁵ Or they came from the white working class but were not yet anchored in steady employment, remaining outside the values of their class. This could be due to illness, as in the case of Ian Curtis. Or it could be due to homosexuality, as with Jimmy Somerville, who was born in Glasgow but had to assert himself in the English music business as a triple outsider: as a homosexual, as a Scot and as a – politically conscious – member of the working class. In an interview, Somerville describes this constellation in the early 1980s: “Coming from these working-class, Trotskyist politics to suddenly being famous and being in a situation where I was around people that were very upper-class and educated – like

the record companies for example, felt pretty strange. Some of them were very cynical and manipulative, and not very generous with whom they were. It was a very interesting period for me” (qtd. in Kinsella).

2. Destruction, Individualization, and the Relevance of Postcolonial Theory

In the 1980s, as indicated above, a decisive overlap of developments occurred. On the one hand, working-class writers and singers broke away from their sociological background. On the other hand, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal policies led to the destruction of this very background, of the rigid definition of an English working class. This destruction was executed on several levels. Certain occupations, their attitudes and values were marginalized by the neoliberal establishment. At the same time, communities physically disintegrated. As unemployment rose, the community’s population declined, property prices and council tax revenues dropped, and infrastructure deteriorated. Places like Rochdale, Barnsley, Tower Hamlets no longer seemed to offer any perspective. Young and talented members of (the steadily dwindling) English working class had to fend for themselves, as individuals in the neoliberal education and labour market. The way back into the (sometimes stifling) warmth of their working-class communities had been destroyed.⁶

This development, however, promoted the emergence of new voices, anachronistic and cynical as that may sound. It even favoured a detachment of lyric poetry from music, whose successes had, after all, increased social acceptance of working-class issues. Another anachronism may also have had a positive effect on the development of a working-class poetry proper: the triumph of postcolonialism in the 20th century, prepared in the slipstream of neoliberal politics, forced the English working class at the turn of the millennium to define its existence in a more inclusive, pointed, and also creative way. Conversely, in the 21st century, the former colonial subaltern has stepped forward and – at least in party politics – rules England, the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, the former Empire, sometimes with a hard hand and a reactionary tendency. Conservative Brexit Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s last cabinet included five ministers (out of twenty-five in government) with a New Commonwealth background, including far-right Home Secretary Priti Patel (succeeded by equally radical Suella Braverman). In addition, there are numerous other examples of the growing influence and power that people with a New Commonwealth heritage – many of who Gayatri Spivak almost forty years ago justifiably categorized as “subalterns” – now wield in the UK; not least current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, or Srichand and Gopichand Hinduja, the heads of Britain’s richest family (cf. Neate).

Of course, postcolonial theory was able to explain the invisibility of a colonial working class of the 19th and 20th centuries. It found an ideal biotope for its theses

in academia. But postcolonial theory fails to do justice to the complex sociological constellations of the 21st century: workers versus bosses, Black versus White, North versus South, male versus female. In the liquid, globalised world of the 21st century, such simple opposites no longer provide patterns from which the new realities could be mapped. Hence, it seems all the more important to take a closer look at the contemporary poetry of the English working class.

Poetry in particular, as the least regarded genre, springs directly from the breadth of life. It reflects upheavals, ambiguities, uncertainties. In this sense, contemporary poetry of the English working class should no longer be exclusively oriented towards the old binaries. Still, the old culture of the English working class shines through many poems, especially those written during the period of forced neoliberal change in the 1980s and 1990s. The influence of 20th century postcolonial theory, gender studies, even Marxist literary theory – interpreting relations of exploitation and alienation, more or less narrowly, in terms of different groups – prevails, strongly. This still seems urgent and imperative. But the liquidity of relations, the diversity of people, the ambiguity of circumstances nowadays tend to elude rigid patterns. Yet, the – fairly representative – poems analysed below only rudimentarily reflect these social changes.

With regard to the poetry of the working class, two main tendencies can be identified in the literary scenes of England at present. On the one hand, working class poets have succeeded in taking the concerns of their peers into wider social circles through their poetry. In individual cases, they have made real careers, like Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage, who were both named Poet Laureate. On the other hand, a new, prospering genre has emerged in a niche: poetry that reflects the life of the English working class with strong local and historical references – and not without nostalgia. Both tendencies will be outlined in the following pages. But what is missing should not be concealed either. For the subaltern of the 21st century also has a light skin colour. He/she no longer refers exclusively to a history of colonial exploitation, but through his/her immigration brings the horrific traumas of Central and Eastern Europe, long held back by the Iron Curtain, to the regions of England.

Behind the Holocaust, the Gulag system of Stalinism, the Holodomor, the World Wars and their aftermath, the expulsion of millions of people from Eastern and Central Europe after 1945 has joined colonialism and the enslavement of Africans as historically inherited experiences in present-day England. Yet, in English-language literature, they seem to be portrayed mostly by benevolent mediators. The people directly affected and their descendants – as members of England's working class – have hardly had a poetic word to say. Even though people from Eastern and Central Europe immigrated to England by hundreds of thousands in the early 21st century and have taken over many tasks of the once-English working class – despite the restrictions which Brexit has recently imposed upon their lives. In 2020, 7 per cent of the UK workforce – 2.3 million people – was born in the

EU. Poles represented the largest group. And almost a fifth of London's population (eighteen per cent) came from the European Union.⁷

Hence, a short and exemplary detour should be undertaken here, by taking a closer look at the Jubilee Reading List 2022, to mark the 70th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's accession to the throne. It reveals a surprising discrepancy. There, one literary work from the Commonwealth is dedicated to each year of Queen Elizabeth's reign. At first glance, the seventy titles show enormous diversity: every country in the Commonwealth, almost every socially relevant group, is represented by at least one author. At second glance, however, it is noticeable that even the kinds of texts chosen are weighted differently. The majority of the texts are prose, mostly novels. There are very few dramas and a total of three volumes of poetry, all published more than thirty years ago.⁸ At third glance, one can perceive that continental Europe plays a fairly minor role in this canon, despite its geographical and cultural proximity and despite the significant immigration into the British labour market mentioned above.⁹ Jewish authors are also missing,¹⁰ a particularly unfortunate omission, as authors like Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter and fellow dramatist Arnold Wesker would have contributed literature that also mirrors working-class life. Hong Kong is not represented either, although the former Crown Colony had belonged to the Commonwealth until 1999 and was only returned to China in a painful process of recolonisation. This also seems strange because China plays an enormously important role in the neo-colonial world of labour in the 21st century, with close ties to the West and building new dependencies for the South – which do not seem to be processed here. Apart from Seamus Heaney, no author from (Northern) Ireland is represented, although the Troubles and their close connection with the working class of Northern Ireland may, indeed, be considered important in the history of the United Kingdom.¹¹ The same applies to Scotland, whose Gaelic-language authors apparently do not seem worth reading even in translation. Other dialects and regional languages – in the UK very frequently a hallmark of working-class descent – are also absent, with the exception of several Caribbean authors and Douglas Stuart from Scotland.

3. Carol Ann Duffy: The Struggle for Expression

The beginning of the change from an all-determining class affiliation to the development of an individual voice is exemplarily found in what might be considered a grey area: in poems by Carol Ann Duffy. Written at the end of the 20th century, they address a farewell from childhood, from the culture of the working class, but also from a Scottish identity which – in accordance with the author's biography – is dissolving in England. Duffy was born in 1955 in the Gorbals, a Glasgow slum, into a left-wing working-class family of Irish heritage. When she was six, however, the family moved to England, where Duffy at the age of 16 met the much older

poet Adrian Henri and alongside him immersed herself in the Liverpool beat poetry scene. By the time she re-emerged twelve years later, following her split from Henri, she was a poet more associated with England, even being appointed the UK's first female Poet Laureate (not Scots Makar) in 2009. Her poetry of the 1980s and 1990s, indirectly reflecting the process of disintegration within the working class, was not widely received until the early 2000s, e.g. in school curricula, which is why two of her poems from that period will be discussed here.

“Originally” (1990) deals with this transformation: on the one hand physically, in the first stanza, through the train journey of a child who leaves behind her proletarian origins, but also her home, her country: “My brothers cried, one of them bawling, Home, / Home, as the miles rushed back to the city, / the street, the house, the vacant rooms.” There is no momentary resolution to this displacement; material poverty corresponds to the lonely child’s hopelessness, reflected in a (worn) toy animal that has lost its eyes: “I stared / at the eyes of a blind toy, holding its paw.” In the second stanza, childhood is also understood as an expulsion, an emigration from a paradise not described in detail. Instead, a sudden confrontation with new, unpleasant situations is evoked, which are set in a rough, proletarian environment. There, unfamiliar words mark not only the expulsion from childhood innocence, but also a sense of strangeness felt (by the Scottish child) in England: “Your accent wrong. Corners, which seem familiar, / leading to unimagined pebble-dashed estates, big boys / eating worms and shouting words you don’t understand.” Nothing is glossed over; the boys are not stealing apples, but eating worms – an observation that suggests neglect, disgust, even abuse. The speaker states, here in direct speech addressed to her tense parents: “I want our own country” (1990, 7). In challenging ambiguity, the self-quoting speaker not only demands a safe space for children and families, she also asks for a country where she can stay, living happily and untouched. However, it remains open whether this means the country where her accent sounds right or a state where people are not forced to leave home and eke out a meagre living.

But adaptation to the new circumstances seems inevitable. The inevitability is evident in the third stanza where the speaker questions the osmotic process in three words, “forget [...] don’t recall [...] change.” Her brother possibly passes a test of courage, an initiation ritual perhaps, by swallowing a snail. The speaker remembers – in a remarkably sibilant alliteration – her slight shame, whose last remnants peek from the Scots dialect word “skelf.” Her tongue finally sheds its skin, like a snake, stripping away its telltale quality, not to reveal its origins: an adaptation creating protective unison, making the speaker now belong to the “rest” of the classroom. But, in the end, the loss is immense: the landscape (“river”), the culture, the language, the roots, the beginnings of her biography have vanished. Even her memory has become attenuated, as is shown in her telling hesitation, in response to the question “Where do you come from?” (1990, 7). Hence, the clarifying question about her origins, “Originally?” – the poem’s title and beginning – does not find an answer.

The poem “The way my mother speaks” from the same volume focuses even more strongly on the question of origin and language, the struggle with them. The speaker travels through England on the train, in the evening, sentences running through her head that her mother spoke, almost like a mantra: “For miles I have been saying / What like is it” – a slight reversal of the word order: “What is it like.” Of course, colloquial influence is noticeable in this slightest inaccuracy, but also the echo of Gaelic sentence structure. “What like” at the beginning of a sentence derives from the Gaelic *ciamar*: *cia* (what) and *mar* (like). The speaker does not mention this, however, an intimation of the subconscious, almost spiritual negotiation of her mother’s linguistic heritage (“restful shapes moving”), ultimately of her ancestors, which follows her, as she rides through England but which she can also fish as a sentence from the green, maybe even the Celtic pool of her memory, her subconscious, like a child, content at the end of summer (1990, 54).

Less conciliatory, though also less personal, is Duffy’s poem “Education for Leisure,” enabling us to sketch the development of working-class suffering under alienating circumstances, from child to adolescent. Here, an unemployed youth ruminates on his immense frustrations, his isolation, which manifest themselves as an impotent male’s delusions of grandeur. His very first sentence, announcement, confession, and threat, sets the tone: “Today I am going to kill something. Anything.” Then, the readers witness a budgie panicking, a fly being crushed by the speaker at the window, a goldfish being flushed down the toilet. These are the only creatures upon which the speaker – ranking at the bottom of the social hierarchy – can exercise power. “I am going to play God,” he declares. In a desperate, failed attempt to communicate with other people, with the public, the young man is thrown off the phone line by a radio presenter, and he then descends into the street with a knife, where he approaches an unnamed addressee, perhaps the reader, in the poem’s very last line: “I touch your arm” (1985, 15).

In the context of contemporary history, Duffy’s poem should, above all, be understood as a critique of Thatcher’s neoliberal economic policy. As a resolute Hayek disciple, the United Kingdom’s first female prime minister had not only devastated countless working-class communities with a harsh austerity policy in the 1980s but had also sent hundreds of thousands of young people into nonsensical, poorly paid auxiliary jobs, as part of the Youth Training Scheme (cf. Cook). Duffy knew this social milieu extremely well, having worked as a poet-in-residence at several comprehensive schools in the East End of London between 1982 and 1984,¹² immediately before the publication of her book of poems. Thus, focusing on social isolation among working-class youths, the poet spotlights a phenomenon that was by no means marginal. In fact, the problem was addressed at the time on a broad basis in the arts, as contemporary films by Alan Clarke, Ken Loach and especially Mike Leigh¹³ testify, only to be overlaid by the further consequences of neoliberal economic policy (pit closures, poll tax, rising poverty) a short time later. Of course, our empathy with the aggressive speaker is limited. But behind

the open, fictional threat, we are also able perceive a manic cry of despair, from which we can at least discern the burning desire to belong, to achieve something: “I am a genius. I could be anything at all, with half / the chance. But today I am going to change the world,” as the speaker declares (1985, 15).

At the beginning of the 21st century, “Education for Leisure” had made it into the educational curricula of secondary schools, but eventually underwent a different reading. Although the poem had already been made compulsory literature in the nationwide GCSE (secondary school leaving certificate) examinations in England and Wales, its almost tragicomic message triggered a scandal after some delay in 2008. External examiner Pat Schofield judged “Education for Leisure” as “absolutely horrendous” (cf. Curtis) in the public debate that she very much shaped. Supported by a small but clamorous following, she eventually helped to get the – in her view – violent, nihilistic poem removed from the syllabus and the examination context. According to the critics’ view, a fictional enemy of the system, a poetic amok runner, had crept into the textbooks, the classrooms, the test questions and the minds of young people. The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA), responsible for administering the exams, therefore, recommended in the same year that all English and Welsh secondary schools should stop using the editions of the poetry anthology which contained Duffy’s poem (and which, until then, had been published without controversy by the AQA). “Education for Leisure” was simultaneously removed from the exam canon for secondary schools (cf. Curtis). Ultimately, however, “Education for Leisure” demands the opposite of its supposed content: one can argue that it is precisely an education system structured by class and restrictive economic policies that leads to isolation and psychosis, destroys the individual and his/her potential contributions to society.

4. Nostalgic Criticism and Reconciliation: From Tony Harrison to Simon Armitage

Simon Armitage’s biography shows occasional parallels to the life of Duffy: He also comes from a working-class background, born in Huddersfield, and was raised in Marsden, North Yorkshire. Like Duffy (Manchester Metropolitan), Armitage currently holds a professorship at a major university in the North of England (Leeds). Finally, Armitage – succeeding Duffy – was named Poet Laureate in 2019. However, he was by no means the first choice. Before him, Benjamin Zephaniah and Imtiaz Dharker had already declined the position.

In a society where social position can be assigned through identity, it seems worthwhile taking a closer look at Armitage’s perhaps most important progenitor in the poetic tradition of England’s (white) working-class, fellow Yorkshireman Tony Harrison. In doing so, we are able to discern even more clearly how Armitage’s poetry has detached itself from the concerns of its predecessors. Harrison himself

comes from a working-class family in Leeds, growing up near Leeds United's football ground at Elland Road, in the 1940s. However, he was able to attend a grammar school, to study to become a teacher and eventually a writer. Unfortunately, Tony Harrison's extensive body of work cannot be acknowledged here. However, a look at his 1985 long poem *V*, also filmed and broadcasted by Channel 4, shows that Carol Ann Duffy's poetry, written at the same time, was not singular but part of a trend. In addition, it explains, even more than Duffy's poetry, how and why Simon Armitage has moved into mainstream society with his poetry.

In *V* the speaker returns to his parents' grave in Holbeck Cemetery, Beeston Hill, just off Elland Road. The home ground of a club at the time mainly representing the white English working class, often playing in white, the colour of the Yorkshire rose, the county's blazonry flower. The graves, though, have been neglected, even desecrated, apparently by racist skinheads, in a self-destructive attack on their own culture. The speaker's parents' gravestone has been defiled, the ambiguous word "United" scrawled on it, referring to the football club, his parents united in death and the speaker's wish to overcome the division of society; what is more, he stumbles upon an empty can of Harp, cheap lager from Ireland. The speaker is concerned, reflects on the grave's condition, yet recognizes his own part in the neglect. As always, he only came by briefly, due to a train change ("I only had an hour between trains," 13), and hence he cannot scrub the tombstone properly. He also knows that he left his class and parents behind – unlike Duffy's speaker, taken away by her parents on a train journey down South. And also unlike Armitage's speaker in "The Unaccompanied," who reluctantly decides to return, crossing the bridge, following his ancestors. The only chance for Harrison's speaker, however, to make up for his embarrassed affinity, seems to create some kind unity in writing: "The pen's all I have of magic wand" (15). In clear and precise verse, interspersed with dialect and colloquial language, which describes, analyses, evaluates, but does not condemn. In contrast, he finds the present dominated by the letter *v*; the Latin word *versus*, in English used, above all, in sports (and law), formally denoting two opponents. This opposition infuriates the speaker; in an imaginary dialogue with the skinhead, he rages: "but all these Vs: against! against! against!" (18) Yet, he feels unable to condemn, but tries to be a spokesman for the unheard: "The only reason why I write this poem at all / on jobs like you who do the dirt on death / 's to give some higher meaning to your scrawl" (19). Unlike Duffy, Harrison does not lose his language, not even his Yorkshire dialect. His stocktaking in *V* thus resembles Hugh MacDiarmid's "A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle" (1926), an epic poem in Scots, which recapitulates the state of the nation; in form and content, moreover, oriented towards Scottish national poet Robert Burns, who, with a touch of good will, may also be counted among the working classes.

Unfortunately, some of Harrison's critics did not want to recognise these references. What is more, at the height of the labour struggles in 1985 – they were also unable to appreciate the speaker's highly differentiated and balanced stance.

Tony Harrison, at any rate, was harshly attacked by conservatives for his poem (cf. Clavane); his nomination for Poet Laureate would probably have been unthinkable. In contrast, Simon Armitage embodies the following generation, which no longer feels the transition to academia as a betrayal, whose writing – by no coincidence – begins with the end of the last fiercely contested strikes of the mid-1980s and the accompanying dissolution of the traditional milieus of the English working class. When issues of class struggle fade away, quietly replaced by the long goodbye of nostalgic observation. Hence, some of Simon Armitage's poems are also about ordinary people, their everyday lives – and their losses: Topics, in other words, that reflect the retreat, the decline, the disappearance of the (white) male, English working class.

In "The Unaccompanied" (2017), the speaker describes in four stanzas his walking at night towards a suspension bridge over a river before hearing a choir of old men ("chorusing men, all pewter-haired or bald, / in the function suite of a shabby hotel") singing songs from times gone by, probably without instrumental accompaniment, i.e. "unaccompanied" (74). The sounds, the songs relate to him, he feels. Probably, he has approached the hotel, and he watches the men through a window. Perhaps he also floats, as a ghost, across the river that here separates worlds: the men – for only men sing in the suite – from the women, the workers from the rest of the population, the English from the rest of the world, the moribund from those living in healthy innocence. The magical atmosphere is underlined by the conductor's baton, hovering like a wand over the greying heads. The protagonist listens intently: the third stanza consists of a list of genres and themes that are being intoned. These include the lost world of hard manual labour ("mills and mines," 74), and the First World War, for which many young men from the same neighbourhoods and village communities in Northern England had volunteered together, suffering horrific losses together in the trenches in the Pals Battalions (named after them), an experience that left deep traces in the collective memory, not only of the English working class (Fitzpatrick 9).

Behind all this lies a fair amount of social criticism, which, however, dissolves into its own kind of ironic patriotism. For the allusion to "mermaid brides" might be taken as a reference to the popular 19th century shanty "Married to a Mermaid," in which the death of a peasant boy pressed into naval service is celebrated, his drowning dressed up as the wedding to a mermaid.¹⁴ Diving deeper at this point, it seems possible to extract even more from the shanty. For the shanty's "gay young farmer" (74) is only shanghaied into naval service through intrigue. A rich knight, thus, prevented an improper liaison between his daughter and the farmer. The song's narrative is clear: patriotism and death for Britain function as a solution to class conflict. Armitage's poem, however, remains (deliberately) on the surface here, then hinting at a Welsh folk song ("The Golden Hills of my Country" – "Bryniau Aur Fy Ngwlad"), possibly a reference to the unity of England and Wales. The round of songs concludes with a glance at "broken hymnbooks" (74), an inspiration from the – now fractured – diversity of Christian denominations, which

were strongly represented in the working class. There is also a reference to the influence of “cheesy films” (74), popular entertainment on celluloid, whether from Pinewood, Ealing or Hollywood, which was an important cultural factor in English working-class and middle-class life during the 1940s through to the 1960s. In this musical heritage – which, by the way, lacks songs of class struggle like “The Red Flag” – the lyrical subject discerns the voices of his male ancestors: “Then his father’s voice rising out of that choir, / and his father’s voice, and voices / of fathers before, concerning him only” (74). With their songs, they build him, only him, a bridge over the cliff, over which he crosses into their realm – and, thus, confirms his belonging to their tradition, to their culture. This belonging also implies a certain risk for the lyrical subject: to do so, he must first take the step into the void, step over the edge of the cliff, in the hope that the songs and their culture will carry him.

The ambiguity of the title refers to several aspects of the poem. Firstly, as mentioned, the men sing without instrumental accompaniment. But they are also without their wives or other relatives, thus content to remain on their own. Likewise, their culture hardly resonates in society. For apart from the isolated, even unaccompanied lyrical subject, no one else, it seems, approaches the singers on this evening; they live in an almost otherworldly state. Hence, Armitage’s poem offers a fairly accurate description of the state of (traditional) English working-class culture, which is cultivated only by a small number of old men, in an echo of bygone days when the shipyards and steelworks and coal mines, their culture’s booming basis, were still in operation, day and night. At the same time, his speaker gently goes into that good night, not raging against the decline of the working classes. Thus, Armitage’s poem remains firmly related to the northern English working class, but it is certainly no longer a provocation. Armitage’s poetry, in fact, even displays an almost representative, stately quality that might also have earned its author the nomination of Poet Laureate. What is more, Armitage’s poem provides evidence that at least the memory of working-class culture persists in England, especially in the North.

5. Working-Class Poetry in England: Shapes of a New Genre

Numerous men – mostly white, some black – of a more mature age have published poetry that deals with the legacy of a once powerful English working class. Simon Armitage and, to a lesser extent, Carol Ann Duffy could even be regarded as the foremost representatives of working-class poetry. This assumption has been critically acknowledged by Fran Lock, referring to Simon Armitage’s appointment as Oxford Professor of Poetry:

Nothing against Simon Armitage, as a poet or a person; he’d more than earned his right to be there as far as I’m concerned. What is troubling about his appointment is

the way in which it has been uncritically trumpeted as a triumph of working-class representation. And it's not, it's really not. A post-war northern male version of working-classness is one of the few acceptable faces of working-class identity permitted to proliferate across mainstream media platforms. This is deliberate: the poetry's distance from the material realities it describes presupposes and encodes a nostalgia, a looking back that defuses potential threat (social or poetic), softens the language of experience, and makes safe what might otherwise be challenging to the cultural status-quo [...]. (cf. Lock 2018)

This constellation, however, is by no means new. Since the 1950s and 1960s, the internationally well-connected Northern Realists (Jim Burns, Geoff Hattersley, Peter Sansom, Ian McMillan, et al.) have exercised some influence in English-language poetry. And their poetry is, indeed, often nostalgic and features a regional, even a local context.

Similarly, in the 21st century, Kevin Cadwallender, for example, deals with the structural and mental changes in Tyneside in his volume *Dances with Vowels* (2009). Melancholy also dominates in his work, for example, when in his poem "This Tyne" he portrays the singer Morrissey – a scion and chronicler of working-class Manchester – as educated and historically aware, since he refers to the local pitman poet Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903) in front of his (rather consumerist) audience in Newcastle. Cadwallender writes: "Morrissey mentioned Skipsey at the City Hall / lost on his disciples, apostles of the shopping mall" (104). The related issue of the uniformity of consumption, of culture, of human interaction is taken up by Jim Greenhalf in his poetry collection *Breakfast at Wetherspoons* (2018). The volume's title reflects its message: currently, the standardised and all-English breakfast of pub chain J.D. Wetherspoon is offered at a bargain price. Its cheapest version ("Freedom Breakfast") sells for £4.41 (on 13 July 2023); the most expensive offer, containing twice as many calories, costs £6.34.¹⁵ The ironic reference to Truman Capote's society novel and Blake Edward's film of the same name (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*) about New York It-girl Holly Golightly here serves to demarcate the territory and reassure readers. This is not poetry in search of luxury, the celebration of beauty and socially accepted style, but – served with a sprinkle of irony – the exact opposite. Geoff Hattersley, who lives in Huddersfield, not only condenses post-industrial biographies of his native South Yorkshire in his locally well-received volume *Don't Worry* (1993). In *Harmonica* (2003) he writes about his five years as a machine operator.¹⁶ Currently, Geoff Hattersley is working on a poem cycle dealing with the ambiguous influence of new technologies on the lives of ordinary people.¹⁷

From geographical references, some English working-class poets go back further in history, even to the first English Civil War, such as Mike Rowley in *Battle of Heptonstall* (2021) or Bob Beagrie in *Civil Insolencies* (2019). It should also be mentioned that the patterns and themes of English working-class poetry are,

as a matter of course, taken up by women and New Commonwealth immigrants, especially from the Caribbean. Nicola Jackson dedicates her poetry collection *Difficult Women* (2018), with a slightly less nostalgic tone, to working-class women who also suffered from inhumane working conditions in the 19th century. Jane Commane has written *Assembly Lines* (2018), a book of poetry about the legacy of the car industry in her hometown of Coventry. Roy McFarlane, co-editor of the anthology *Celebrate Wha? Black Poetry from the Midlands* (2011), on the other hand, reflects on the hostile reception of black people in neighbouring Wolverhampton. Admittedly, McFarlane does not refer explicitly to the world of labour. But his strong historical and regional references signal a closeness to the values, the mores, and modes of expression of the working class. This closeness is apparent, for example, when he observes in “A Black Man in Wolverhampton” that “We felt at home with people / Who couldn’t speak the Queen’s English” (87). Behind this, however, we can also recognise a hesitant immersion, which in this context complements Edward Galbraith’s postcolonial thesis of the nation language. Members of the working class, as McFarlane notes in negation, also define themselves through their dialect (which can lead to an inner conflict among upwardly and spatially mobile persons, as elaborated in Duffy’s poetry). Members of the working class recognise themselves in language; at the same time, they distinguish themselves, strengthen their self-identification, vis-à-vis members of other classes conversing in the “Queen’s English.” In this sense, Jamaican Patois would belong in the working-class areas of the Midlands, where its speakers can feel at home. Their successful integration is also evident in the line “The Black and Gold of the Wolves,” which alludes to the strong role of black footballers in the local Premier League club, Wolverhampton Wanderers.¹⁸ McFarlane also evokes historical precedents of 20th century immigration. Not only does he mention the Irish, but local industrialists, too, like the Mander family, who immigrated from Wales. By referring to Enoch Powell’s infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech (made in 1968 in Birmingham, not Wolverhampton), McFarlane implicitly raises the question, against an already historical background, as to how long the rejection of (black) immigrants should continue.

From the characteristics outlined above, a typology of contemporary English working-class poetry could be suggested. It is certainly male-dominated, though women have joined the ranks of the poets. Its verse demonstrates a nostalgic, friendly attention to fondly remembered, historical detail. However, these poems are neither racist nor nationalist – despite such tendencies in the run-up to Brexit, which even extended to once left-wing social milieux, especially working-class ones (cf. Goodwin and Heath). At the same time, English working-class poetry shows strong regional connections – predominantly to the once prosperous, industrial centres in the Midlands and the North. Hence, it comes as no surprise that three of the most important publishers of working-class poetry are based in the North of England, namely in Ripon (Smokestack), Hull (Wrecking Ball) and Hexham (Bloodaxe).¹⁹

Regionalism, though, is by no means a feature exclusive to working-class poetry in England. Poetry dedicated to shipbuilding testifies to the fact that working-class verse have prospered in Tyneside, in Clydeside and in Belfast alike (cf. Bellamy). And, of course, Wales has always had a thriving working-class poetry scene, even a *Red Poets' Society*, based in Wrexham.²⁰ While Scots also seems to encourage poets with a working-class focus, like Glaswegian Victoria McNulty and street poet Gary Robertson who writes (and performs) in Dundonian dialect.

6. Conclusion

Against this background, it would not be unfair to describe English working-class poetry as taking a certain delight in provincialism. World politics are not ignored – among Smokestack's poetry collections we also find verse by Amir Darwish in *Dear Refugee* (2019) sublimating the author's experiences of fleeing to the UK as an asylum seeker during the Second Gulf War. But they do not necessarily constitute a vital element of its sometimes even isolationist poetics. Or, as Owen Gallagher put it in "Minister of Poetry," not without irony: "Anyone who enters our country / must be a published poet" (61). This is where legitimate criticism could possibly begin. In the poetry of working-class England, we find very few 21st century subalterns – Eastern Europeans or Chinese, for example – as subjects, but more importantly as poets. In fact, contemporary working-class poetry sometimes perpetuates the narratives of (western) postcolonial theory, pitching the Global South against the Global North, despite the fact that immigration to England (and its statistics) speak of a very different situation: oppression, discrimination and exploitation in the 21st century affect many people from very diverse backgrounds. They may come from Eastern Europe, from China and from the New Commonwealth countries. And they might also be born in Britain. While capitalist exploitation, more often than not, cloaks its grip in rainbow colours, cushioning back-breaking labour conditions in progressive language. At the same time, the poetry of the English working class is not exclusively socialist either. Fran Lock's criticism certainly bears more than a grain of truth. Contemporary working-class poetry's main thrust is rarely directed against current conditions of exploitation; verse as outspoken as that of Martin Hayes in *they want all our teeth to be theirs* (2021) and openly engagé organisations like *Poetry on the Picket Line*²¹ remain the exception rather than the rule. Instead, English working-class poetry recalls, on the one hand, the cause of workers and the exploited in history. On the other hand, it mourns the loss of roots, of social ties, of working-class culture. One could call this attitude – in its own way – one of traditionalist solidarity (but not conservative). This approach is perhaps not very original, nor could most working-class poems' transparent form be described as innovative. But readers and listeners from the still fairly numerous English working class are likely to recognise themselves,

their families, and communities in that verse. Their concerns, hopes and desires, but also their history and their own personal stories are reflected in them in a very genuine way.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Engels, Friedrich. 1887. *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845). New York: John W. Lovell.
- 2 Football players in Great Britain would usually undergo an apprenticeship, beginning their careers like miners, shipbuilders or bakers. A differentiation was made in rugby, where (amateur) Rugby Union players would often be recruited from public schools and (professional) Rugby League remained in an enclave in the North of England. Cf. also David Storey's novel *This Sporting Life* (1963) and his play *The Changing Room* (1971), based on his experiences as a rugby league player for Leeds RLFC.
- 3 Cf. Stephen Moss, "Blackpool: Profile of a Ghost Town," *The Guardian*, 27 August 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2010/aug/27/blackpool>
- 4 In her 2021 article, Fran Lock "Thinking the Working-Class 'Aven't Gard'" identifies accessibility as a major issue, but stakes another claim, i.e., that working-class avant-garde poetry has been driven by working-class women.
- 5 The cultural contribution of musicians and writers from the Caribbean cannot be overestimated, especially in a working-class context. Beginning in the 1960s, Desmond Dekker, Laurel Aitken, Roland Alphonso, Jimmy Cliff and many other ska artists would not only provide the two-tone sound and the sharp lifestyle for English working-class teenagers; but their cultural impact would eventually spread all over the world, inspiring hundreds of other artists – almost always with a working-class bias.
- 6 While it seems difficult to rely on individual case studies to prove this assumption, declining population figures speak for themselves. In an industrial town like Barnsley the population almost halved during the late 1970s and mid-1980s: https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10211980/cube/TOT_POP
- 7 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/>
- 8 These are Seamus Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) and Jackie Kay's *Adoption Papers* (1991). In addition, Seamus Heaney was an EU citizen as an Irishman and distanced himself from the Commonwealth during his lifetime. Incidentally, in *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), Bernardine Evaristo uses a style that, with its flowing text structured by line breaks, is at least reminiscent of poetry, which the author calls "fusion fiction" (cf. Bucknell).

- 9 However, European themes are not completely ignored. The Third Reich plays a central role in the works of the two best-selling Australian authors Thomas Keneally (*Schindler's Ark*) and Markus Zusak (*The Book Thief*). And in John Le Carré's *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (1974), Cold War Europe is also evoked.
- 10 Other famous Jewish names missing are Nobel Prize winner Elias Canetti and Booker Prize Winner Howard Jacobson. Only Jamaican writer Andrea Levy, who grew up in London, refers – among 70 authors – to a Jewish grandfather.
- 11 This is also recognised in literature, most recently with Anna Burns' novel *The Milkman*, which won the Booker Prize.
- 12 Cf. <https://www.bbc.com/bitesize/clips/zhyqxn>
- 13 Cf. Alan Clarke, *Made in Britain* (1983). The cult film deals with the rebellion of racist skinhead Trevor against all attempts at education and intervention by the authorities: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iLNpsf1k_Yw. Ken Loach's largely forgotten film *Looks and Smiles* (1981) revolves around the everyday lives of unemployed young people in Sheffield: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtNnJcxMcNA>. Mike Leigh's *Meantime* (1983) is also set in East London: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isMjvRpAckU&list=PLF2jqAycOHK6DIkfp4sl7duk2SqdxAnGi>
- 14 “There was a gay young farmer, / Who liv'd on Salisbury plain; / He lov'd a rich Knight's daughter dear! / And she lov'd him again. / The Knight he was distressed, / That they should sweethearts be. / So he had the farmer soon pressed, / And sent him off to sea. / Singing Rule Britannia, / Britannia rules the waves / Britons never, never, never shall be slaves...”
- 15 https://www.jdwetherspoon.com/~media/files/pdf_documents/menus/currentmenus/menu_71.pdf
- 16 <https://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowships/geoff-hattersley/>
- 17 Cf. the entrance on Hattersley on the Royal Literary Fund's website: <https://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowships/geoff-hattersley/>
- 18 Cf. <https://www.wolves.co.uk/news/equality/20211030-black-history-month-the-gold-and-black-pioneers-who-led-the-way/>
- 19 While Bloodaxe and Wrecking Ball do not predominantly publish working-class poetry, they remain open to voices outside the orbit of academia and commercial publishing. To a lesser extent, the same is still true for Carcanet Press operating from an office building in Cross Street, Central Manchester.
- 20 Cf. <http://www.redpoets.org/>
- 21 Cf. Unfortunately, the *Picket Line Poets* can only be found on *Facebook*: <https://www.facebook.com/PicketLinePoets/>

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(im)Material Geographies: From Poetics of Terraforming to Earth Scripts

Abstract: The article explores the work of two contemporary poets, Alice Oswald and J.R. Carpenter, with reference to the material and immaterial aspects of their poetic projects. It is argued that although disparate in their form, both artists' works are linked by their interest in the environmental forces as (im)material manifestations of more-than-human agency. In this sense they can be seen as belonging to a longer and broader strain of poetic endeavours (like concrete poetry and land art) that struggle to problematise the relationship between form and meaning. The article also employs the notion of earth scripts which allows to see such poetic and artistic practices as forms of descriptions of the earth characterized by differing degrees of sensitivity to the environmental challenges posed by the Anthropocene.

Keywords: materiality, Anthropocene, climate crisis, contemporary poetry, digital literature, Alice Oswald, J.R. Carpenter

1. Introduction

The ecological crisis might be a crisis of imagination, as Lawrence Buell (1995) put it, but it also has a very tangible, material aspect. It is, as we now know, manifested in phenomena like failing crops, global warming, or unexpected weather conditions on an unprecedented planetary scale. However, this emerging critical physicality does not only concern the devastation of ecosystems but is also deeply entwined with another, immaterial dimension, inseparable from the material one. Thus, the ecological crisis as a crisis of imagination emphasizes the link between the material and the immaterial; between the domain of physicality and that language and representation. Recognising such a connection encourages us to think about its specificities (of form, function, and possible outcomes) and urges to

consider questions regarding the way they might be helpful in gesturing towards a somewhat different language – one capable of describing, reacting to, and helping us, at least to a degree, to live through these hard times. Perhaps such language is that of poetry?

During her Oxford poetry lectures, Alice Oswald rightly observes the intertwined nature of materiality when she points to metaphor as a device for trying to “detect something immaterial”; just like matter implies metaphysics, materiality, paradoxically, is an argument for the existence of immateriality (2022). Viewing it as a node to representation, a junction between physicality and language (or the verbal stand-in for what is absent), allows to see materiality at the same time as the domain of the immaterial and semantic. Likewise, poetry as a multimodal discourse – one which makes use of sound, body or memory – calls out to much more than a ‘mere’ practice of linguistic inscription, located well beyond its written form. Recalling the ‘active’ element in its antique etymology, *poiesis* may well stand for practice: an act of doing (something) and performing actions. To a certain extent, a similar logic could be found at play in Paul Crutzen’s and Eugene F. Stommer’s (2000) proposition to recognize the Anthropocene as a new geological era. Much as it reflects the devastating impact of human actions on the materiality of the planet, the notion also points to the existence of an agent (or, in fact, agents) further linked in to a composition of causes (actions) provoking particular material results – action affects matter, matter shapes representation, cultural representation affects ‘things that matter.’

As a result, numerous recent theoretical perspectives have been preoccupied with recognizing new forms of entanglements between diverse agents that we as humans share the living space with. Noticeable across various disciplines, this tendency already for some time now has resulted in what some call the post-anthropocentric turn.¹ While offering to rethink material realities or ontology of objects, the theoretical discourses attempting to breach the disciplinary gap necessarily have to rely on rather hermetic parlance (e.g. of philosophy or science). Therefore, what seems pertinent to literary studies right now is reflection on how these new perspectives, together with the mutual disciplinary criss-crossing they advocate, can enrich the study of literature, including a critical summary of what vantage points on matter and ‘things’ they suggest. In this context it makes sense to ask some of the questions outlined above to the imaginative discursive and linguistic practices of poetry.

While trying to approach these issues, what follows looks at the selected works of two notable contemporary poets: Alice Oswald and J.R. Carpenter. Special attention is devoted here to the way in which their respective lyrical sensibilities struggle to probe the limits of language as a medium of communication, with particular respect to its materiality and how it attempts to evoke the planetary elements. Although disparate in form, both artists’ respective works are linked by their interest in the environmental forces perceived as (im)material manifestations

of more-than-human agency. Their work can be seen as belonging to a longer and much broader strain of poetic endeavours that struggle to problematise the relationship between form and meaning. Yet, perhaps because of a heightened planetary and climate awareness the endeavours of these present-day artists might tell us something about the future heading for poetry, especially that their literary practices seem to offer a less intrusive form of lyrical language and verse than many of their artistic forerunners (e.g. concrete poetry).

2. The (Terra)formings of Poetry

What readily comes to mind when thinking about the terrain of poetry and its links with the (im)materiality of language is the tradition of concrete poetry. Rooted in the older but equally multifaceted experimental strains of writing, like the early 20th century avant-gardes and indirectly even in earlier fascination with typographical verse, this literary-artistic current is often associated more with the probing of material limits of signification than with questions of the environment. In this sense, the key issues it is usually paired with (e.g. the conceptual problematization of the artistic object, questioning of the institutional confines or of representation itself) are ones which focus on the way it is connected with the ‘spatial’ revolutions 1960s and 1970s. This includes what Lucy Lippard (together with John Chandler) famously called “The Dematerialization of Art” (1971), as well as the visual, modernism-derived impulses to make form synonymous with content. However, such a reading of many of the conceptualism-fuelled works, together with their disparate attempts at taking writing and signification beyond the printed page, may overshadow these projects’ individual reliance on the physical surroundings. This additionally obliterates the actual physical intrusion in the earth some of the concrete works constitute.

On a closer inspection, there certainly is a lot of examples to be found across numerous projects within the broadly understood concrete poetry tradition which allows us to see them as anthropocentric interventions in the structure, fabric and formation of landscape and the environment at large. In fact, artistic ways of shaping the material surroundings as exhibited, for instance, by authors like Ian Hamilton Finlay, Robert Smithson or Richard Long, can be seen as practices akin to writing and inscription, or, to a degree, versions of one of Anthropocene’s staples – terraformation.² By getting rid of paper and putting words and letters into the physical spaces of a landscape, and through altering the physical surroundings (the environment), site-specific art (including concrete poetry) in many ways constitutes a version of specifically understood practice of writing – an act of inscription that penetrates the land. Even if we envisage this process perhaps somewhat differently to Jacques Derrida, who describes writing at the opening of *Spurs* as a violent practice – an activity in which “some pointed object [...] a quill or a stylus [...], stiletto,

or even a rapier” (37) scrapes the material surface of paper – concrete poetry still, in many ways, embodies an intervention in the physical surroundings. Given the reliance on minimalism and conceptualism of experimental concrete poetics, it is interesting to ask to what kind of an account of environment, or, more narrowly, of place they produce. Is it radically different from, say, more traditional accounts of the earth or place? In his *Anthropocene Lyric*, Tom Brislow (2015) offers a helpful perspective by pointing to how geography, etymologically standing for “earth description,” may function as “writing of place” but argues for an alternative mode of representing place and environment, which he terms “literary geo-graphies, or earth scripts” (8). In contrast to the anthropocentrically generated accounts where localities are filtered through human interests, tradition or language, earth scripts offer something else. As Brislow claims, “earth-scripts – made by humans who are part of the earth – are therefore inherently self-conscious writerly descriptions of our spaces fleshed out by the more-than-human world” (8). Consequently, earth scripts may be a useful term for the types of literary (and undoubtedly all sorts of artistic) descriptions of places which, even though articulated by and in a human language, include an awareness of being partly influenced or shaped by the more-than-human forces. Obviously, not all of literary/poetic descriptions of places qualify to be earth scripts, especially that the category also prompts us to consider notions of subjectivity, agency and power. Yet, it nevertheless parallels significant present day critical interests as seen in various ecological perspectives at disparate spatial and temporal levels, differing scales, or even at the level of particular elements themselves (cf. Cohen and Duckert).

Form such a vantage point, a brief look at some of the staple works of Ian Hamilton Finlay – one of the genre’s heavyweights – reveals an intriguing relationship between concrete poetry and the environment. Designed together with his wife Sue and located around fifty miles from Edinburgh, the famous poetic neoclassical garden *Little Sparta*, is profoundly steeped in the classical tradition of antiquity. In many ways, it thematizes the notion of conflict, including the one between culture and nature, while being a collection of disparate material artistic items: statues, pillars, or sundials and stony inscriptions. With the passing of time many of them have become integrated into the landscape and now constitute part and parcel of the environmental context in which they were initially placed. Commenting on this process, the Polish poet-scholar Jerzy Jarniewicz elegantly points to how Finlay’s poems first depart from linearity and get free from the confines of the syntax (such is the sense of his one word poems). Then they leave the book and turn on to three-dimensional artifacts. And finally, they *melt into* the landscape, becoming almost indistinguishable from its natural elements. (Jarniewicz 277; emphasis mine).

The reason why the key verb (“melt”) is so interesting here is obviously not because there is something wrong with it, but precisely because it adequately describes how the artistic objects now fits into their context. One of the effects of

such a tight integration stems from the ways in which almost everywhere around this artist's garden we can find ways in which 'nature' subsumes cultural artifacts, which thus complicates the possibility of any clear differentiation between these two elements (Jarniewicz 278). This quality of Finlay's work, intended to tell an anthropocentric story of a clash between nature and culture – at the same time connecting it more to earth description rather than earth scripts, can be taken to illustrate something opposite: a lively and benevolent cooperation at a material, organic level, additionally masking the original dimension of physical intrusion in the landscape. In other words, this does not mean that the artistic items are now devoid of their intended anthropocentric meaning, but their enmeshing testifies to how, on an organic–material level, the environment seems to be an active part in meaning making.

In this sense, concrete poetry, as exemplified by Finlay's *Little Sparta* garden demonstrates how poetic and artistic projects may manage to actually invalidate the difference between artifacts and 'natural' environment – very much in the same way it is interested in bridging the divide between words and things (Jarniewicz 277). Correspondingly, other forms of art coterminous with the rising popularity of concrete poetics registered impulses intent on bringing together an art object as something sealed-off from the context (i.e. its environment) and the way this object is embedded in the environment. Robert Smithson's land-art projects are a good case in point. His weirdly poetic, yet to some extent also concrete, *Spiral Jetty* (1970) bears affinity to Finlay's works not only because of being a large-scale earthwork, but perhaps even more so due to a benevolent ambiance which permeates the whole site of the project. Ultimately integrating human intervention within the natural surroundings, the monument works as an argument for the type of contemporary participatory and immersive conceptual art, which, despite being made of the land and in it, testifies to the engagement with site specificity, especially by cutting across several modes of representation and media which Smithson employed to represent his project: earthwork, essay, and film (Prinz 329). Despite their formal features, one of the many axes around which the verbal and visual materials of both *Spiral Jetty* and *Little Sparta* accumulate or even grow, is language. In this sense, apart from the possible authorial intention included in such projects, earthworks like these also register the processes which Timothy Morton calls "enmeshing" – the way in which humans are embedded in organisms which gesture towards forces hitherto unnoticed by anthropocentric thinking (2018). By allowing more-than-human actants to work on the artistic interventions of land art or concrete works, such artistic projects also enact environment's propensity to incorporate and welcome virtually everything, including unexpected creative partnerships (at an organic level) as well as terraforming interventions.

Interestingly, what stands out from artistic engagements with the earth during the heights of the concrete/land art era is the work of Richard Long (b. 1945). His attempts to take writing and inscription out into the open spaces is particularly

important, especially because of these processes' deliberate preoccupation with immateriality and permanence. Employing the seemingly straightforward activity of walking, Long uses footprints to create provisional drawings on the earth's surface. Located somewhere between performance and ritual, his artistic activity can be also seen as "a way of marking his body's relationship to place and time" (Renshaw 363). Such practices gesture towards the kinaesthetic dimensions of art making, with his projects recording intriguing aspects of the physical, human intrusion in the landscape, albeit ones that problematises the permanence that usually comes with writing. *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), for example, was created by photographing effects of the artist stopping in a field in Wiltshire and trotting to and fro. Similarly, *Walking a Line in Peru* (1972), intended as an homage to the pre-Columbian Nazca culture which echoes the Medieval tradition of pilgrimages or prehistoric migrations, consists in Long walking "a perfectly straight line that stretched for several miles from the foothills of the Andes across a dry riverbed using aligned notches made by Indians" (Renshaw 363). The active use of footprint as his tool offers insight into thinking about the materiality of artistic processes. On this note Ben Tufnell aptly points out that a footprint is not only one of the basic units of human measurement – it constitutes a powerful symbol for connectivity, rootedness (with plenty of phrases and expressions found in the language to give us 'firm footing') and, above all evokes the idea of physical contact of – the "idea of an artist 'touching the earth'" (26). Although Long's works also rely on a physical intrusion in the materiality of place, the ephemeral quality of his work makes it much more sensitive to the marks and traces left after possible artistic practices are completed. The awareness of the consequences of human activities makes such interventions much closer to earth scripts, perhaps already heralding a less materially intrusive heading for the artistic practices to come.

Conceived and executed with a particular location in mind, site-specific artworks like the ones just mentioned certainly rely on a mixture of geo-specificity that comes from the tradition of earth description (even if the intention of many artists might have been to break away from it). In this sense, concrete poetry and land art can be seen as artistic practices that followed a specifically understood poetics ultimately altering the physicality of landscape they interacted with. However, these projects also demonstrate that the meanings intended by their designers are necessarily accompanied by the workings of more-than-human agents and processes taking place within the environment. While the dominant aspects of such works might be connected with the observer's experience or the political, social, or geographic aspects of the location that contribute to these texts' (often immaterial) message, they remain entangled in environmental contexts, in a way illustrating the claim Morton (2021) articulates throughout one of his works, aptly entitled *All Art is Ecological*.

3. Towards Earth-Scripts

Let us now turn from the poetics of terraforming to less invasive modes of producing earth scripts. Among such more recent efforts Alice Oswald's lyrical practice stands out as particularly successful in this respect. It testifies to the fact that such writing needs not to intrude heavily into the physicality of the land to achieve its poetic goal of providing artistic descriptions of various spaces or particular localities. Although her lyric does stem from physical human presence in the landscape – excursions on foot or gardening – these are rather poetic workings within the language which, even if they do engage with earth's physicality, they do so mostly through exploring the paradoxical materiality that comes with the medium of language. Furthermore, these poetic descriptions result from a specific understanding of the overlap between (im)material realities of language – from a physical dimension both within writing and within the land. Articulated with the awareness of non-anthropocentric otherness and with respect to the scale-breaking vastness connoted by the environment, they can be regarded as attempts at making room for more-than-human perspectives.

Oswald, an acclaimed poet, who holds awards and numerous prizes for her work (including Ted Hughes Award or T.S. Eliot Prize), shares affinity with some of the concrete poets and land artists in various ways: with Finlay, in terms of being devoted to a particular locality (Oswald lives in Devon) and in probing the importance of the mythic antiquity in human history (she is trained in classic languages); just like him, she is also a garden lover but her process is perhaps closer to that of Richard Long, as she is also an avid walker. Her poems are equally frequently composed while working in the garden, in accordance with the open air or 'just' during walks. Correspondingly, her artistic process intends to echo the seemingly immaterial or sometimes barely perceptible rhythms of changes in the light and density or humidity of air. Importantly, she does not write down her poems immediately so as not to destroy the creative moment, which, as she believes, needs to engage corporeality and memory. That is why she usually performs her poetry without the aid of a printed page, in a way further echoing artists like Edwin Morgan, especially when it comes to the role of sound in poetry. The material aspects of her writing thus include a particular attention and affection towards the sounds and music of language and nature (cf. Martindale). While this may be simply conceptualized as a procedure to amplify silences, Oswald is in fact committed to giving voice to that "what speaks when no-one speaks," as stated in "Severed Head Floating Downriver" (2018a, 24). This is also visible, for example, in the auditory quality of her verse which frequently serves as aural earth descriptions or sound maps.

Such is the case, for instance, of *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* (2009), which, just like *Dart* (2002) before it, is drawn from Oswald's treks along both of the important British rivers. Offering a lyrical focus on the landscape, the approach to mapping the material and sonic landscapes in both cases is thoroughly non-invasive

and multifaceted. Employing intriguing means to address particular localities and the specificities of their environments they also manage to reveal numerous more-than-human entanglements. If *Dart* attempt to render the ontology of the river as a hypoerobject (cf. Morton 2013) – radically larger than human beings and exerting effects on them – *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* takes moonrise (happening in various stages) as its subject and contains it within a book-length “poem in several registers, set at night on the River Severn Estuary” (2018b, 1). Characteristically for the poet, different entities populate these spaces described: “some living, some dead, all based on real people from the Severn catchment,” with the intention of registering the influence exerted by more-than-human actants; “to record what happens when *the moon moves over us* - its effect on water and its effect on voices” (2018b, 1; emphasis mine). Significantly, she is interested in the non-human agency as manifested in other interactions, e.g. when the moon “chooses to push/ the river right over without caring” (2018b, 45), and amplifies the sound and voices of entities like wind, moon, or trees. More importantly, sounds and melodies in her diction are not only linguistic onomatopoeia but places where language is made to attune to others while maintaining a mode of conversation, even if earth-others “speak out with shadows in their voices” (2018b, 24). Full of other non-human entities and agents, her poetry additionally includes the moon, a poet figure (called the “Dream Secretary”), to name just a few from *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, as well as flies, cockerels, clouds, flowers, a badger, or even a dried-up river Dunt, all of which can be read/heard in her volume called *Falling Awake* (2019).

Listening to these voices allows us to notice a particular affective dimension of such lyrical practice. That is why Tom Brislow identifies an “emotional framework” at play in Oswald’s poetic diction: while it “might look like a series of anthropocentric projections of states upon the world – although not coterminous with anthropogenic impact on the environment – [yet] the overall feeling of the poem is an ability to acknowledge multiple senses of nature’s life, character, and mood” (85). As she says herself, “I have to force myself to look out from the flower’s point of view at these great walloping humans coming down the path, and try, just try, and feel it from their point of view because it’s a different world to them, a fascinating hard one” (qtd. in Brislow 84). Such emphasis on feeling signals Oswald’s continuous preoccupation with the affective register, which “heightens our respect for processes, powers, and things of ‘nature’; but also turns the emotionally inanimate beings into an affective autobiographical animate one, placing fresh light on the ways in which we conceive of our agency in the more-than-human world” (Brislow 85).

Just as *A Sleepwalk on the Severn* promotes considerations of natural environment as agency particularly apt in demonstrating affect, Oswald’s other works gesture, too, at the interlacing of materiality and immateriality within poetry and language. This conceptualization of the environment is noticeable in her versions of earth scripts as an attempt to tackle the immaterial (meaning) and articulate it

in poetic verse. Significantly, this practice is also an overtly inclusive one: the idiosyncratic conception of language, like in the case of *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, consists in much more than merely a recording human experience contextualized within a significant environmental background (additionally giving rise to human affects). Instead, it successfully evokes experiences of more-than-human inhabitants of the spaces that the poet represents.

In *Falling Awake* (2016), for example, similarly to the way walking becomes a form of engagement with the land which avoids unnecessary terraforming, the seemingly simple practice of weeding – an act of “scrabbling at the earth” – becomes a powerful metaphor for the process of writing at large (2018a, 58). That is why, in her succinct translator’s afterword to the volume, Magda Heydel aptly identifies this as largely true for Oswald’s writing philosophy: language becomes the earth, a soil which only our meticulous scrabbling can save from being overgrown with weeds (2018a, 179). Connected with interventions in the land, this practice is however one which does not need to rely on physical and material intrusions (as it was the case with concrete poetry or land art, to a certain extent). Such ‘writing-as-weeding’ might also take the form of excavations, just as it happened in the case of the aptly subtitled *Memorial: An Excavation of the Iliad* (2012), where Homer’s text becomes the linguistic and cultural soil that Oswald digs into. A text (and language) thus becomes a material-like space for paradoxically immaterial investigations – a practice which she actually manages to turn to poetry’s favour with *Memorial* effectively becoming “a translation of the *Iliad*’s atmosphere, not its story” (2012, 6–8).

All of this is obviously not to say that Oswald as a poet is unaware of the materialities of writing. To the contrary, her writing frequently operates with a particular attention to dimensions of physical space, especially those of the page (typography, use of columns, marginalia, or grey-scale type, etc.) relating her work to aspects of concrete poetry and typographical verse, among others. However, rather than merely provide an anthropocentric description, her poetic procedures intend to problematise diverse textual dimensions in relation to both form and content, as well as to the very experience of reading and representing place, landscape, or the environment’s otherness. Thus, they constitute a specific version of earth scripts – a poetics which employs affective and sensory qualities that affect the reader’s perception of the world and of the environment

4. Digitalised Elements

In many respects a similar engagement with the relationship between material dimensions of the environment and its artistic representations as seen in the works of Alice Oswald’s can be found in another example in the lyric after the new millennium – the mixed-media projects of the Canadian-British artist J.R. Carpenter.

A writer, poet and a researcher with a practical bent, she produces groundbreaking works of digital literature, much to a critical acclaim as well as to a welcoming response from international audiences at festivals or institutions (libraries and museums) where she performs her pieces. Stretching over various platforms – print, performance, and digital media – her works offer intriguing insights into immateriality and tap into intricacies of representing how natural elements may function as agents and become material parameters of earth scripts. Associated with the seemingly immaterial dimension of virtual spaces witnessed on the computer screen or during performance, these texts eventually find their way to a classic, physical book form – yet another format, by no means an ultimate version of a particular project. While a comparison between both incarnations (the printed codex versus the ever-changing digital one) is a tempting perspective, my interest here lies more in the way in which Carpenter’s poetics serve as an instrument for thinking about less materially invasive alternatives to anthropocentric accounts of environment and how they may serve to record the agency of elements.

Several of the artist’s compositions explore limits of language, form and ways of meaning making, also with respect to particular localities. Such for instance is the case of attempts to accommodate hyperobjects like the weather – omnipresent, experienced intimately by individuals, yet transcending human scales of perception – or natural elements (storms, tides, large bodies of water) within language, which builds on pieces like, e.g., *Once Upon a Tide* (2015), *The Gathering Cloud* (2017), or *The Pleasure of the Coast* (2019). Additionally, Carpenter’s works often results from commissions from particular organizations tying them to specific places. While this points to affinities with other poetic projects, like the aforementioned Oswald’s *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*, her understanding of the notion of place is somewhat different. In many respects, it is much closer to regarding it as a multi-modal space: one which can be approached from various (artistic) angles, yet never completely exhausting the potentialities of description. Such perception of the text – as an artistic merger of materiality, immateriality and other forces – seems to bring her work close to Roland Barthes understanding of text as “a *multi-dimensional space* in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (Barthes, 146; emphasis mine). This claim from the seminal *Death of the Author* essay does not only refer to privileging the reader – e.g. urging them to notice something about the world or its historical representations – but also evokes, renders or creates spaces in the digital world which explore questions of agency that Barthes was already driving at (while on the road to the reader’s birth).

More importantly for the present discussion however, the question of place receives an interesting treatment in a project like *...and by Islands I mean paragraphs*, where Carpenter (2013) fuses print books and digital spaces from a topographical perspective. The project makes use of a visual stylistics of a map that in a hyperobject-like way goes beyond the confines of the web browser window only to cast the readers into the seemingly uncharted space where, as the title

suggests, the islands are made up of quotes from various literary, historical and theoretical texts on the subject of islands. The necessity to navigate through these digital-textual space revises the tradition of geographic earth description, especially through questioning the modes of charting the uncharted territories. Other projects like *The Gathering Cloud* exists across media: as digital web-based piece, poetic performance accompanied by collage-like graphics and a print book (Carpenter, 2017). The latter actively corresponds to what Jussi Parikka calls “a condensation of media history and [constitutes] a comment on the current environmental weight of clouds” (9) with an important part of the whole endeavour consisting in probing the limits of the medium. Reliant on the interplay of textual and graphic archival texts, Carpenter’s “hypertextual hendecasyllabic verse” (2017, 103), registers several impulses, including a search for new forms of representing the way in which “clouds resist ontology” (57) and insistence on making us aware of the, paradoxically, culturally conditioned notion of ‘nature’ by pointing out how “the term *The Cloud* refers to a cultural fantasy” (83), perhaps to raise awareness of the costs of data storage. In the light of Carpenter’s mixed-media digital works, it is interesting to observe that this ‘natural’ space perhaps should be understood not so much as the possibility to immerse oneself in the poststructuralist fantasy of a borderless textuality, but more as a project involving aspects of non-human agency.

The attempt at devising a different mode of telling the story of climate change and elemental activity that might correspond more to aspects of earth scripts is particularly pronounced in the case of *This is a Picture of Wind* (2020). Employing an internet form, it consists in producing algorithmically generated verse which makes use of live weather data to represent ephemeral textual images and immaterial variants of verse authored by the wind. Seemingly detached from the physicality of the natural environment – the poems, after all, are enacted in the digital medium and appear on the screen just for a brief moment – the project successfully manifests the overlap of matter and immateriality of natural phenomena. It stems from a poetic response to an encounter with the effects of violent weather phenomena – winter storms of 2014 which affected several areas in South West England causing floods and drastic alterations to the landscape. As she says, “[f]ollowing the news in the months after these storms, I was struck by the paradox presented by attempts to evoke through the materiality of language a force such as wind which we can only perceive indirectly through its affect” (2020, 124). In this sense, Carpenter shares a similar perception of the weather to Alice Oswald’s, especially in seeing it as a continuous interruption as “patterns and forces, things that are invisible, ephemeral, sudden, catastrophic, seasonal and endless” (Oswald and Keegan xiii). Her element in this case is also language (cf. Cohen and Duckert). That is why Johanna Drucker rightly observes how this project consists in calling up and activating several modes of representing natural phenomena, all of which include a broad range of sources: the artist’s notebooks as well as archival works found in “diaries held at various archives, such as the National Meteorological Library and Archive

in Exeter, searching the writings of 18th century poet John Clare, and the work of his contemporary, Francis Beaufort, who codified the scale we still use for measuring wind today” (11–12). Such a collection of source texts provides a rich and lexical varied base for generating poetry. The traditional, printed version makes use of Beaufort’s vocabulary to produce typographical verse arranged vertically on the page which grows in font size so as to correspond to wind force descriptions: from “still” through “heavy” to “broken”, or from “quiet” through “rough” to “violence” (Carpenter 2020, 27–29). In the web-based reiteration, based on a broader verbal lexicon, an algorithm connected to a data stream of real-time readings of wind speed in South-West England makes the choices of expressions. The resulting phrases which can be seen on screen – poem-like constructs, reactions to live weather data, are also an attempt at a visual rendering of linguistic and verbal intrusions to the language (and particular localities in England) resulting from the agency of wind as a natural element. Needless to say, these leftovers from the element’s activity are also different with each new visit (see the ongoing process at Carpenter’s website at <http://luckysoap.com/apictureofwind/>).

The work offers a seamless interlacing of often poetic phrases and a chance-based selection of observing the dealings of the natural elements. As Drucker asserts,

every instance of observation of the wind is particular, but no algorithm or model or poetic projection can forecast the next event with precise accuracy. As the wind changes speed, it alters the data to which Carpenter’s inventory of phrases is linked. New snippets of text are displayed on screen, textual windsocks, fleeting indices of on-going events. (12–13)

Taking advantage of intimately personal yet digital spaces of our electronic devices, the phone or computer screens this picture also relies on visual elements. Poetic lines of observation are rendered in larger blue text, while the changing poem-like constructs that correspond to wind speeds are made visible below. They are arranged into calendar like squares, each individual box standing for a given month of the year, represented on the backdrop of a map of South West England peppered with data numerals indicating ocean depths. Despite a vast reservoir of words and phrases to render the ever-changing weather conditions, the main quality this ‘textual picture’ manages to record is the fluctuating nature of wind’s creativity. They need to be observed quickly and attentively, as the compositions may be soon, literally, gone with the wind. This registers the ephemeral dealings of the element illustrating not only how the elements simply act upon the language, but also act *as* language in itself.³

5. Conclusion

In the terrain of poetry, the struggle to represent the overlap between materiality and immateriality remains a lasting field of interest. Viewing such past traditions like concrete poetry and associated land art as meaning-making practices that additionally constitute forms of earth descriptions allows to regard them as terraforming practices. The artistic engagement with the environment is expanded by the contemporary lyrical voices of Alice Oswald and J.R. Carpenter, which, while being less intrusive into their material surroundings, also problematises the overlap between matter and immateriality. Oswald's is a poetry, exhibiting great intensity and rooted in an intrinsic, deep-level entanglement between the natural environments. It engages the materialities of poetic language (like sound, body, and writing) which aid in efforts to make present the immaterial qualities coming with material spaces. These are additionally seen as spaces for the affect that might be helpful in achieving some empathy towards what Val Plumwood (2002) has so adequately called "Earth's others." While also seeming from emotional reactions to violent weather events, J.R. Carpenter's digital projects likewise attempt to map out the material spaces of entanglement between writing and the immaterial, between language and the weather. And it is not only the case that speaking of the weather articulates a continuum between humans and the environment (Parikka 2017), but Carpenter manages to employ the digital form of creativity and writing to express the material effects of seemingly immaterial natural elements. The gusts of wind that are partly the subject of *This is a Picture of Wind* can certainly be felt and recorded, even though they resist representation. The employment of media technology that led to the creation of the digital literature, and resulted in a subsequent book publication, earned Carpenter a label of (co-)author a "poetic media meteorology" that records "series of material transformations" made visible in media texts (Parikka 2017).

By way of conclusion, we might think not only about how poetic activity, broadly conceived, offers reiterations of the mutual enfolding of materiality and immateriality, so that language and environment ground each other in terms of theme, register, and the production of affect. In this context, such perspectives like material ecocriticism or notions of earth scripts allow us to see how poetry, including the generative one, poses questions about authorship, and also how the potential withdrawal of authorship may hint possibly at a new heading for the future of artistic engagements with the hyperobject scales of global warming or environmental elements. Perhaps a new strategy for language and poetry after the turn of the millennium is to obliterate human authorship altogether or to opt for cooperation, especially that practically all of the works discussed in the essay, more or less acutely, make us notice the multiplicity of cooperative (im)material agents at work in the world and in our environment.

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Notes

1. This includes but is not limited to such positions as new materialisms, speculative realism, or object-oriented ontology, all of which highlight different aspects of a planetary awareness and various entanglements between organisms, cf. Iovino, Serenella and Oppermann, Serpil 2014. *Material Ecocriticism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, in literary studies cf. S. Pultz Moslund et al., 2021, *How Literature Comes to Matter: Post-Anthropocentric Approaches to Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press; and in the areas connected with poetry, e.g. J. Fiedorczuk, G. Beltrán, *Ekopoetyka/Écopoética/Écopoetics. Ekologiczna obrona poezji/Una defensa ecológica de la poesía/An ecological “defense of poetry,”* Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego, Warszawa 2015.
2. Although of the three artists mentioned only Long is an Englishman, the choice of such figures is dictated by their involvement in forms of land art which, as I argue, can be read as practices closely linked to concrete poetry as they are associated with taking textual meaning beyond the confines of the printed page. Smithson’s “masterwork, the *Spiral Jetty*, is not a singular thing but might be considered *network*; it exists not only as monumental earthwork jutting into the Great Salt Lake in Utah but also as an extraordinary piece of a quasi-explicatory *poses* and meditation (first published in *Artforum* in 1972) and also as film, part documentary, part hallucinatory road trip, part dream,” cf. B. Tufnell, *In Land: Writings around Land Art and Its Legacies* (2019), Winchester, UK: Zero Books; Finlay is mentioned here as the most recognizable artist within the concrete current but there are obviously too many other Anglophone poets to mention all of them, cf. Greg, Thomas. 2019. *Borders Blur: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
3. Compare the interesting use of Hugh Sykes Davies’ term “ecolect” which can be taken to “denote a language that arises from extended human habitation in a particular place” (McKusick 234).

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Translation-Poems: Blurred Genres and Shifting Authorship in Contemporary English Verse

Abstract: One of the most interesting tendencies in contemporary English poetry which arguably will develop further and mark the next decades of writing in England, are works which I would call translation-poems, i.e. texts which problematize the distinction between translations and original works, as well as between authors and translators. One could mention here such books as Jo Shapcott's *Tender Taxes* (versions of Rilke's poems), Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (a translation of Homer's *The Iliad*), and Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow: Troilus and Criseyde* (a version of Chaucer's poem). All three books have been advertised as authored by these English poets; it is only their names that appear on book covers. Significantly, this type of translating, or adapting poetry comes now largely from women writers. Trying to define the blurred genre they are working in, they call it variously: versions, excavations, extrapolations, remixes, etc.

Keywords: literary translation, adaptation, authorship, appropriation, women poets, contemporary English poetry, Lavinia Greenlaw, Alice Oswald, Jo Shapcott

1. Introduction: Authors, Poets, and Translators

The last two or three decades have been marked by the growing awareness of the importance and specificity of translation. Centres of translation studies have been cropping up, translation workshops have become part and parcel of university programmes. Translators have stopped being anonymous; they are often active actors of the literary scene, guests of literary events, even media celebrities, with their names appearing more and more regularly on book covers next to the names of 'original' authors. This process, from the translator's relative invisibility to his or her coming-out, found its exposition in Lawrence Venuti's landmark study

(1995), in which the scholar critically scrutinized the political and cultural basis of the assumption that a properly translated text should have an appearance that “it is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’” (1). The present-day process of translators’ becoming visible is not so much a question of the long awaited sign of recognition of their work, though numerous examples can be given of books in which the translator’s name was not revealed, and if it was, then only on the copyright page. Translators’ work has long been seen as secondary, inferior, derivative (Simon 26, 29). The change of attitude came with the recognition that literary translation is a creative process, requiring not a ‘transfer’ of a source text into the target language culture, nor even its ‘reproduction,’ but a special kind of ‘creation.’ And if it is agreed that translating literature is, by definition, a creative intervention, then translators can be seen, to use Anna Legeżyńska’s phrase, as “second authors” (20), or even as ‘authors’ of their target texts.

The degree of the translators’ creativity depends on the type of the source text and its literary quality, reaching its height in translating poetry or poetically charged prose. It is thus no coincidence that translators of poetry are often poets in their own right: to render a poetic text into one’s own language requires linguistic skills no less than writing one’s own verse. Though there are translators of poetry who are not practicing poets, one could hardly find a poet now who has not doubled as a translator. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation with fiction writers: novelists are rarely involved in translations. Modern poets of the English language who produced, however occasionally, literary translations include T.S. Eliot translating Saint-John Perse, Ezra Pound translating Sextus Propertius, Robert Lowell translating Boris Pasternak, Louis Zukofsky translating (homophonically) Catullus, John Ashbery translating Rimbaud, Ted Hughes translating Janos Pilinszky, Seamus Heaney translating *Beowulf*. The list can be continued. What is interesting in these endeavours is the literary affinity between the poetry in translation and the poet-cum-translator’s own poetic preoccupations. The poets’ translations can be seen as extensions of their own poems, to the degree that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two, Pound’s translations being the most evident example. His renderings of Chinese poems contributed to the emergence of his own style and today are included in Pound’s poetry collections as his ‘original’ poems.

One could claim that due to these processes, with translators being recognized as (second) authors, translation becomes more of an autonomous literary genre, which is indicated by two parallel tendencies. Firstly, the target text’s connection with the ‘original’ author is weakened, if not suspended. Secondly, the target text’s ties with the translator are foregrounded, placing translations made by poets, such as Pound, within the context of their own poetry. At the risk of sounding banal, one can say that poetry translation requires much more linguistic creativity than any other type of literature. It also requires and allows for much more freedom, in the effect of which the translation may vary from word-to-word translation to free adaptation, bearing the characteristics of the translator’s style and predilections.

Any critical study of the work of Hughes or Heaney will have to take into account their translations as works central to the evaluation of the poet's oeuvre. These processes result in the problematization of the term 'translation,' which is often made to include such translative interventions as adaptation or paraphrasis.

Robert Lowell's collection *Imitations* (1961) includes poems originally composed in such diverse languages as Greek (Homer), German (Heine), French (Baudelaire, Rimbaud), Italian (Ungaretti, Montale), and Russian (Annensky, Pasternak). In the publisher's note one can read that these are "original poems in English [created] from poems in another language" (n.p.). Poems in our language created from poems in another language would usually be called translations; it is strange then that the publisher avoided the term. In his Introduction to *Imitations* Lowell himself also tries to steer away from the word 'translation' and when the term actually appears, Lowell admits that he prefers to replace it with "an imitation":

It seems self-evident that no professor or amateur poet, or even good poet writing hastily, can by miracle transform himself into a fine metricist. I believe that poetic translation – I would call it an imitation – must be expert and inspired, and needs at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand as an original poem. (xii)

This statement finds its supplement at the end of the Introduction, where Lowell declares: "I have been almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them ring right for me" (xiii). Lowell's words deserve a closer look: the poet feels uneasy about using the word "translation," coining instead the more general term "imitation," which allows him much greater freedom, almost as great as the author's. He is ready to claim that translation does not only require the same skill, but may involve an even greater command of technique than the original poem. Translating poetry, as opposed to Robert Frost's famous dictum, is to Lowell not a matter of losing, but of creating. Lowell does not go further in his revision of translation, but the logical consequence of his line of thinking would be to claim that someone who has to demonstrate "at least as much technique, luck and rightness of hand" as an original poet, i.e. the translator, has to be a poet himself. We arrive again at the question from the beginning of the article: can we think of the translator as the author?

I take Lowell's work, and especially his introductory remarks, as a symbolic beginning of what I would call the modern era of translation poems. Forty years later an Irish poet, Tom Paulin, published *The Road to Inver* (2004), bringing together verse translation which had previously appeared in his poetry books and offering us, as the publisher's note declares, "the richest collection of its kind since Robert Lowell's *Imitations*" (n.p.) – with versions of Rilke, Baudelaire, Ponge, Montale, Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, Tsvetayeva, Horace, Sophocles, and many others. The publisher claims that the book is "at once a new volume of poetry by

Tom Paulin and a personal anthology of European poetry” (n.p.), finding it possible, or necessary, to blur the distinction between one’s original work and translation – an attitude very symptomatic of the recent changes in translation studies. Two years later, another Irish poet, Derek Mahon, published *Adaptations*, a collection of poems rendered into English from French, Latin, Italian, Occitan, German, Greek, Russian, and Irish. Mahon is equally unwilling to call these poems “translations,” thinking of them as versions or “imaginative, recreative (and recreational) adaptation[s],” mostly from cribs prepared for him by those who speak these languages. Mahon looks for a justification for this practice, by referring to its long “venerable tradition: poets use it to keep the engine ticking over” (11).

Similar problems with nomenclature, indicative of the need to redefine translation, can be seen in all literary endeavours that will be discussed in this article. Translation rather than standing for a precisely defined, homogenous activity, is in fact a ‘continuum’ of various types of responding to the original text, from verbatim, or philological translation to adaptation, paraphrase, and even further. Both in translation studies and in actual translation practice one can notice the growth of a belief that “the concept of translation as such can be stretched to cover all types of transformation or intervention” (Bastin 12). As with a ‘continuum,’ there are no clear boundaries between one type of translation and another. Without this ability to define where translation stops and adaptation starts, especially with scholars undermining “the sacred character” of the original (Lefevere 234), it becomes impossible to classify a given text as one or the other; it is often both, the difference being rather in our approach to it, with translation focusing on the relationship with the original text, and adaptation linking the text with the target culture. It is in this borderland that defies definitions, the territory of blurred genres that many modern poets have been recently working and, arguably, will be working in the coming decades.

The authors of the new genre that I would call, for want of a better word, “translation poems,” are in many cases women and almost always poets in their own right. Let us have a closer look at three outstanding examples: *Tender Taxes* by Jo Shapcott (2001), *Memorial* by Alice Oswald (2011), and *A Double Sorrow: Troilus and Crisseyde* by Lavinia Greenlaw (2014). All three titles come from the last twenty years; all of them were published in the 21st century. The phenomenon of translation poems seems to be growing, deeply rooted in how translation, originality and authorship are being redefined today. Its increasing significance makes it justified to see translation poems as the poetry of the immediate future.

2. “We don’t yet have the word for this kind of exchange”: Jo Shapcott’s *Tender Taxes*

Shapcott’s *Tender Taxes* is subtitled “Versions of Rilke’s French Poems,” but we would not guess it from the book’s cover: Rilke’s name can nowhere be seen. It is

only from the front page inside the book that the reader learns that the poems have a foreign background. Shapcott is definitely unwilling to call them translations, or even to credit Rilke with authorship – she publishes them under her own name in a book of which she appears to be the sole author. It is significant that she has chosen this particular cycle of poems: works of a German-speaking Austrian poet who wrote them in French. The originals are then already foreign language texts. Shapcott's publisher, Faber and Faber, writes on the sleeve, as if ignoring the subtitle, that the poems are “more than versions.” Her poems are supposedly “arguing with the originals, crossing and re-crossing the frontier between translation and origination” (n.p.). The wording here shows a veiled mistrust of the term ‘translation,’ which, unavoidable as it is, seems too narrow or burdened with too specific expectations to stand for Shapcott's project. The way out of this terminological conundrum is to blur the distinction between translation and original, between the translator and the author. In order to avoid misunderstanding, Shapcott in her Foreword assumes a more clear-cut position than her publisher and argues firmly that the poems in the book are decisively “*not* translation[s]” (emphasis mine). She continues her commentary by attempting to find the adequate term to describe her work: “my poems became responses, arguments, even dramatisations. I've called them ‘versions’ here, reluctantly. We don't yet have the word for this kind of exchange” (ix). It is interesting how the refutation of “translation” as the generic term results in a series of vaguely synonymous terms, as if one single word was not enough, each being too limiting for the kind of writing *Tender Taxes* represents: “responses,” “arguments,” “dramatisations,” “exchange,” “versions.” Even the word that comes last is admitted only “reluctantly.” Significantly, Shapcott seems to believe that this lacunae will disappear: “we don't *yet* have the word for this kind of exchange” (ix; emphasis mine). Shapcott wrote this Foreword in 2001; in the coming years she and other women poets, as I will discuss it later on in this article, would still be looking for an adequate word for their work. Shapcott leaves the issue open, ending her collection with a line from a poem by Borges: “I do not know which of us has written this page” (ix). Though his poem “Borges and I” plays with the difference between the speaker and the author, Shapcott's quote from a different (male) author and from a different language (Spanish) can be read as a statement of the universal condition of writing, which is always already polyphonic, always of dubious origin.

What comes to the fore in Shapcott's renditions of Rilke's French poems is the gender relation between the contemporary woman poet and the man with the authority of being a classic, one of the outstanding figures of world poetry. By translating Rilke's poetry, Shapcott is re-writing the male poet's work and readjusting his perspectives. She is not adopting his voice, but investing his poems with her voice. The collection includes three sequences. In “Les Fenêtres,” Shapcott makes Rilke's poems sound more natural and contemporary. In “The Valaisian Quatrains,” which describe the landscape of the Valais in Switzerland, Shapcott changes the

tone: from pastoral to something darker. She also appropriates the poems to make them speak about her landscape, moving them from Switzerland to the borders of Wales, “where my family has its roots” (x). And finally, in the third section, “Les Roses,” Shapcott discovers that the roses of the poems are in fact women, or even more, that “these poems were versions of female genitalia” (xi). What she then sets out to do in her *Tender Taxes* is to reverse the gender relations: if in his French originals the Austrian poet spoke to and about women, in Shapcott’s versions it is the roses (women) who are given voice and made to speak. *Tender Taxes* are then translations which can be compared to contemporary appropriation art marked by such names as Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, or Richard Prince, being *per se* critical and involving “recoding or a shift in meaning” (Graw 214). Being an act of redress, of unmuting the muted, Shapcott’s translation is a movement from French into English, from the early 20th century into contemporary times, from Switzerland to Wales, but most importantly perhaps from the male voice to the voice of a woman.

Shapcott’s strategy can best be seen in the first poem of the cycle “Les Roses.” If Rilke’s poems remain numbered, but untitled, the English poet introduces titles: each poem of hers bears the title which is a name of a different species of roses. The first poem is called “Rosa gallica” (I), and is followed by “Rosa hemisphaerica” (II), “Rosa foetida” (III), “Rosa centifolia” (IV), “Rosa nitida” (V), etc. Calling the poems by names of roses introduces one more language, Latin, to this already multilingual project, as if the English poet, though speaking in their name, tries nevertheless to underline their autonomy: they are no longer Rilke’s, but with their Latin names (and language of their own) they also belong to a different world than Shapcott’s. Each Latin name, of course, has its English equivalent and the titles could have had a different form: Gallic rose (I), sulphur rose (II), Austrian copper rose (III), Provence rose (or cabbage rose) (IV), shining rose (V). The poet, however, decides to have the Latin nomenclature. The naming of individual poems using (foreign) names of the roses, which in Shapcott’s versions speak for themselves, turns the poems into a series of short dramatic monologues with individualized speakers. Roses are no longer anonymous: having regained their voices, they have also regained their names. These are all telling names and almost in each poem Shapcott introduces images which explain them: *hemisphaerica* – “you see me half open,” *foetida* – “dropping bruised scent,” *centifolia* – “the hundred-petalled rose,” *nitida* – “(you) make the flower glow,” *sancta* – “you’ve made / a saint out of me,” *damascena* – “catch a trace / of twice blooming damask,” etc. The attributes of the roses which their Latin names identify not only individualize each flower, but also become themes of the poems.

The cycle’s first poem, “Rosa gallica,” leads to the justification of its English/Latin title, being a proper opening for Rilke’s French poems. The fragment is, however, Shapcott’s addition, absent in the original version:

I

Si ta fraîcheur parfois nous étonne tant,
 heurese rose,
 c'est qu'en toi-même, en dedans,
 pétale contre pétale, tu te reposes.

Ensemble tout éveillé, dont le milieu
 dort, pendant qu'innombrables, se touchent
 les tendresses de ce coeur silencieux
 qui aboutissent à l'extrême bouche. (Rilke 17)

“Rosa gallica”
 If sometimes you're surprised
 by my coolness
 it's because inside myself,
 petal against petal, I'm asleep.

I've been completely awake while my heart
 dozed, for who knows how long,
 speaking aphids and bees to you in silence,
 speaking English through a French mouth. (Shapcott 59)

The Gallic character of the rose from the first poem of the cycle is identified in the last line as its mouth: it is a French mouth, which however speaks English. The phrase can be seen as the key to Shapcott's poems, and in a more general sense also as a metaphorical definition of translation, which is always a double-speak, a palimpsestic composition for two voices: the source-language voice and the target-language voice, the former being audible in the background, the louder the more we are aware of the text as translation (cf. Mahon's hope that his adaptations will be read “almost like original poems in English, allowing their sources to remain audible”). In her version of Rilke's poem, based on the opposition between the inner and the outer, between sleeping and being awake, between silence and voice, Shapcott applies these contradictions to the act of translation: to its opposition between the original, muted text, hidden beneath the English words, and its translated version, opening itself to the readers and speaking to them. Shapcott seems to overcome this opposition, to question the divisions suggested by Rilke and the traditional understanding of the art of translation that separates the original from its foreign language version, the author from the translator: it is the dozing heart that “speaks to you in silence.” Or, as the publisher's note on the cover puts it: Rilke and Shapcott “are brought together in the shared incognito of a foreign language” (n.p.).

The silence invoked here by Shapcott is the communication beyond language, a phenomenon that unites as much as it separates. The lexicon of this silent

communication consists of “aphids and bees,” the concreteness of the rose’s feminine world stands in sharp contrast to Rilke’s male abstractions. This is Shapcott’s consistent attitude: not only replacing the second person by I, but also getting rid of Rilke’s abstractness in favour of her concrete images: in “Rosa moschata” (XVII), for instance, Shapcott writes about dancing “around the stove,” an image which is absent in Rilke, but which elaborates upon the idea of “cooking up perfume”:

XVII

C’est toi qui prépares en toi
plus que toi, ton ultime essence.
Ce qui sort de toi, ton ultime essence.
Ce qui sort de toi, ce troublant émoi,
c’est ta danse. (Rilke 20)

“Rosa moschata”

I’m cooking up perfume –
attar of roses,
absolute rose –
dancing round the stove. (Shapcott 74)

Shapcott’s disagreement with Rilke’s abstract, fleshless diction is formidable: his French “*préparer*” is rendered into English as “cooking up” and his even more abstract “essence” changes in Shapcott’s version into “attar of roses.” The word “attar,” coming from Arabic, shifts the concept of ultimate essence to the physical experience of smell. So when the “absolute rose” arrives in the next line, it has already been made flesh. The experience Shapcott’s rose is telling us about is rooted in the material, sensual world, which finds its utter conclusion in the stove with which the stanza ends.

Shapcott’s argument with Rilke reaches its zenith in the poem “Rosa arvensis” (VI):

VI

Une rose seule, c’est toutes les rose
et celle-ci: l’irremplaçable,
le parfait, le souple vocable
encadré par le texte des choses.

Comment jamais dire sans elle
ce que furent nos espérances,
et les tendres intermittences
dans la partance continuelle. (Rilke 21)

“Rosa arvenis”

One rose is every rose,
so you say, just as one word
might be any other:
sepal, stigma, filament.

But then we can't speak floriculture,
can't discuss botany at all,
not even mention plant entropy
or the taxonomy of roses. (Shapcott 64)

The second stanza of Shapcott's poem is her own: in these four reformulated lines she takes issue with Rilke, claiming that when we lose sight of the uniqueness of things, we will not be able to discuss botany, plant entropy or the taxonomy of roses. One rose is not every rose, she seems to argue with Rilke. Her reversal of roles, with female roses speaking to the male poet rather than being spoken to, enables her not only to start a “tender and taxing conversation” with him, but also to question his assumptions: “you'll find my roses addressing his, saying, in effect: It's not like that, it's like this” (xi).

3. “My approach to translation is fairly irreverent”: Alice Oswald's *Memorial*

Ten years later another English poet, Alice Oswald, continues, albeit in a radically different vein, Shapcott's preoccupations, addressing issues of translation, authorship, and gender relations. With *Memorial*, her version of Homer's *Iliad*, she encounters similar terminological difficulties. Oswald, a classicist by profession, left out of Homer's epic about eighty percent of the text, keeping only short descriptions of warriors' deaths and passages of lyrical similes. Her version of the *Iliad* is free of any heroic matter, most of the narrative passages have been omitted, as well as the scenes with demi-gods, kings, and heroes; what the reader gets are death-scenes of warriors whose names, sometimes mentioned only once in the epic, would be unfamiliar to most of us. Oswald enumerates them at the very beginning of her poem, printing them in majuscules in one column, one below the other. The unadorned cataloguing of names goes on for eight pages, recalling similar lists seen on various monuments such as the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, the Srebrenica monument, or the Warsaw Umschlagplatz Monument Wall. The terminological problem surfaces first in the subtitle of Oswald's book: “An Excavation of the *Iliad*.” Her use of a metaphor, instead of the technical ‘translation’ or ‘version,’ points to the uniqueness of the poet's endeavour – its originality requires a new term, bringing to mind Shapcott's comment “we don't

yet have the word for this kind of exchange” (ix). Oswald’s term underlines one of the functions which her creative translation performs: she salvages or reclaims the forgotten or long ignored dimension of ancient warfare, its human cost buried under the male-centred heroic treatment characteristic of the epic convention. In this, her work of translation, as it was the case with Shapcott’s *Tender Taxes*, may be seen as a work of redress.

Homer’s epic poem starts famously with an address to the Muse and proceeds to the presentation of its hero, Achilles: “Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another” (1; trans. Samuel Butler). Homer, opening his poem *in medias res*, omits the first nine years of the war, taking as its starting point Achilles’ feud with Agamemnon. Oswald decides to start her poem differently, not with anger, but with a death toll:

The first to die was PROTESILAUS
 A focused man who hurried to darkness
 With forty black ships leaving the land behind
 Men sailed with him from those flower-lit cliffs
 Where the grass gives growth to everything
 Pyrasus Iton Pteleus Antron
 He died in mid-air jumping to be first ashore
 There was his house half-built
 His wife rushed out clawing her face
 Podarcus his altogether less impressive brother
 Took over command but that was long ago
 He’s been in the black earth now for thousands of years. (13)

Oswald’s opening poem is based on the fragment from Book II 695–710, in which Homer catalogues Grecian ships with their Achaean chieftains, Protesilaus being one of them, with an army of forty ships:

And those that held Phylace and the flowery meadows of Pyrasus, sanctuary of Ceres; Iton, the mother of sheep; Antrum upon the sea, and Ptelem that lies upon the grass lands. Of these brave Protesilaus had been captain while he was yet alive, but he was now lying under the earth. He had left a wife behind him in Phylace to tear her cheeks in sorrow, and his house was only half finished, for he was slain by a Dardanian warrior while leaping foremost of the Achaeans upon the soil of Troy. Still, though his people mourned their chieftain, they were not without a leader, for Podarces, of the race of Mars, marshalled them; he was son of Iphiclus, rich in sheep, who was the son of Phylacus, and he was own brother to Protesilaus, only younger, Protesilaus being at

once the elder and the more valiant. So the people were not without a leader, though they mourned him whom they had lost. With him there came forty ships. (34–35; trans. Samuel Butler)

Homer's passage quoted above is not about death, but starts with a description of the richness and the beauty of the lands Achaean warriors had to leave to take part in the war. Protiselaus's death is mentioned here as if by the way, with a suggestion that although his wife wept after him and his people mourned him, his death was not a great loss to his people, who quickly found another leader. It is not the death of one of many replaceable leaders that finds itself in the centre of the passage, but a presentation of the contingent of forty ships from Iton, Pyrasus, Antrum, and Pteleum, heading for war.

In Oswald's rendering of the fragment death is both its starting point and its conclusion. She rearranges the order in which details of Protiselaus' life are recounted. The woman, who in Homer's narrative functions only as an element of the warrior's story, not an agent in it, but an object, also in the grammatical sense: "he had left a wife." In Oswald's version she acquires agency and becomes the grammatical subject of the sentence: "His wife rushed out clawing her face" (13). Apart from rearranging the scene, Oswald also introduces two time perspectives, one is Homer's narrator's, while the other is the perspective of the narrator of her own 21st century verse: "long ago" versus "thousands of years." The first phrase refers to the nine years that had passed since the beginning of the Trojan War, when Homer's account of it started. The second, "thousands of years" (13) is clearly rooted in our times. When we look at what is left of the Trojan War, we are aware of the phantomic presence of Homer's protagonists. Achilles is with us and will be returning for a couple of centuries in various literary and film narratives, Prote-silaus, on the other hand, is the name known only to the aficionados of the *Iliad*.

Hector, whose name concludes Oswald's poem, is perhaps, along with Patroclus, the only well-known Homeric hero who appears in *Memorial*, though the English poet makes sure that her Hector has relevance to our times and turns him into a modern young man:

And HECTOR died like everyone else
 He was in charge of the Trojans
 But a spear found out the little patch of white
 Between his collarbone and his throat [...]
 He was so boastful and anxious
 And used to nip home deafened by weapons
 To stand in full armour in the doorway
 Like a man rushing in leaving his motorbike running
 All women loved him. (71–72)

Oswald's final scene recalls Hector's love of Andromache, but deprives it of any sentimentality: leaving the poem, we are left with a picture of a woman, whose husband had been killed, and who has to take the responsibility for caring about his dead body:

Hector loved Andromache
 But in the end he let her face slide from his mind
 He came back to her sightless
 Strengthless expressionless
 Asking only to be washed and burned
 And his bones wrapped in soft cloths
 And returned to the ground. (72)

With Hector returning "to the ground," Oswald's subtitle acquires deeper meaning of reclaiming from the earth not only, as Schliemann did, the ruins of the city, but also the remains of those who attacked and defended it.

It is significant that Oswald's American publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, found the term "excavations" too extravagant and replaced it with the unproblematic "version." The 2012 British edition by Faber and Faber calls the poem "a brilliantly original new poem which is also a translation" (quoted from the cover), echoing the editorial note in Tom Paulin's book (cf. "It is at once a new volume of poetry by Tom Paulin and a personal anthology of European poetry"). The phrasing here is indicative of the publisher's attempt to close the gap between translation and originality. Oswald's poem is both original and translated, which redefines the latter as an active and creative process. Oswald herself does not seem to feel uneasy about the use of the term 'translation,' declaring that she understands it in her own way:

[M]y approach to translation is fairly irreverent. I work closely with the Greek, but instead of carrying the words over into English, I use them as openings through which to see what Homer was looking at. I write through the Greek, not from it – aiming for translucence rather than translation. (2)

It is an interesting passage in the poet's attempt to catch the uniqueness of her work, though revealing also the persistency of the problem the poet has with the term 'translation.' She is ready to risk a contradiction in her short pronouncement quoted above by claiming that what she approaches is translation and that what she aims at is not translation. It is as if the word, being rejected for all the problems it causes and assumptions it evokes, returns unwanted.

In the same paragraph of her Preface, Oswald introduces an important distinction, saying that while her "'biographies' are paraphrases from the Greek, my similes are translations" (2); yet how she manages to distinguish between

paraphrases and her “irreverent” usage of translation remains unclear. In the passage quoted above she reinterprets the term ‘translation,’ adjusting it to her own ends and moving it closer to what could be called paraphrasis. If Homer’s words are treated as openings leading the poet straight to the world described, Oswald’s goal is to see what Homer sees and to respond to it in her own terms. In order to achieve it, she has to neglect – although she does not admit it – Homer’s language that mediates between the reader and the described world. That this mediation may in fact be something more – a creation of that world; that words cannot be separated from what Homer ‘was looking at’ is not an issue for Oswald. What Homer – the blindman! – was looking at is available to us only thanks to the words he uses.

Oswald’s *Memorial* – an original new poem which is also a translation – intrigues as a poem with an interplay between fragments and the whole. The term “excavations,” which Oswald prefers to “versions,” prepares us to accept the *Iliad* in its truncated form, with its seven-eighths of the poem lost in translation. Excavation is a process of reclaiming works of art in their fragmentary form – and *Memorial* is fragmentary. The sense of reclaiming is nevertheless supplemented by the sense of loss. Oswald reclaims by wiping out, she excavates by burying. Homer’s work in her rendition is as much a work of saving, as it is the work of erasing. In this Oswald may be reminiscent of Georges Perec, whose novel *La Disparition* written twenty five years after the Holocaust was composed by eliminating the letter e from the writer’s alphabet, or Robert Rauschenberg, who in 1953 produced one of his works by erasing Willem de Kooning’s drawing (*Erased de Kooning Drawing*).

4. “...a practice of free borrowing and blithe reinvention”: Lavinia Greenlaw’s *A Double Sorrow*

Lavinia Greenlaw’s *A Double Sorrow* with the subtitle “Troilus and Criseyde” was published in 2014, three years after Oswald’s *Memorial*. As the publisher’s note informs us, Greenlaw’s poem is a “rendering of Chaucer’s captivating love poem” (n.p.), thus establishing a link between Greenlaw’s book and Chaucer’s work, though Greenlaw’s version of the narrative is very free and Chaucer’s name is mentioned neither on the cover, nor on the title page of the book. In fact, the story of the two lovers is neither Greenlaw’s, nor for that matter Chaucer’s. The author of *The Canterbury Tales* found inspiration for his poem in Boccaccio’s *Il Filostrato*. Boccaccio, however, cannot lay claim to the authorship of the poem, as his work was in turn based on *Le Roman de Trois*, a 12th-century work by Benoit de Sainte-Maure, or rather its Latin version by Guido delle Colonne. Sainte-Maure’s work followed the narrative of Latin recension of Dictys and Dares, whom Homer mentions as his predecessors. With such a proliferation of authorships the poem’s origins become dispersed, making it nearly impossible to say what the original

of Greenlaw's *Troilus and Criseyde* is, the poem travelling through centuries, languages and cultures, translated and re-translated. In its history, the concept of originality undergoes a radical dismantling, corroborating what scholars, like Lefevere, would point out that "all 'originals' draw on prior sources" (234).

Fiona Sampson, in a review in *The Guardian* quoted on the back cover, claims that "*A Double Sorrow* is not a simple translation. Instead, in an act of imaginative reconstruction, Greenlaw has filleted the original, lifting telling phrases and key narrative moments and making them her own." Here again, one sees how difficult and unhandy the term "translation" is. The reviewer uses it, yet finds it necessary to modify its meaning by saying that it is not of a "simple" kind, in a way that resonates with Oswald's uneasiness about the very term when she says her attitude to translation is "irreverent." By claiming it is not a "simple translation" the reviewer both legitimizes the term and distances herself from it, finding it impossible to get rid of it. The word, however problematic, proves unavoidable, if only to be later modified or contested. The reviewer calls it "imaginative reconstruction" and evokes the concept of appropriation, when she notices that Greenlaw makes the poem "her own," or, more tellingly, that she "lifted it." This corresponds with the poet's comment on the historical context of the *Troilus and Criseyde* narrative. Having acknowledged Homer's importance in this history, she remarks that the *Iliad* only mentions Troilus, Paris's brother, and hardly touches upon the narrative itself, though the name of Troilus crops up in various other pre-Homeric stories. In the Middle Ages, however, the narrative took its shape, when medieval poets "took hold of these old tales and established a practice of free borrowing and blithe reinvention." Each of these terms, "free-borrowing" and "reinvention," can be used in describing what Greenlaw does with Chaucer's text, having been authorized by the practice common in the times of Chaucer himself. And yet, when she tries to define the nature of her poem she introduces a new term: "It was the imagery, rather than the story, that made me want to write my own version – which is not a version, and certainly not a translation, but an extrapolation" (xi). The poet uses the general term in order to negate it, provides us with the name for her work only to upset it: "my version [...] which is not a version" (xi).

It is symptomatic of the problems contemporary poets face with naming the kind of exchange they are engaged in. If Shapcott speaks of "versions," and Oswald of "excavations," Greenlaw decides to introduce a more technical term, "extrapolation." The verb "to extrapolate" comes from mathematics, where it means to "calculate approximately from known values, data, etc. (others which lie outside the range of those known" (OED). The poet tries to elucidate her extrapolation method in the preface:

I've jettisoned characters and scenes, and made some borrowings of my own. I've taken an image or phrase (which in the Chaucer may be a passing mention or something played out over hundreds of lines) and have used it to formulate each small but

irrevocable step in the story. At times these are different aspects of the compacted emotions mentioned above. At others, they are decisions, gestures and (rarely) actions. (xi)

That Greenlaw uses a scientific term here should not come as a surprise, knowing the poet's interest in science and her use of scientific imagery in her earlier poems.

To see how radical Greenlaw's extrapolation is, one can compare the description of Troilus' death in Chaucer's original (and in a modernized translation by A. S. Kline) with the way the author of *A Double Sorrow* dealt with it. The fragment comes from stanza 260 and the beginning of the next stanza, lines 1814–1822:

260

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
 This litel spot of erthe, that with the see
 Embraced is, and fully gan despyse
 This wrecched world, and held al vanitee
 To respect of the pleyn felicitee
 That is in hevne above; and at the laste,
 Ther he was slayn, his loking down he caste;

261

And in him-self he lough right at the wo
 Of hem that wepten for his deeth so faste

260

And down from there he spies
 this little spot of earth that with the sea
 is embraced, and begins to despise
 this wretched world, and hold it vanity
 compared with the true felicity
 that is in heaven above. And at the last
 down where he was slain, his gaze he cast.

261

And in himself he laughed at the woe
 of those who wept for his death now past. (Chaucer 445)

In Greenlaw's version these twelve lines have been compressed into seven, but more radically the eighty-four syllables of the original text have been reduced to thirty-two. Greenlaw, as with all fragments in her book, gives the passage a title, which makes it more autonomous and focuses on what the poet thinks is the thematic core of the passage:

He is his own happiness

He looks down on what he has left:

A spot of earth

Embraced by the sea

A city

A camp close by

A field where men weep

And he laughs. (Greenlaw 217)

In *A Double Sorrow* this is the final stanza, the poem's conclusion, though in Chaucer's work there are still six stanzas before the end. Greenlaw cuts short not only the poem, but also the sentence, leaving out the object clause in the effect of which Troilus's laughter appears self-sufficient, its motive – unspecified: "And he laughs" versus "he lough right at the wo of hem that wepte for his deeth." The poem in Greenlaw's version returns to its beginning and echoes it by contrast: sorrow, even doubled, is replaced with laughter. Troilus's death signifies his liberation, or, as the title of the passage makes it clear: happiness.

The only 'original' image Greenlaw has kept is "A spot of earth / Embraced by the sea." Apart from that, the minimalist catalogue includes three details that point to the narrative that Troilus has just exited: the narrative of the Trojan War with the city, a (military) camp, and a field with weeping men. Liberated from the vicious circle of violence, war, dubious heroism, and death, Troilus can only laugh – in sharp contrast to the tears of warriors. Greenlaw's version is free from Chaucer's moral and theological commentary, which runs for the next six stanzas. If Chaucer is ready to oppose the wretched life on earth with "the true felicity / that is in heaven above," Greenlaw relies entirely on objectivist diction, preferring concrete images, expressed by a succession of three unadorned nouns – city, camp, field.

5. Conclusion

The three English women poets discussed here are by no means the only ones who make use of translation and redefine it, by questioning the authority of the text and contesting the very concept of originality. The translations they make are their new poems, it is their names that can be seen on book covers, though the source text never disappears from view and readers are always reminded that they are reading a polyphonic, polylingual work. The three poets find the traditional understanding of translation too limiting, in consequence they look for other terms that would define their creative work more adequately – rather than talk about translations, Shapcott prefers to talk about "versions," Oswald about "excavations," Greenlaw about "extrapolation." The search for the proper, accurate term continues: Patience

Agbabi, who published *Telling Tales* (2014), her version of *The Canterbury Tales*, calls her poems “remixes” taking the term from the language of contemporary music. In each case, whenever the poet speaks about her work, the term *translation* crops up and is contested, as if she found it both unavoidable and dissatisfying. In effect, we often come across the poets’ comments (and editorial notes) composed of contradictory, mutually exclusive statements: the work is a translation and is not a translation. Shapcott, Oswald, and Greenlaw are examples of women poets appropriating the works by canonical male writers in order to subvert them, revise gender relations, re-imagine and re-write classical texts.

Scholars identify various factors which make translators resort to adaptation; among them the “disruption of the communication process: the emergence of a new epoch or approach or the need to address a different type of readership” (Bastin 5) seems to be the condition shared by the three women poets discussed here. In times when assumptions underlying the male-centred cultures of the past can no longer be upheld and a readership looks more critically at the veiled manifestations of dominance and discrimination, they feel the need to turn to classical texts and adapt them. This kind of practice seems to me one of the most inspiring and widespread aspects not only of today’s poems, but also of the poetry of tomorrow.

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Forms of Sequentiality in Contemporary English Poetry: Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell

Abstract: This article discusses the sequential devices which structure lyric poems. The sequentiality of poems is usually given little systematic attention to in poetry analysis. The main focus tends to be on speaker, imagery, theme and prosody. But a central aspect of the meaning of any poem is the manner in which the progression of the poetic utterance is organised. One such device, widely used in traditional and contemporary poetry, is the schema of the narrative. This article briefly sketches a theoretical approach to the description of the sequential extension of poetic texts and applies it to examples from the work of two prominent contemporary English poets, Simon Armitage, the present poet laureate, and Glyn Maxwell.

Keywords: poetry, sequentiality, poetry analysis, narrative, schema, meaning, Simon Armitage, Glyn Maxwell.

1. Introduction: Some Methodological Remarks

The sequentiality of poems is rarely given systematic or extensive attention to in handbooks of poetry analysis¹ and in general theories of the lyric². The main focus is usually on speaker, imagery, theme and, especially, on prosodic devices. But a central feature of a poem (as of any text) concerns the question how its sequence is organised on the semantic level, what devices are applied to direct the progression of thoughts and constitute the meaning which is unfolded in the course of the poetic utterance. The premise underlying the following analyses is the assumption that poems are primarily read for their meaning, not for the “pleasure [...] derive[d] from the physical re-enactment of a poem’s sound pattern or the cognitive appreciation of its formal mastery” (Zetzelmann 136).³ Meaning signifies some phenomenon

of human existence, some problem of living and acting, of experience and imagination, of desire and resistance to gratification. Such phenomena and problems are centrally conditioned by change, on account of the essentially temporal constitution of human existence. A fundamental device available to human consciousness for representing, ordering and treating such problems and phenomena in a text is the operation of narration. A narrative can minimally be defined as a change of state predicated on a person, a thing or a situation, typically undergoing some significant shift, an event (cf. Prince 1988a, 58–61),⁴ “a transformation, a transition from an earlier state to a later and resultant state” (Genette 19). In this sense change and dealing with change inform also the contents of literary works of art, centrally in narrative fiction but pervasively also in lyric poetry (cf. Hühn and Schönert 2002; Hühn and Kiefer 2005), albeit with significant differences between these kinds. Poems frequently feature narrative structures in a hidden or submerged form, which one might call “covert narrativity” (cf. Hühn 2022, 250–251).

This article will briefly sketch a theoretical approach to the description of the syntagmatic extension of poetic texts and apply it to examples from the work of two prominent contemporary English poets, Simon Armitage, the present poet laureate, and Glyn Maxwell. The analyses will demonstrate the pervasiveness and variability of narrative as a prime device for structuring the sequence of their poems and discuss the relevance and function of such a narrative structuring. The different forms and causes of change presented in the process of narration within the select examples do characteristically possess an ethical dimension, i.e. they are motivated by and endorse specific values.⁵

A poem, as a delimited, self-contained text published as a separate verbal entity,⁶ clearly marked off from its environment (within a poetry collection, a periodical, an anthology), presupposes for the reader some form of internal unity and connectivity – of whatever kind and of whatever degree, some connectivity stretching from the beginning across the extensive middle part to the ending. Questions of sequentiality, of cohesion and coherence, in texts are theoretically dealt with by text linguistics. The approach in the following analyses is loosely based on the assumptions of the *Rhetorical Structure Theory* by Mann, Thompson and Matthiessen,⁷ which describes the connection within the sequence of a text by a set of *relations* among functionally significant textual spans. A textual span is defined as the minimal cohesive section, element or component part of a text, ranging from a sub-clause in a sentence via an entire sentence to a stretch of sentences. Such minimal text-spans include, for instance, statement, proposition, alteration, concession, consequence, antithesis, corroboration, explanation, repetition (cf. Hühn 2022, 251). And the interconnections or interrelations among such textual spans can take various supra-segmental forms such as narrative development, explanation, argumentation or description.⁸

2. Simon Armitage: Exploiting Narrativity

Simon Armitage is particularly prone to resort to narrative structures in one form or another in the treatment of his subjects. Several of his lyric poems are in fact straightforward narratives, such as “Hitcher,” “On the Trail of the Old Ways,” “Tale,” “Reverse Charge” and “Parable of the Dead Donkey” (all in Armitage 1993). Instead of analysing such obvious examples I will choose three other poems in which he employs narrative schemata in a more involved and ambivalent way. Armitage’s poetry is generally characterised by a thematic focus on everyday experiences and common views rendered with a dry wit combined with critical seriousness. These features are all apparent in “Homecoming” (1997, 20). In this poem, the speaker tackles a psychological problem in an elaborately imaginative way, utilizing narrative devices both for presenting the problem and for suggesting the solution.

The speaker addresses a young adult, presumably a woman, asking her (“think,” line 1) to listen to three “narratives,” which he then proceeds to “tell,” all of which concern her personally, though in different ways (“you,” lines 8, 11, 12, 21). The first is a programmatic process or mini-story of learning to expect and accept help and support from others, a trust exercise, “where those in front / stand with their arms spread wide and free-fall / backwards, blind, and those behind take all the weight” (lines 2–4). The second (lines 5–13) is a personal story about the addressee in which support and help for her had been lacking. The speaker recalls an incident and its consequences (lines 5–11 and 12–13) which she had experienced as a child sixteen years before (line 15). She had carelessly allowed her canary-yellow cotton jacket to fall off the hook (obviously at school), get trampled over and become sullied, an act of negligence for which she had been severely reprimanded by her mother. When she came home, her mother had guessed what had happened (“puts / two and two together,” lines 7–8), told her so furiously into her face (“makes a proper fist of it / and points the finger,” lines 9–10) and caused a violent row (“Temper, temper. Questions / in the house. You seeing red. Blue murder,” lines 10–11), in the end peremptorily sending her to bed (line 11). Later that night she had desperately sought relief by stealthily leaving the house and apparently trying to phone some understanding friend: “you slip the latch and sneak / no further than the call-box at the corner of the street” (lines 12–13). This tale ends without a comforting conclusion.

The speaker introduces these two stories by asking the addressee to connect the general example in the first stanza with her own personal retrospective narrative in the second, applying the former as a solution to the latter: “Think, two things on their own and both at once” (line 1). In his third narrative (lines 18–23) the speaker does just that: he proceeds to “set things straight” (line 17). He imaginatively describes – “narrates” – the act of how the addressee may put her neglected yellow jacket back on, detailing this procedure by referring to the sleeves, the buttons and the zip or buckle (lines 18–22). The speaker makes clear that this

act of belatedly “try[ing] the same canary-yellow cotton jacket [...] / [...] for size again” (lines 22–23) has to be understood as the practical application of the trust exercise to her personal case: “Step backwards into it” (line 21, literally referring back to lines 3–4). Thus, the former inconclusive painful story of damage, guilt and punishment is finally brought to a happy conclusion by redressing the neglect of the jacket and asking the addressee actually to put it back on. By implication, the speaker even goes one step further: he metaphorically describes the process of putting on the jacket as an act of hugging the addressee, as indicated by naming parts of her body instead of the corresponding parts of her garment:

These ribs are pleats or seams. These arms are sleeves.
 These fingertips are buttons, or these hands can fold
 into a clasp, or else these fingers make a zip
 or buckle, you say which. (lines 18–21)

This comforting hug finally makes up for the former reprimand and the unrelieved suffering it had caused in the past: “It still fits” (line 23).

This hug as belated consolation for youthful suffering functions as the event, the eventful closure of the retrospective tale. The successful conclusion is also implied in the title of the poem, “homecoming,” and the shift in its meaning. Applied to the past incident, the original homecoming described in the beginning, the term acquires an ironic meaning: coming home means being sternly told off by the mother. With the concluding third narrative in mind, however, the term recovers its original positive meaning of returning into the safety and comfort of one’s home. On the level of utterance, the poem thus performs the proper trajectory of a conclusive narrative – a development in the addressee’s situation finally resulting in a decisive turn, in an eventful change of state.

This shift from the inconclusive, unsatisfactory ending of the former story to the belated resolution of the crisis in the present is brought about by the speaker imaginatively projecting himself into the past situation. He does so in two respects (lines 14–17). He imagines himself as the recipient of the addressee’s phone call asking for help (“I’m waiting by the phone,” line 14) and provides, as it were, the consolation the addressee had then been longing for. In addition, he projects himself into the past situation as a “father figure [...] want[ing] to set things straight” (line 17) and to redress the mother’s harshness, ironically rejecting her moral right to criticise her daughter (“the very model of a model of a mother,” line 8). This desire to set things straight is eventually enacted by the speaker in the final consoling story. The connection between the past crisis and the present consolation and resolution, across a gap of 16 years, is purely imaginative and reveals a strong emotional attachment on the part of the speaker for the addressee. Their constellation might be construed as an affectionate relationship and the consoling hug as a gesture subtly expressing love.⁹

As to the function of the narrative structuring of the utterance, both courses of action narrated successively in the poem are motivated by the intention to encourage mutual trust, to help and to console, to overcome emotional problems for other people. Thus, the function of narrating is clearly ethical, based on the value of mutual assistance and love and demonstrating the enactment of this value in interpersonal relationships. This ethical motivation informs both the dimension of the told and of the telling,¹⁰ the behaviour narrated within the two mini-stories and the narrating of them in the course of the poetic text.

A narrative structuring of the poetic sequence in conjunction with a thematic focus on everyday experience and contemporary living conditions is also apparent in the title poem of Armitage's 2017 collection *The Unaccompanied* (2017, 74). This poem presupposes a speaker who is responsible for the utterance but remains covert (i.e. without explicit reference to himself). He employs narrative sequences in two respects and on two levels – first, as a means to structure the progression of the utterance at the superordinate level of the text, namely the protagonist's on-going behaviour, his physical movements, and, second, to structure the sequence at a subordinate level, the protagonist's ongoing perceptions and imaginations while walking. The second (internal, mental) sequence has an impact on the first (external, physical) sequence.

The external sequence, which structures the utterance from beginning to end, consists of the movement of the protagonist ("he") through a riverside landscape and finally across the river: "Wandering slowly back after dark one night / above a river, towards a suspension bridge" (lines 1–2). This physical movement is accompanied by a continuous mental activity, summarily described as what "concerns him," the activity of imagining or remembering: "a sound concerns him" (line 3), "Then concerns him again, now clearly a song" (line 5), "Then his father's voice [...], / "his father's father's voice, and voices / of fathers before, concerning him only" (lines 14–16). This narrative sequence of the protagonist's external and internal acts is presented through a cohesive string of text spans, sentences in the present tense all referring – directly or indirectly – to the protagonist as the subject. These physical and mental acts are presented im–mediately, that is, by a covert narrator, whose hidden mediation is only revealed by evaluative comments such as "a sound [...] that might be a tune / or might not" (lines 3–4), "clearly" (line 5), "shabby" (line 8), "cheesy" (line 13). The external sequence is set at a particular point in time ("one night," line 1) and characterised as a walk back, presumably home. The place where he is walking is separated by the river from the other side, as the references to a suspension bridge (line 2), to the "gorge" (line 17) and to the "cliff edge" (line 18) indicate. In this movement, the protagonist, as the title implies, is "unaccompanied," i.e. he is walking alone. But, mentally, he turns out to be accompanied nevertheless by an emerging "sound," "a tune," a "noise," "a song" (lines 3–5), progressively reaching further back into the past – constituting the chain of men singing in a men's choir ("sung / by chorusing men," lines 6–7) – a

continuous chain of singers in a choir directed by a conductor: “Above their heads a conductor’s hand / draws and casts the notes with a white wand” (lines 9–10). This emerging chain of singers singing is progressively specified with respect to location (a shabby hotel on the opposite bank, lines 6, 8), topic of the songs (“songs about mills and mines and a great war [...],” lines 11–13) and identity of the singers (his father and his forefathers, lines 14–16). This quasi-narrative sequence of singers, as constituted in the protagonist’s mind, is not drawn out chronologically in each link but described summarily in its various aspects, imaginatively forming the recollected history of his male ancestors in their living conditions. The narrative direction of this sequence is regressive – reaching successively back into the past. The great variety of the songs sung by the forefathers makes it clear that this is not an aloof elite song culture but a broad spectrum of themes, ranging from working conditions (“mills and mines,” line 11), war experiences (“a great war,” line 11) and fantasy and myth (“mermaid brides and solid gold hills,” line 12) to religion (“broken hymnbooks,” line 13) and low-quality popular art (“cheesy films,” line 13). The relevance of these imaginative recollections for the protagonist is stressed throughout (“concerns him”), but particularly towards the end: “concerning him only” (line 16).

The personal impact of this internal (mental) sequence on the external (physical) sequence of wandering home is achieved in the last two lines: the imagined chain of singers is “arcing through charged air and spanning the gorge” (line 17) enabling the protagonist to “step [...] over the cliff edge and walk [...] across” (line 18). Thus, the protagonist is enabled, during his nightly walk home and his concurrent ruminations about and his imaginative probings into the past, to re-establish a close link to his collective past, the string of his forefathers, and join them again (or for the first time), thus to achieve a new re-integration both into his regional and his social and cultural environment as well as his family past and paternal tradition. This connection is described (literally) as a boundary crossing (imaginatively walking across the gorge) – a genuine narrative event.

The title is obviously meant to be ironic. Even in his solitude (walking alone, in darkness, separated spatially from his environment as well as temporally from his family’s past), this man tracing the line of his ancestors is mentally connected both with his past ancestors and with his present environment. The function of these two narratives is insofar ultimately ethical as they exemplify and endorse the positive humane value of overcoming personal isolation, loneliness and separation, by connecting the individual with his family, his origins, his family’s past as well as with his present environment, thus bringing about overall harmonious personal and social integration and fulfilment.

A completely different approach to the narrative structuring of a poem can be seen in “The Dead Sea Poems” (1995, 1–2). Instead of an ethical function the narrative is employed in a playful, fanciful und self-referential manner. The narrative design structures the sequence of the utterance from beginning to end. Essentially,

the speaker, in the role of the poet (as it turns out in the middle, line 17), “narrates” the production – or more precisely, the inadvertent coming into being, the emergence – of the present poem. The most decisive feature of the narrative organization of this poem is the shift in framing, the switch from a pastoral to a literary, a poetic frame. In the beginning, the speaker employs the schema of a shepherd driving a flock of goats in search of water across a rocky, arid and barely vegetated country:

And I was travelling lightly, barefoot
 over bedrock, then through lands that were stitched
 with breadplant and camomile. Or was it
 burdock. For a living I was driving
 a river of goats towards clean water. (lines 1–5)

This is a course of happenings during which one of the goats breaks free and escapes into a cave:

To flush it out, I shaped
 a sling from a length of cotton bandage,
 or was it a blanket, then launched a rock
 at the target, which let out a racket –
 the tell-tale sound of man-made objects. (lines 7–11).

Inside the cave the shepherd in his pursuit then comes across some caskets, in which he – suddenly switching from the schema of goat herding to that of a poet dealing with his poetry – discovers “poems written in my own hand” (lines 15–17).

The poem’s utterance is a syntactically cohesive narrative, a coherent chain of changes of state all predicated on the same figure, the speaker, who throughout refers to himself explicitly by pronouns of the first person singular (lines 1, 2, 7, 17, 19, 24, 25, 29). Although the narrative sequence is syntactically cohesive, there are several semantic deviations, disruptions and shifts or distorted, incongruous and odd expressions (emphasis mine): “camomile. *Or was it* / burdock” (lines 3–4), “driving / a *river* of goats” (line 5), “one of the herd *cut loose to a cave / on the skyline*” (lines 6–7), “*flush* it [the goat] *out*” (line 7), “a sling from of cotton bandage / *or was it a blanket*” (lines 8–9), “*launched* a rock / at the *target*” (lines 9–10), “the *tell-tale sound* of man-made *objects*” (line 11), “caskets [...] *gasped* [...] *theatrically* perhaps” (lines 13–14), “a *breath* of musk / and pollen” (lines 15–16), “*twelve times nothing*” (line 20), “*under infra-red and ultra-sonic*” (line 22), “bearing it all in mind, like / *praying*, saying [...]” (lines 26–27). These deviations and distortions serve to foreground and problematise the status and foundation of this narrative, effectively questioning its literal validity and somewhat obfuscating its narrativity.

The other conspicuous feature of this narrative sequence, which likewise draws attention to its status and validity, is the aforementioned shift – in the course

of its development – of the frame. The first part (lines 1–17) is framed as the tale of a shepherd tending a flock of goats and accidentally coming across a hoard of manuscripts in a cave. This part of the tale is clearly an allusion to the discovery of jars housing ancient biblical manuscripts in the Qumran caves near the Dead Sea by a Bedouin shepherd in 1946. The second part of the sequence (lines 17–31), however, is framed as a poet’s – the speaker’s (in his role as a poet) – rediscovery of his early poetry. Due to a momentary financial squeeze he auctions off these poems: “being greatly in need of food and clothing, / and out of pocket, I let the lot go / for twelve times nothing” (lines 18–20). Described in somewhat fantastic terms the speaker thereafter takes “it all / to heart” (lines 25–26), reprocessing the texts, writing new poems, “singing the whole of the work / to myself” (lines 28–29) and coming up with “innocent, / everyday, effortless verse” (lines 29–30), “verse, of which this / is the first” (lines 29–30), explicitly referring to this very text which the reader is currently reading. This concluding abrupt reference to the present poem functions as the eventful termination and aim of the narrative drive underlying the poetic utterance. The link constituting the transition between these two narrative frames is the *Qumran scrolls*, in their quality as written texts. This link between the two frames forms the basis for the title of this poem as well as that of the entire collection: “The Dead Sea Poems.”¹¹

The pervasive verbal, lexical and semantic incongruities in the development of the narrative introduce a playful, witty note and highlight as well as undermine the narrative devices as such – the tale becomes more fantastical and volatile when dealing with poetry and cannot be taken too seriously. This device draws particular attention to the poem itself and its meaning and the artificially contrived devices: one can observe how this very poem is “crafted” – surreptitiously coming from afar and suddenly being there: “this / is the first” (line 30). The title is ironic (dead sea) and “the first” also refers to the structure of the collection as a whole, in which this poem is indeed the first item. As against the ethical approach in the other two poems, in which narrative devices are employed to tackle some serious human problem, in “The Dead Sea Poems” (and more pervasively in the entire collection of that name) Armitage stages the act of narration as such to demonstrate and celebrate his poetic imagination and inventiveness as a means of writing poetry. Narrativity is here performed for its own sake, as a spectacular and surprising feat resulting in its own eventful constitution, which allows him to sequentialise and order a large amount of material.

3. Glyn Maxwell: Complicating Narrativity

Like Armitage, Glyn Maxwell draws widely on narrativity to organise the sequentiality of his poems. But while Armitage employs narrative generally in a more or less straightforward, if elaborate manner, Maxwell tends to complicate the narrative

organisation of his poems extensively by undermining, revoking, contradicting, denying, ridiculing or submerging narrativity and playing with it. The thematic frame of a great many of his poems is love, the emergence and the difficulty of a love-relationship. The treatment of love (in poetry) is almost necessarily narrative, in as much as it is concerned with the origin, the growth, the experience and the decline of a love relationship. A relatively simple example is “The Ages” (2013, 5).

The speaker addresses another person (“you”), presumably a woman, with whom he seems to have a close relationship. He starts his utterance with the promise of a definitive clarification of the situation: “Let’s get this straight” (line 1). He then proceeds to describe his behaviour and movement before the addressee existed at all (“when you were not,” line 2). In this, he appears to claim (“yes,” lines 2, 3; “sure,” line 5) that everything she has been told has actually already referred to him, had included him: “all the stories you were told / have me in them somewhere, off to the side” (lines 7–8). The speaker’s previous history is characterised, as stressed through his description, by a vast temporal and spatial extension: he “roamed the earth” (line 2), he was a contemporary of President Lincoln’s life and death (“some President got shot / trying to enjoy the play,” lines 4–5) and witnessed war and peace (“my world / had wars in it and peace,” lines 5–6). The reference to Lincoln is odd (it is not clear why this particular historic person should be mentioned) but the general claim is obvious: the speaker’s existence was prepared and forecast for the addressee in everything she had heard so far (“all the stories you were told / have me in them somewhere,” lines 7–8). The same claim is then repeated and reciprocated for himself, for his knowledge about her: “all the stuff I know has you somewhere” (line 9). These rather fanciful and exaggerated mutual claims amount to romantic lovers’ idealistic, hyperbolic notions that both were exclusively predestined for each other from time immemorial.

Then a sudden shift occurs from the long stretches of their two pasts – the two “ages” – to the present hour: he announces something (“this”) he has been trying to do “since half-four” (line 10), which is then specified as the elaborate reflections about their recollections of the past in the first nine lines, irreverently summarised as the brief time the speaker had been waiting for her to wake up:

So all that to and fro means nothing more
to me than time I took and time I make,
awning and fretting in this garden chair,
whiling away the ages till you wake. (lines 11–14)

Meeting her again after her afternoon nap functions – wittily – as the eventful fulfilment and closure of their mutual love story, as the event of this narrative.

So, the poem presents rudimentary narrative structures on two levels. First, the content of the speaker’s reflections refers to the “story” of him and the addressee eventually coming together in the concluding event of a love relationship. Second,

on the present level of speaking, the speaker's recollections of his past and of the past in general (abbreviated to a few items) function as the ongoing "story" of his waiting for the addressee to wake up. Thus, the providential movement of their lives towards each other in the past is identified with the brief span, in the present, of waiting for her to wake up from an afternoon nap ("And I've been trying to do tis since half-four," line 10). These narrative structures are presented in a condensed form, but they can clearly be re-constructed as résumés of lengthy changes of state. The point about their presentation is the playful, ironic, exaggerating style. This first goes for the vast expansion of the speaker's past to include Lincoln's assassination, which is wittily explained as the speaker's "small talk with the dead" (line 3). This is further indicated in the reference to his knowledge as "stuff" (line 9). And the playful note is especially expressed in the description of the brief period waiting for her to wake up from her nap as "yawning and fretting" (line 13) and "whiling away the ages" (line 14). While the recollections of their respective long pasts are condensed rigorously, the brief hour of waiting for her is expanded to "ages." What is also highly ironic is the confrontation of their condensed recollected long lives with the expanded short afternoon period. Both periods together are referred to as ages, in the plural, as mentioned in the title. Witty is also the concomitant contrast between the high romantic topic of predestined love and the trivial, hum-drum experience of waiting in a garden chair for the beloved to wake up from an after-lunch nap.

The half-ironic, half-serious use of narrative structures for the topic of love characteristic of this poem is generally typical of Maxwell. Another aspect of the ironic-serious stance is the particular poetic form used here: This is a sonnet, a form originally (during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance) set aside for the theme of love. The form of the sonnet, with the traditional break after line 8, the *volta*, is utilized here for the narrative structuring of the text. There is a conspicuous division between the octave (abab cdcd) and the sestet (eff geg), between the speaker's focus on his own life in his recollections (lines 1–8) and on his knowledge of her and her present nap (lines 9–14). It is after line 8 that the focus shifts from her knowledge of him to his knowledge of her and his present situation of waiting for her to wake up. The essentially serious experience of love can only be treated, this poem seems to imply, ironically, which does not at all mean that it is dismissed, and by exposing (and opposing) it to the humdrum everyday reality of sitting in a garden chair. The condensed narratives underlying this poem have basically an ethical function, expressing affection and loving devotion. But the pervasive exaggerations and incongruities within this utterance imply an ironical stance on the side of the speaker creating a certain ambivalence, tempering affection with a degree of exasperation.

A much more involved and allusive treatment of the love narrative is presented by "Love Made Yeah" (1995, 20).¹² The sequence underlying "Love Made Yeah" is clearly narrative, appearing to present a traditional love story, albeit in a

very involved, suggestive and highly ambivalent manner. The speaker's utterance consists of a seemingly incoherent chain of references to situations, actions and events, described in the present tense. They are ascribed by the speaker to himself ("I," "my," "me") and addressed to a group of (presumably male) friends ("you," line 11; "guys," line 19; "friends," line 30). As indicated by the title and a number of expressions within the text, the speaker's utterance is framed as the narrative presentation of his evolving love story with a girl (lines 25, 29) from its beginning ("my eyes meet eyes," line 1) to its ultimate fulfilment in their union ("I am hers," line 29). The intermediate stages stress the passionate intensity of this love affair: from the triumphant accumulation of descriptive adjectives for "love made" ("Nothing but glorious, jealous, incredulous, / bibulous, fabulous, devil'll envy us / love made, love made!" lines 8–10) via the emphasis on intimate trust in the phrase "here at the heart / of the movement I trust my hand in another" (lines 16–17) to the strong attachment to the beloved in the concluding statement "I am hers" (line 29). This is expressed by another accumulation, this time of present participles ("following, wishing on, crediting, catching," line 24), which culminate in the speaker declaring "her my star" (lines 24–25), who kindles his burning desire: "Her eyes are as hot as one needs to ignite / the cave in the human guy" (lines 28–29). This result refers back to the intimate mutual gaze at the outset: "my eyes meet eyes" (line 1).

This love narrative is interspersed with references to the political narrative of a violent uprising against an oppressive government, in a public square, with allusions, through French phrases, to the French Revolution ("va ten to the King," line 5; "drapeaux," line 6; "sans doute," line 16). This political narrative portrays the speaker, as does the love story, more as a victim than as a successful active protagonist. The string of references starts with the expulsion of the rebels from the public sphere, the Square, to a (law) court with the speaker opposed to the ruler: "Whoever was marched from the Square [...] / and to what court, I don't give a hyphen, / "va t'en to the King!" (lines 3–5). This constellation continues in the second stanza with the persisting spirit of rebellion ("Our drapeaux are waving," line 6) despite the threat of punishment ("what's in the offing / but tears, tribunals and unwelcome aid," lines 6–7). The next two stanzas (lines 11–15, 16–29) refer to the public media (Press and TV, namely CNN) reporting on the fall of the heroic revolutionaries ("the heroes felled / in the upshot," lines 12–13) and the success of the shady bourgeois followers, who value money rather than freedom ("the oiliest climb of the customary / bourgeois fuckers," lines 13–14) as well as the speaker's own imminent personal punishment ("I am odds-on to cop it," line 18). He is already familiar with such consequences, since he is vulnerably human, as he acknowledges in his reference that he was born of a mother ("I did arrive here / via a mother," lines 19–20). The fifth stanza reports on the ultimate failure of the rebellion, the victory of the ruling powers ("oligarchy or puppet or shah," line 22) and the speaker's own imprisonment and humiliating trial ("I am banged up and on trial in slippers," line 23). The speaker initially rejects the addressees' pity for

his failure in the rebellion, only to accept it on second thought, although he does not really concede that he has failed: “don’t do the pity. All right, do the pity, / but that won’t happen, believe it from me!” (lines 26–27)

These two contrastive narratives of love and rebellion are linked in three ways. First, they are juxtaposed: in lines 1–5 (stanza 1) the story of love is followed by the story of rebellion; in lines 6–10 (stanza 2) the succession is reversed and the question about the negative consequences of a rebellion is countered by a triumphantly emphatic insistence on “love made; love made;” in lines 11–20 (stanza 3), (trustful) love is surrounded by references to the (failing) rebellion. Second, the two narratives are causally linked in lines 21–25 (stanza 5), as the speaker is punished by the ruling power for remaining faithful to his beloved (“on trial [...] / for following [...] / her my star,” lines 23–25). Lines 26–30 (stanza 6) then ignore outright the danger of punishment for his love (line 27) and declare his private love to have been won in a final political or historic victory: “I am history” (line 30). Third, an allegorical connection is introduced when the ruling power is identified with “my reason” (line 3), and love is presented as a rebellion against the speaker’s rational mind. This suppression of love is finally overcome by the passionate intensity of affection returned by the beloved one. The phrase “Her eyes are as hot [...]” (line 29) relates to the speaker’s initiative in “my eyes meet eyes” (line 1) in the beginning and finally concludes in her active choice: “I am hers” (line 30) – instead of “she is mine.” This declaration signifies the eventful closure of the love story, the event of “love made.”

The narrative presentation of the love theme is made more ambiguous by a string of incongruous words or phrases such as the implication in “zillionth [time]” (line 1) of an uncountably large number of instances, denying the notion of uniqueness for the speaker’s love; the nonsensical replacement of “hyphen” for the idiomatic complement “a damn” in the phrase “I don’t give a hyphen” (line 4); the strange insertion of French terms, especially the combination of the colloquial “va t’en” with “King” (lines 5, 6); the colloquialisms “yeah” (line 11), “Uh-huh” (line 16), “That ain’t news, guys” (line 19); the references to the “Press of this planet” (line 11) and to CNN (line 18) in this private love context; the expression “bourgeois fuckers” (line 14); the various foreign or slang terms for money (“*argent, ackers, geld,*” line 15); the description of her eyes as “ignit[ing] / the cave in the human guy” (lines 18–29); the spurious argument (and its odd phrasing) for rejecting the news-value of his imminent indictment (“That ain’t news,” line 19): “I did arrive here / via a mother” (lines 19–20). The effect of these pervasive incongruous terms is jocular and disruptive, partly depriving the love theme of its seriousness, an effect also brought about in another respect by the jarring combination of love and rebellion on the level of contents. As a result, a sense of ambiguity characterises the events narrated.

The semantic ambiguity created by these lexical elements is further corroborated by prosodic devices. The speaker’s joy of having won his love is underlined

in two places by the emphatic enumeration of several words with similar endings: six adjectives ending in “-ous” qualifying the noun phrase “love made” (lines 8–10), and four present participles qualifying the beloved, “my star” (line 24). The triumphant tone is somewhat undermined by the incongruous nature of the enumerated words, especially in the first passage: “jealous” and “bibulous” possess a negative quality in this context, and the contracted phrase “devil’ll-envy-us,” at odds with the rest of the list, adds a humorous note. The morphological similarity in “unturnable from, unstarable in” (line 2) in fact conceals a contradiction, as the speaker can neither turn away from his beloved’s eyes nor can he stare into them. The unexplained, abrupt reversal within a single line from a rejection of pity to its acceptance (line 26) increases the ambivalence of the situation, all the more so as the need for such pity is immediately afterwards denied (“but that won’t happen [...],” line 27).

In general, however, the pervasive incongruities and inherent tensions within “Love Made Yeah” are balanced by the parallel construction of the six stanzas, the melodious rhythm of the lines (mostly dactyls, sometimes alternating with iambs) and the emphatic closure of the endings in each stanza, supported by rhyme. The internal incongruity and tension characterising the narrative progression of the speaker’s utterance are thus reflected in the relationship between the semantic and the prosodic dimension. The changing interactions between the two narrative frames of love and rebellion together with the multiple incongruities create a highly ambivalent and complex rendering of a love story in its precarious progression from abrupt beginning to eventual fulfilment, to the concluding event. The poem combines elements of success and failure, moments of victory and defeat, as well as instances of active achievement and passive acceptance. Throughout, a precarious balance is kept between emotional devotedness and ironic detachment. The result is the poetic presentation of a personal love narrative that renders palpable the elusive nature of love and the contradictions it causes in the lover. To summarise the status of narrativity in Maxwell’s poem: the narrative structuring of the sequence as a continuous change of state is strongly corroborated while the internal quality of the changing human state as such is persistently made ambivalent and ambiguous (cf. Hertel and Hühn 2021, 397–401). The underlying motivation of the two intertwined narratives of love and rebellion is ultimate ethical – the desire for affection and for freedom, respectively. With respect to the love narrative the ethical quality is raised specifically by stressing that the motive is not selfish and possessive (as frequently in love stories) but expressly unselfish: “I am hers” (line 29).

In its particular narrative perspective Maxwell’s “Rest for the Wicked” (1995, 13) can be compared and contrasted with Armitage’s “The Unaccompanied.” While “The Unaccompanied” is regressive, as it were, intent on recovering the antecedents of the present situation and going back in time to the narrative beginnings, Maxwell’s “Rest for the Wicked” is concerned with endings, with the termination of a narrative development. “Rest for the Wicked” is a reflection on the experience of the end, of

coming to an end, in various phases of one's life. And this reflection on the significance of coming to an end is specifically focused on the question of knowledge with respect to such a sense of an ending, the awareness that a development – and what development – is actually coming to an end, as is emphasised by the string of words referring to the cognitive dimension: “know” (lines 1, 7, 8, 14), “ask” (line 8), “watch” (line 12), “language” (line 12), “gives [...] away or shows” (line 13).

By contrast to the deployment of two long narrative sequences in Armitage's “The Unaccompanied,” “Rest for the Wicked” – both in the body of the poem and in its title – presents numerous short narrative text spans constituting compact developments or changes of state. These sequences are of two types and their succession is accompanied by the variation of these types. These two types are: termination: a development or movement coming to an end; and transition (plus expected continuation): a new beginning and the further development after a temporary end. In other words: the difference between these two types is that between end-stopped and run-on narrative sequences. The poem starts off with the first type of sequence, termination: “We only know we've come to the end of something / by our meeting happily here” (lines 1–2). This is a present development described by the speaker as a member of a group (“we”), predicated on this group and consisting in the event of its conclusive constitution: “meeting happily.” The awareness (“we only know”) of this eventful termination calls up the memory of similar experiences in the past: “the end of a termtime, a school play, a holiday,” always resulting in happy emotions: “would splash us away towards love, hearts wrapped, some hero” (lines 3–4). And the former experiences function as a confirmation of the happy outcome at present. Thus the narrative and its eventful termination have a clear ethical component: solidarity, fulfilment and restfulness.

This variant of the first type of sequence (termination) is followed by the second type, transition: “goodbyes” (line 5) implies a fresh departure and movement towards something different, something new (lines 5–9). This departure and its goal at first appear both diffuse and problematical as indicated by the expression of regret (“sniff,” “tears,” lines 5–6) and furthermore by the group's internal heterogeneity (“incompatible salt-group *A*,” line 6; possibly a reference to a blood group). But the negative evaluation is subsequently rejected, if in convoluted terms: “weren't true” (line 5), “we are all *0*” (line 7; another oblique reference to blood groups – where group *0* is compatible with all others, indicating the basic homogeneity of the group), “the world is still turning” (line 8; i.e. developments are continuing), “we went with the force of fifty greetings” (line 9; i.e. with a positive outlook).

The controversial aspect of both sequences, termination and transition, is the evaluation of the end, of the outcome of the development. The first type, termination, ends positively, the second type, transition, problematically, but with a rigorous attempt to come to a positive evaluation, nevertheless. In the present situation (“today,” line 10), both aspects are juxtaposed or opposed to each other: “we

greet” and “the strain of some mere losses” (line 10): “greeting” is positive, implying welcome, while “losses” is negative, signifying reduction. This ambivalence seems to be the final stance of the speaker’s train of thoughts at the present moment. The poem then ends with a long sentence (lines 10–14), which comprises both – negative as well as positive – stances: “*compound* eyes in which all the *darkly* envisioned / watch with us” (lines 11–12; emphasis mine). The main point of the ending then is the awareness that an end has been reached at all, a sense of an ending, a concluding insight expressed in language: “always gives us away or shows” (line 13) and “a loop and whorl of a language” (line 12). This new insight is highlighted by the crucial difference between the introductory line of the poem and its repetition in the last line: While in the beginning the quality of the ending had been emphasised (“We only know we’ve come to the end of something / by our meeting happily here”), now the fact of ending as such is stressed (“we know it was only the end we came to”), the eventful awareness of the final termination of movement and change.

The title frames this variation and commutation of coming to an end and establishes an ironic perspective on these reflections. “Rest for the wicked” reverses the proverbial phrase “No rest for the wicked,” which goes back to a passage in the *Old Testament*: “There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked” (Isaiah, 48: 22). This phrase also comprises a temporal sequence, a change of state: people who are wicked, i.e. responsible for evil-doings, will in the end be able to rest without persecution and punishment – against the common notion that evil-doings always entail persecution and punishment. As the title for the complex variations of the two sequences, termination and transition, this reversed phrase promises comfortable – eventful – restfulness as a reward for whatever one has done in life, sounding a generally consoling note for people looking back on their past. Insofar as the conclusion of narrative developments is considered in value-related terms, in terms of good and bad, the narrative structures in “Rest for the Wicked” are ultimately based on an ethical motivation. The poem downplays the gravity of the end and valorises the ending as an event – as against unending persecution.

4. Conclusion

The analyses of select poems by Armitage and Maxwell have demonstrated the pervasive as well as diverse employment of narrative structurings for the sequentiality of their poems. Narrative text spans occur on various levels, in various extensions and in various concatenations. Differences concern, on the one hand, the extension and complexity of narrative and, on the other, the motivation of narrative. As to the extension and complexity of narrative, in two cases – Armitage’s “The Dead Sea Poems” and Maxwell’s “Love Made Yeah” – the narrative trajectory is co-extensive with the entire poem. But in each case the narrative is inherently complicated and somewhat obscured by the combination of two heterogeneous frames: goat-herding

and poetry processing in Armitage's poem, erotic love and political rebellion in Maxwell's poem. This combination of the ultimately incompatible has different effects for the dominant theme of the narrative: grotesque ironizing and emotional ambivalence. In three cases two separate narrative spans are combined to form a more comprehensive narrative development: the continuation and completion of an unsatisfactorily interrupted personal story in Armitage's "Homecoming," the integration of an isolated contemporary individual life into a long historical collective tradition in Armitage's "The Unaccompanied" and the playful and teasing opposition between a life-long predestined love story and the brief waiting for the beloved to wake up in Maxwell's "The Ages." In one particularly complex case – Maxwell's "Rest for the Wicked" – several condensed brief narrative text spans of two types, termination and transition (together with continuation), are combined and opposed for a reflection on the ending of a narrative.

Pervasively both Maxwell and Armitage problematise and undermine the clarity of the narrative structure by blending or linking various (heterogeneous) schemata or by obfuscating the clear trajectory of a narrative. The basic narrative organisation of the whole of the poetic text or of parts of it has thus to be extracted as underlying changes of state (cf. Hühn 2022). As to the (dynamic) motivation of narrative developments, the poems by both poets present narrative structures, i.e. basically the development of human states of affairs and the sequence of human acts, which are guided by ethical motives, by positive human values, such as affection, consolation, comfort, assistance and desire for gratification and happiness. This is especially true for Armitage's poetry, but essentially Maxwell's various treatments of the love theme are ultimately also guided by motives of affection and fulfilment of desire. In all cases the dynamic narrative development aims at and finally reaches some kind of conclusion, some kind of concluding event.

Notes

1. To name a few select English and German examples: Lennard mentions only "syntax," sentence construction and combination; Burdorf discusses sequence on two brief pages; O'Donoghue does not refer to sequence at all; Mandel offers an idiosyncratic approach of extracting "propositions," which is difficult to operationalise and systematise; Strobel is an exception: he has a long chapter on syntagmatic reading and on cognitive semantics (coherence, scripts and frames).
2. Culler, promoting the ritualistic feature as the core element of poetry, restricts the sequential dimension to sound and visual patternings and plays down and dismisses the semantic sequentiality relegating it to what he considers marginal cases of poetry such as dramatic monologues and ballads.

3. Zettelmann compellingly argues for the primary focus on the semantic dimension of poetry, without ignoring the prosodic structures.
4. See also Prince: “narratologists agree that narrative sequences represent linked series of situations and links [...] and that these sequences can be expanded and summarized, that they can be combined with other sequences in specifiable ways such as conjunction, embedding, or alternation and that they can be extracted from larger sequences” (2016, 12).
5. For an overview of “Narrative Ethics” see Phelan.
6. For the concept and the structure of a prototypical poem which underlies the analysis of the examples in this article see Hempfer.
7. See Halliday and Webster, Averintseva–Kisch.
8. See e.g. the text types proposed by Virtanen, the sequential or textual schemas proposed by Adam.
9. See Hertel and Hühn 2021, 401–403.
10. These are two of the four dimensions identified by Phelan in his discussion of “Narrative Ethics.”
11. With this manner the title poem sets the scene for the majority of the ensuing poems in the entire collection *The Dead Sea Poems*.
12. “Love Made Yeah” was first published separately in 1990.

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Brand New Oldies: Recent English Narrative Verse

Abstract: A substantial amount of narrative verse has been written and published in England in the first two decades of the 21st century. Several writers, including Bernardine Evaristo, Ros Barber, Patience Agbabi, and Moniza Alvi, have written successful and well-received longer narrative poems. These poems fall into various categories: novel in poems, verse novel, and narrative collection. Five features of these texts are distinguished: the reworking of traditional and popular story materials; the predominant deployment of traditional narrative and narrational technique; accessible verse technique; an interest in past subjects and an attempt to render them available to a contemporary readership; and an adoption of non-narrative and lyric modes.

Keywords: 21st-century English poetry, narrative verse, novel in poems, verse novel.

1. Introduction

The thesis advanced in this essay is that there has been a resurgence of narrative verse, and, particularly, longer narrative verse, in the early 21st century in England, and that this phenomenon has not been widely discussed. Further, I argue that the narrative verse of these two decades has been marked by five features. These are: the reworking of traditional and popular story materials; the predominant deployment of traditional narrative and narrational technique; a related favouring of accessible verse technique; an interest in subjects from the historical past and an attempt to render them readily available to a contemporary readership; and a surprising adoption of non-narrative modes. The underlying element in most of these features is what can broadly be understood as accessibility – of story material and technique. The tendency to deploy the non-narrative within narrative is a phenomenon that needs further and contextualizing discussion.

Texts chosen for detailed analysis are: Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* (2001); Glyn Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* (2005); Ros Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* (2012); Moniza Alvi's *At the Time of Partition* (2013); Kate (Kae) Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* (2013); Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014); and Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* (2014). Other relevant texts referred to briefly include: Fred D'Aguiar's *Blood Lines* (2000); Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* (2011); Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011); Ian McMillan's *The Tale of Walter the Pencil Man* (2013); and Jay Bernard's *Surge* (2019). I will forego detailed notes on the authors, as details of their careers are widely available. But it should be noted that most of these texts are written by well-known poets. Barber is primarily an academic, but Evaristo is a successful poet and novelist, and Maxwell is a prolific poet and playwright. Alvi, Agbabi, Tempest (a playwright too), and Greenlaw have also won wide recognition for their verse. Narrative texts referred to in passing – by D'Aguiar, Bergvall, Oswald, McMillan, and Bernard – are all by prominent contemporary English poets. The choice of my principal corpus of texts is motivated by diversity of authorship, subject matter, and technique, although the points of convergence among these texts, despite differences, are striking.

My article is divided into seven sections. In the first, I offer a definition of longer narrative poetry, indicate briefly the long tradition of the category, and point to the relative critical neglect of recent narrative verse. In five subsequent sections, I discuss each of the features of recent narrative verse set out in my thesis. A final section draws conclusions from the previous discussion and suggests lines of further research.

2. Narrative Poetry: Definition and History

Most writers on narrative verse take the term for granted, and do not attempt to define it. However, one can offer a brief definition. Gérard Genette defines narrative as “une production linguistique assumant la relation d'un ou plusieurs événement(s) [...] l'expansion d'un verbe” / “a linguistic product taking on itself the relation of one or several events [...] the expansion of a verb” (19). On the other hand, Franz K. Stanzel insists on the centrality of mediation to any narrative. For him, “die Mittelbarkeit des Erzählens” is narrative's defining feature (15). H. Porter Abbott suggests the former is crucial, while he points out that the latter does not embrace the narrative in, for example, films, or works of visual art (2008, 13–15). With regard to narrative verse, it should also be noted that many ballads (narrative poems *par excellence*) have a narrative strategy that employs unmediated dramatic dialogue. Although I see mediation as an important aspect of many narratives, I concur with Abbott's position.

A narrative poem is one that recounts an event or events, as opposed to presenting states or argument, although the definition of event and attendant narrativity is a complex aspect of narratological analysis. Abbott makes it clear that the presence

of an event is necessary for a narrative to be seen as such. He is, however, reluctant to define an event, although he gives examples (2008, 13). He insists that narrativity is complex but is a matter of degree (2008, 25). Event and narrativity are discussed in great and illuminating detail by Peter Hühn and Abbott in the relevant entries in the *Living Handbook of Narratology* published online by Hamburg University. I operate in my essay with the following rough definition of event and narrativity, which is germane to my analysis of my selected texts. An event entails a verb and a change of state, physical or emotional. Narrativity involves the linking of events in sequence, temporal or causal, to generate some kind of story, however skeletal. By scholarly consensus, event and narrativity are attenuated in lyric utterances, descriptions, or discursive commentary (Abbott 2011). Dramatic texts, on the other hand, are certainly eventful, but are usually not mediated by narration. This understanding is a simple one, but it serves my purposes in the essay.

My concern in the following essay is with longer narrative verse. This description also needs to be glossed. This is especially so as I argue below, as Eva Müller-Zettlemann does (238–240), that all lyric poems contain or imply narrative. Longer is clearly a relative term, as is, in another context, short story. I suggest that literary categories are best understood as existing on a continuum. A brief poem is usually a page long or much less; John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences* are much longer. The poems I discuss are nearer the longer end of the spectrum, which is not to say that much shorter poems do not also contain clear narrative elements.

Narrative verse is an old category of literary text. Abbott suggests that the majority of narratives in human history has been in verse (2011). The antiquity of narrative verse, even only within English-language literature, is evident. The limits of this essay do not permit a detailed history of the category. I use the term category because I do not think narrative verse is a genre (in any strict sense, as a sonnet, crime story, or perhaps *film noir* are) or a mode (as a large class like the dramatic is); it is, however, clearly a category of text that can be distinguished, and is distinguished, among others. I can do no more than indicate the depth of the phenomenon. Chaucer's tales, the medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and popular ballads are central elements of the canon of English literature, as is John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). John Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1712/1714) are long narrative poems, as is Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798). In the 19th century, prominent examples of narrative verse are as varied as and as important as Alfred Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859), George Meredith's *Modern Love* (1862), Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868–1869), and Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1898). These are all very different poems – romance, *fabliau*, supernatural tale, beast fable, heroic epic, political satire, mock-heroic, psychological crime story, a dissection of a collapsing marriage, ballad – but they are all longer narrative poems.

Throughout the 20th century, narrative verse is present in English literature in major texts. Central canonical texts are examples of modernist narrative poetry: for example, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937). In the later part of the century, narrative poems form an important although often under-discussed aspect of literary history. For example, one of the finest Anglo-American poems of the 20th century, Anne Stevenson's *Correspondences* (1974), is a narrative poem, a feminist rewriting of US history in epistolary form. Narrative passages are central to Christopher Logue's *War Music* (1962–2005/2015). James Fenton's output is full of narrative poems (*inter alia*, "The Milkfish Gatherers," "Out of the East," "The Ballad of the Shrieking Man," but there are many others). These are only a few examples among many. The extensive tradition of narrative verse in English is acknowledged by Hermann Fischer (*passim*) and Catherine Addison. The latter states that "[t]he verse novel [the type of narrative verse on which she focuses] [...] was actually quite old [by the 1990s]. It had not even undergone a period of dormancy" (2). In the first decades of the 21st century, longer narrative verse has a long history.

However, recent narrative verse is underdiscussed by commentators on modern and contemporary poetry. This is the case with otherwise thorough and insightful monographic studies by Fiona Tolan (2010), Nerys Williams (2011), and David Kennedy and Christine Kennedy (2013). It is also the case with important and scholarly surveys of relevant fields. Erik Martiny's *Companion to Poetic Genre* (2012) does contain one illuminating and relevant essay, Romana Huk's on the ballad, but nothing else specifically focused on narrative verse as such (117–138). Wolfgang Görttschacher and David Malcolm's *A Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Poetry, 1960–2015* (2021), although several of its essays discuss narrative poems, does not look at the category of narrative verse specifically. A similar silence can be noted in Neil Corcoran's *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry* (2007) and Edward Larrisey's *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945–2010* (2016). If these companion volumes can be taken as demonstrating a critical consensus at the time of their publication, and I suggest that they do, narrative verse, as such, plays little part in that.

One influential anthology of late 20th-century English poetry indicates that recent narrative verse is important. Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion in the "Introduction" to their *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) suggest that one feature of the "decisive" change in "sensibility" that their anthology claims to document is a deployment of "the art of narrative." They acknowledge that this is "not so much a new element in poetry as an isolation and re-emphasis of a time-honoured one" (11, 18–19). For them, an innovatory quality of such verse lies in the deliberate inconclusiveness of some of these narrative poems and an emphasis on the artifice of storytelling (19). Their anthology also includes several texts by Douglas Dunn, Derek Mahon, Tony Harrison, Carol Rumens, and others, that clearly have marked narrative elements. Indeed, Paul

Muldoon's "Immram" is a relatively long narrative piece (144–152). However, I am not aware of any scholarly work that explicitly addresses the narrative verse of the poets included in this anthology. Over twenty-five years later, James Byrne and Claire Pollard's anthology *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets for the 21st Century* (2009) similarly includes several narrative poems by Emily Berry, Siddharta Bose, Joe Dunthorne, Sandeep Parmar, and others, but barely mentions this aspect of the poems in their selection.

Nor do narratologists usually discuss narrative verse. Genette, Stanzel, and Abbott do not discuss poetry at all in their far-ranging studies of narrative. Indeed, Müller-Zetzelmann argues that "[p]oetry is one of the few literary modes perceived to be situated outside the ever-widening narrative realm" (232, 233–236). A glance at the topics considered in James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz's *A Companion to Narrative Theory* confirms this observation. Part IV of this collection considers narrative in law, cinema, opera, music, and performance, but not in poetry (413–512). In an essay entitled "The Unnaturalness of Narrative Poetry," Brian McHale does something to combat this occlusion, while noting how it has been the norm within narratological studies (199–222). A major exception to this neglect lies in recent work by Peter Hühn and those scholars connected with him. However, Jörg Schönert, Hühn and Malte Stein certainly acknowledge the innovative nature of their undertaking in bringing the study of narrative to poetry (1). A more recent (although self-limiting) endeavour to relate narratological concepts to the analysis and study of lyric verse is Hühn's *Facing Loss and Death: Narrative and Eventfulness in Lyric Poetry* (2016). This neglect is discussed at greater length by David Malcolm (2018).

The indifference to verse narrative is surprising if for no other reason than that lyric verse always contains or implies narrative elements. Thus, any list of poets practicing narrative in the 20th century would be extensive. The narrative aspects of lyric verse are emphasized by Jochen Petzold (225). Müller-Zetzelmann discusses the ellipses, the lyric *histoire*, as she defines it, that are implied by any lyric poem. She goes on to argue that an analysis of the basic narratological story-discourse distinction would be of great use to those who discuss poetry (238–240, 244). The highly functional intersection of the narrative and the lyric is discussed at some length by Schönert, Hühn, and Stein (2007, 3), by Hühn (with contributions by Britta Goerke, Halina du Plooy, and Stefan Schenk-Haupt) (2016), by McHale (199–222), and by Malcolm (67–79).

However, longer narrative verse has recently provoked some theoretical discussion. For example, Ines Detmers points to the "Entinstitutionalisierung" (the deinstitutionalization) of the mixture of mode and genre, and the "gattungstransgressiv" (genre-transgressive) nature of the category (185, 190–191). Narrative verse is disturbing because it disturbs well-established distinctions between narrative and lyric, poetry and prose, and poem and novel. Important work in this field has been done by Henrieke Stahl, who distinguishes (along a spectrum of configurations

of longer narrative verse) among a collection of poems, a poem cycle, a novel in poems (Glyn Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* [2005]), and a verse novel (Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* [1986]). In the first two categories, the degree of thematic connection among parts is high, and though the poem cycle contains poems closely related thematically, in setting, and figures, any overarching narrative *histoire* (a plot, in Stahl's terms) is absent. A novel in poems, however, while maintaining a narrative arc, consists of relatively discrete, potentially autonomous poems with varying voices and points of view. Stevenson's *Correspondences* is another good example here. A verse novel, on the other hand, is marked by narrative coherence and consistent verse form and by unified narrational perspective (Stahl 90, 91). Besides Seth's well-known text, Fred D'Aguiar's *Blood Lines* (2000) is an example. Stahl suggests that recent writing in English about narrative verse occludes distinctions among types of that verse (90). This is not entirely true. Joy Alexander notes "the vexed question of distinguishing between a novel told in verse and a series of poems linked in narrative sequence" (270), without, however, trying to resolve the issue. It must be noted, however, that there is a tendency to collapse possible distinctions among narrative verse, the novel in poems, and a verse novel. Narrative verse is surely a larger category of which the novel in poems and the verse novel are sub-categories. That is the understanding with which I operate in this essay.

Nonetheless, contemporary narrative verse, however under-theorized, especially in its manifestation as a verse novel or novel in verse, has certainly drawn the attention of several recent commentators. Alexander discusses it in her essay "The Verse-novel: A New Genre" (2005), Catherine Addison addresses it in *A Genealogy of the Verse Novel* (2017), and it is the subject of Adrian Kempton's *The Verse Novel in English: Origins, Growth and Expansion* (2018). However, Stahl is correct that these studies are largely indifferent to distinctions among various categories of narrative verse, and indifferent to questions of technique, and tend, as their titles indicate, to class all as verse-novel. In my discussion below, I reverse this approach. My subject is narrative verse, verse marked by a high degree of narrativity and eventfulness, as I indicated above. But distinctions can be made. Some longer narrative poems are closer to novels than others. Moniza Alvi's *At the Time of Partition*, while it does give a coherent narrative, is closer to a highly unified collection of poems. Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* is, in Stahl's convincing terms, a novel in poems. The same is true of Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow*. Bernardine Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* and Ros Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* are verse novels, while Kate (Kae) Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* is, because of its brevity, similar to a short story in verse, a form that all the narratives in Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* fit within.

But whatever distinctions are to be made, longer narrative verse, in broad terms, has enjoyed a resurgence in the early 21st century in England. Here I list some important authors and titles: Fred D'Aguiar, *Blood Lines* (2000); Bernardine Evaristo, *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) and *Lara* (2009); Glyn Maxwell, *The Sugar*

Mile (2005); Caroline Bergvall, *Meddle English* (2011); Alice Oswald, *Memorial* (2011); Ros Barber, *The Marlowe Papers* (2012); Ian McMillan, *The Tale of Walter the Pencil Man* (2013); Moniza Alvi, *At the Time of Partition* (2013); Kate (Kae) Tempest, *Brand New Ancients* (2013); Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (2014); and Lavinia Greenlaw, *A Double Sorrow* (2014). One could include other texts: Maxwell's *Time's Fool* (2000) and Bergvall's *Drift* (2014) for example. Jay Bernard's recent *Surge* (2019) is relevant. Robin Robertson's *The Long Take* (2018) would be relevant (after all, it is published by an English publisher), but Robinson's Scottish origins mean that I must leave his verse narrative out of consideration. Craig Raine's *History: The Home Movie* (1994) is only a few years outside the time parameters of this essay. In what follows I analyse texts by Evaristo, Maxwell, Barber, Alvi, Tempest, Agbabi, and Greenlaw. My choice is partly subjective: these seem to me among the most accomplished examples of the category of longer narrative verse. The texts chosen also illustrate a wide range of narrative types and strategies. They also turn out to have a surprising amount in common.

3. Traditional and Popular Story Materials

The narrative poems under discussion predominantly rework popular and traditional story materials. Such adaptation is evident in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*. Spunky young Zuleika grows up in an African immigrant family on the mean streets of Londinium. The lovely, saucy girl of humble background catches the attention of a repellent rich older man. He marries her, enriches her family, sexually abuses her, and tries to control her. She draws the attention of an even more important figure and becomes the Emperor's mistress. He dies. Her husband poisons her. Nothing is left of her, not even a memory (236) until, that is, Evaristo brings her back. The story material's moves are unashamedly melodramatic and colourful.

Tempest, too, produces a popular narrative in *Brand New Ancients*, and one that, further, possesses a traditional orientation. The story material, eventful to a marked degree, involves a marriage that has fallen into boredom, an affair, domestic violence, a child brought up by someone not his father, remorse, drunkenness, two boys (Clive and Terry) growing up in neglect and falling into delinquency. Tommy, the child of Jane's fling with Brian, grows up a talented artist. He falls in love with the lovely and sensible Gloria who pulls pints at the local pub. Tommy prostitutes his talent for a lot of money working for an advertising firm in the City. He drifts away from Gloria, only to realize that he loves her. Clive and Terry, by now hardened louts, try to rape Gloria. She fights back and saves herself. Tommy sees it all. They are together. Brian, lonely and abandoned by all the women in his life, goes to Thailand, maintains a Thai child lover, and then dies.

The story material is drawn from television soap opera, the BBC's *EastEnders*, for example. Characters are mostly lower-class with every-person lower-class

English names like Kevin, Terry, or Gloria. They hold unglamorous jobs in a supermarket, a bar, or at an airport. The place setting is never specified, but one must assume it is London. When Tommy moves upwards into the City, he feels unhappy; he does not belong there, despite his success. But the story is traditional too, for these characters are Tempest's brand new ancients. The speaker/narrator (who can be identified with Tempest) constantly relates her characters to figures from classical mythology. Jane is Pandora (11); Mary is Medea at a supermarket checkout (13). Tommy is Dionysus (27); Terry is a minotaur (36). Gloria in her rage against her attackers, is one of Zeus's daughters (40) and she defends herself "like a heroine, a god" (42). Brian's South-East Asian country is even called an "Olympus" (46). In the opening seven pages of the text, the narrator insists that the gods and heroes are here with us in the modern city. "The Gods are all here / Because the Gods are in us," she declares (5).

Agbabi's *Telling Tales* is a reworking of the traditional and canonical narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It transposes Chaucer's romances, morality tales, beast fables, and *fabliaux* to contemporary and metropolitan Britain. The pilgrims are on a bus travelling from London to Canterbury. The MC, Harry Bailey, organizes a story-telling competition. What we have is the transcription of a recording (1–2). A list of author biographies (invented) is given at the book's end (115–120). They are all denizens of the contemporary London writing and performance scene, although they may come from far-flung parts of the world and are a truly international body of performers. The text marks the stages of their journey, the performers, and the Chaucer tale that each reworks. Helen Ivory calls the text "a vibrant reboot" (99), and Rory Waterman describes it as "for and about twenty-first-century – a fast-paced, modern equivalent with a contemporary cast" (23). It, too, combines the popular and the traditional.

Like Tempest's text, Agbabi's is narrative driven, full of events. This can at times achieve a dizzying effect, as in "Tit for Tat" (11–14). This tale is sexually explicit and deals in drugs and promiscuous fornication and cunning tricks played on others (it retells "The Reeve's Tale"). Indeed, this is largely the story materials of the tales in their rebooted versions. Much of this derives from Chaucer, but the degree of wild coupling, violence, drug consumption, carnivalesque abjection, and duping others in Agbabi's *Telling Tales* offers a particular version of contemporary Britain, one guaranteed to interest a young and contemporary audience. All the new Canterbury Tales are collapsed into *fabliaux*. Even the lowliest of Chaucerian tales usually carries some kind of moral. That is not the case here. The tales are "authentic / cos we're keeping it real," declares the MC at the start of the bus journey (2), a point that he repeats at its end (113). The poem's last line is "all that's written is written to inspire us" (113). Not everyone would agree. For example, Lyndon Davies acknowledges that Agbabi's versions of Chaucer may appeal to some: "She revels in the grimy side of life, in the lingo of street-lore,

drug-dealing, sex and violence and I think teenagers might enjoy her big garish colours and saucy mouth” (64). But Davies continues, Agbabi’s sources, for good or bad, may be *EastEnders* and *Big Brother* rather than Chaucer. For Sohini Basak, the reviewer of *Telling Tales in Wasafiri*, it is “an example of how contemporary poets can create a new audience for their work” (81).

In *A Double Sorrow*, Greenlaw retells one of the most familiar narratives in European literature, that of the lovers Troilus and Cressida (spellings of the female protagonist’s name are various), whose unhappy fates are played out against the background of the Trojan War. Greenlaw sets out some of her sources in an introduction: Chaucer, above all, but also Boccaccio and the unacknowledged earlier sources from which they draw (x–xi). Further, she marks the sources of specific passages in the text, giving book and line numbers to Chaucer’s text and to Boccaccio’s. (Robert Henryson’s powerful 15th-century retelling in Scots, *The Testament of Cresseid*, is not mentioned.) Thus, the story material is a familiar one and Greenlaw sticks to its received outlines, although her rendition of the story, which I discuss below, is innovative.

Maxwell in *The Sugar Mile*, Barber in *The Marlowe Papers* and Alvi in *At the Time of Partition* do not rework traditional story materials. However, one can scarcely exaggerate the presence of Maxwell’s subject (the bombing of London in 1940 and 1941) in the British popular imagination (Gardiner 2004, 689; Calder, *passim*). Further, the premise of Barber’s poem – Christopher Marlowe did not die in 1593, but lived to write plays for a cat’s-paw nonentity called William Shakespeare – also has some popular resonance, as is witnessed by the film *Anonymous* (2011). Similarly, the story of a family in time of war and, indeed, the subject of the Partition of India in 1947 have echoes in popular culture, for example in the TV series *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), although Alvi writes of that set of events from a different, although not entirely different, perspective.

4. Narrative and Narration

Narrative and narrational technique are traditional in most of the poems under discussion. In Evaristo’s *The Emperor’s Babe*, the story material is presented in a logical chronological sequence, with only minor analepses to present Zuleika’s parents’ journey from Africa to Londinium. Zuleika is the narrator throughout and her account is never questioned or rendered problematic. The text aims at maximum accessibility to its readers. The same is true of Barber’s *The Marlowe Papers*. The narrative is not entirely chronological and linear, but mixes passages before and after Marlowe’s feigned death and disappearance (approximately the first 40 pages). These are, however, clearly marked, and the narrative does, indeed, break down into two long chronologically coherent sequences. The first 200 pages are mostly devoted to the period before Marlowe’s feigned death and escape from

England, while the remaining 200 pages (approximately) deal with events after that. Temporal signposts are clear. The narrative, however, comes to no closure. It stops sometime in the early 1600s with many Marlovian plays still to come. It seems that Marlowe has finally accepted his hidden and obscure life, at least for the present, although if he is waiting for rehabilitation under a new king, he will be disappointed. Narration, too, is straightforward. Marlowe is the narrator. Other characters speak only in the dialogue he records or in letters he reproduces. Once again, the text is strikingly accessible.

Tempest organizes her narrative and shapes its narration like a 19th-century realist novelist. The narrative is chronological, eventful, and comes to two points of closure. The narrator is omniscient and intervening in the manner of a classic high Victorian fiction. The omniscient sections of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853–1854) offer a good example. "The Gods are all here," the narrator tells us. She elaborates:

The gods are in the betting shops
 the gods are in the caff
 the gods are smoking fags out the back
 the gods are in the office blocks
 the gods are at their desks
 the gods are sick of always giving more and getting less
 the gods are at the rave -
 two pills deep into dancing [...] (5)

For all its eventfulness and diversity of speakers, Agbabi's rewritten *Canterbury Tales* is similarly traditional and accessible. The competing narrators recount their tales in logical and chronological sequences. They come to points of closure. They act of story-telling is not problematized in any way. One example among many comes from "Tit for Tat," a retelling of "The Reeve's Tale" (11–14). The climax and closure of the tale is farcical, but coherently narrated (although the narrator is a dog). The wife of the cuckolded Psycho

strikes down on what she thinks is Jen,
 and hits her husband! Jen and Al
 grab dope, the space cakes, t-shirts, jeans
 and me – I leave a parting growl –
 and run through site, au naturel,
 to tent to tell our saga of
 free food, free dope, free cakes, free love. (14)

More problematic narratives and narrational strategies are found in Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* and Alvi's *At the Time of Partition*. *The Sugar Mile* has two central

story materials. One is an account of the 1940 bombing of an industrial area in London, the Sugar Mile of Tate and Lyle sugar warehouses. The other is set in a New York bar a few days before the 2001 attack on Manhattan. A third and minor narrative recounts a major shipping accident on the Thames in 1878 involving the sinking of a pleasure boat and the deaths of hundreds of passengers. All narratives either directly (1940 and 1878) or through implication (2001) entail very large civilian casualties and substantial destruction. The text moves between its two main settings, 2001 and 1940, from the beginning. The connection between the two times is the person of Joey, an Englishman in the New York bar, who is a survivor of the 1940 bombings in London. An English poet, Glenn, writes down, it appears, what Joey tells him, although there must be a very large measure of imaginative reconstruction in the text. There is certainly editing. Pages 3–4 is a first draft of page 139. Page 122, perhaps Glenn's notes, perhaps something else, has corrections marked.

Certainly, various voices concatenate and intersect in 2001 and 1940; various points of view interweave. Some have names: Raul the barman in New York; Granny May in 1940; members of the Pray family in 1940. But there are also an unnamed Warden, a Home Guard soldier, a bus driver. There is a degree of confusion about the voices in both the 2001 and 1940 sections. It is not always entirely clear who is talking and who is related to whom (or, indeed, exactly what they are talking about, current actuality, memory, or imagined events). That is surely deliberate on Maxwell's part, especially in the 1940 part of the narrative. These are people displaced, traumatized, and confused, whom Alison Brackenbury calls "Blitz ghosts" (83). It is also clear that in this text any account of the past is in some measure an imaginative reconstruction. Alvi's *At the Time of Partition* also problematizes the act of narrative. The text is largely organized in a logical and chronological sequence, but an important topic in the text involves the narrator/poet herself. She chooses to tell "the family story" (9). She tries to put herself in her grandmother's place (14), but must acknowledge when and where she must invent (27, 39). In fact, her doubts about her telling this story recur throughout. Is the story "there for the taking"?; is it hers for the taking (9)? Is she being presumptuous in telling it (52)? "How to arrive at one overarching story?" she asks herself of Partition (8). In the end, almost with relief, she returns "the unending story / To itself" (63).

Greenlaw's version of *Troilus and Criseyde* is complex in narrative and narrational terms. The text has an omniscient narrator who in a logical and chronological manner recounts events or gives characters' thoughts, feelings, and words. See, for example, the presentation of Calchas's thoughts and actions (8). See, also, the account of Troilus's reawakened spirits in his love for Criseyde (99), or that of Criseyde's fears in her isolation and abandonment (184, 185). See, too, the accounts of battle that bring the text close to an end (214, 215). But other voices speak directly to the reader: Pandarus (98) (he is addressing Troilus, but his utterance is unmediated); Troilus (150, 179, 201); and Criseyde (95, 139, 208). It must be

emphasized that these are all unmediated utterances, either directly addressed to another character or part of an internal debate. Thus, the narrative has prominent dramatic elements. But the most striking aspect of Greenlaw's retelling is a formal one. The text consists of nearly two hundred seven-line passages, printed as separate poems on separate pages. It is, however, difficult to imagine these poems being published separately, independently of some kind of narrative context. The text is fragmentary to a marked degree. Indeed, narrational or authorial or editorial paratexts, printed at the bottom of many pages, are often necessary to make it clear to the reader who is doing or saying what and to whom. Ellipses recur throughout. The act of retelling and the partial and fictive nature of the narrative is, thus, foregrounded.

5. Verse Technique

The technical aspects of the verse in the texts discussed are often traditional and aim to make texts readily accessible to readers. In Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe* the metrical base of the poem is a free verse line that ranges in syllables per line and in main stresses per line, but mostly has around ten syllables and three to four main stresses. This is a line that is, in this configuration, close to rhythmic prose. In an interview, Evaristo says that she is proud of the fact that the verse does not interfere with reading the text (Valdivieso 10). But several sections have much shorter lines with fewer main stresses (22–26, 107–108, 184, 236). These sections are often less narrative than lyrical utterances. Technically the entire poem presents a familiar configuration of early 21st century lyric verse in English.

In *The Marlowe Papers*, the main verse technique employed by Barber is a traditional and familiar ten-syllable blank verse line, which has a basic iambic skeleton, although not by any means always. For example, Marlowe starts his narration with the following:

Church-dead. And not a headstone in my name.
No brassy plaque, no monument, no tomb,
no whittled initials on a makeshift cross,
no pile of stones upon a mountain top. (1)

The first line has five main stresses, but is not iambic – rather it runs: spondee, iamb, amphibrach, anapaest. Line 2 runs: diamb, second paeon, iamb. Line 3 runs: two amphibrachs, third paeon, single stress. Line 4 runs: two iambs, and possibly a six-syllable foot that is scanned xxx/x/. Barber employs this line throughout the text. There is occasional rhyme, usually at the end of a verse paragraph. For example,

And so, I leave my former name behind.
Gone on the Deptford tide, the whole world blind. (2)

Such rhyming is a concluding and conclusive device familiar from Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Equally familiar is Marlowe's (and Barber's) deployment of sonnet form, with a relaxed use of rhyme (2, 228, 268, 309, 327). The lines are ten-syllable ones here too, as they are in passages consisting of rhyming quatrains (for example, 118, 134, 193, 321). The verse has received praise, with Laurie Smith noting that "Barber has developed an excellent narrative medium" (64). Such a comment and Evaristo's remark quoted above suggest that the verse does not get in the way of the comprehensibility of the text's narrative.

Alvi's verse in *At the Time of Partition* is equally accessible and familiar: short two- or three-syllable lines, free verse. It is the standard line of much late 20th- and early 21st-century lyric verse (here, of course, employed in a narrative). It is intimate and conversational, as befits the text's domestic and familial perspective on history. It is accessible and moving in equal measure. It is certainly not self-advertising and demanding, but tells its story with tact and modesty.

Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* is intended to be a performance piece. "This poem was written to be read aloud," declares the author in a paratext on a title page (n.p.). As in Evaristo's and Barber's texts, Tempest's verse is of an accessible kind, at least to a certain younger audience. The lines are of variable length. Sometimes there is rhyme, sometimes not. Many rhymes are assonantal or consonantal, and do not count as traditional full rhymes. Alliteration is frequent, to give a phonic force to an utterance. Anisobaric rhyme is common. It is a text for a rap performance. One short passage must stand for many:

There's always been heroes
and there's always been villains
and the stakes may have changed
but really there's no difference.
There's always been greed and heartbreak and ambition
and bravery and love and trespass and contrition [...].
The stories are there if you listen. (4)

This is very forceful and inventive verse. "Heroes" and "changed" remain unrhymed. But "villains" surprisingly rhymes with "difference." Tempest is often very inventive with rhyme, for example, "pavement" and "Ancients" (43). The syntactic parallelism, homoeoteleuton ("ambition," "contrition"), consonance ("difference," "ambition," "contrition," "listen"), and alliteration ("trespass," "stories," "listen") of the remaining lines make its punchy point with vigour. The text aims at public performance and comprehensibility.

Helen Ivory calls Agbabi's *Telling Tales* "a vibrant reboot" (99) of Chaucer's texts, and Rory Waterman describes it as "for and about twenty-first-century – a fast-paced, modern equivalent with a contemporary cast" (23). The verse as varied as the cast of narrators and characters. The diversity of forms is unlike Chaucer's

consistent ten-syllable rhyming couplets (revolutionary in the late 14th century) in the source text. Thus, “The Kiss” uses eight-syllable lines rhyming aaaa (7–10). “Roving Mic” has much shorter lines and rhyme in irregular patterns (15–18). “What Do Women Like Bes” largely does not rhyme, although there are hints of assonance and consonance, and it does at times drift into rhyme (31–37). “The Makar” is composed in *rime royal* (ababbcc) although with a very free sense of rhyme (61–65). “Profit” is made up largely of unrhymed ten-syllable lines, although a rhyme is always found for the refrain of “*Cupiditas*” (70–74). Some tales are in couplets, for example, “The Gospel Truth” (109–111). However, despite variety, accessibility is a key element in the texts. One commentator has noted the texts’ rootedness in traditions of reggae, dub, and rap (Davies 63). The following stanza certainly sounds like something from a rap battle, with internal lexical repetition and persistent rhyme:

So, I got fucked; John’s a fuckwit;
 an Nick my lover, fucked to shit;
 an Abs scored hard, he’s fucking fit;
 both men were fucked by the fucked-off git. (10)

The technical strategies employed in Greenlaw’s *A Double Sorrow* and Maxwell’s *The Sugar Mile* are different. As in Alvi’s text, the technical features of Greenlaw’s verse are not ones usually associated with narrative. Her verse form, Greenlaw states in the Introduction to the text, is an adaptation of Chaucer’s *rime royal*. Although line length and number of main stresses per line are variable, there is a tendency toward ten-syllable lines, although these show wide variation in number of main stresses per line. Rhyme, in this version of *rime royal*, is usually a matter of assonance and consonance, rather than full rhyme. (Greenlaw also abandons rhyme on occasion, for example, 66, 147.) The seven-line fragments are held together by considerable phonological orchestration. It is carefully crafted verse, but it is not a narrative-centred medium. It is certainly not a transparent one. Although highly functional in evoking emotion, memory, the interwoven nature of persons and experiences, the devices call attention to themselves.

Maxwell’s *The Sugar Mile* is a demanding text requiring an attention to technical aspects of the verse that other texts in my corpus do not. The confusion and destruction of the bombing it recounts are technically enacted in the text. In the opening sections set in 2001, for example, it is really not clear where we are and who is speaking (5–9). The voices in 1940 are often fragmentary utterances cut out of and from an immediate context (for example, 20–21, where disjointed syntax and lack of punctuation reflect this). The text moves between verse and prose (104–107, 118–120), and at times becomes a congeries of disconnected words (22–23). The verse, too, is varied in organization. Over the whole poem, line length and stress pattern are diverse. The role of rhyme in Maxwell’s verse is striking. Long sections

have no apparent rhyme or phonological echoing: for example, 3–9, 20, 71, 84. Other sections are rhymed, but the rhymes and the schemes are not always traditional. For example:

And so we came to this school on Agate Street
in Canning Town, it was late

we were dead beat
a man rides by repeating *Yellow alert*

Yellow alert.
Point is, we had no right but the way I saw it

anyone had the right.
Purple alert

He goes. *You're like a rainbow* says gran
and he storms off on his bike, somebody's son. (42; original emphasis)

Consonance is used in this passage, not full rhyme, although the voice that the above quotation comes from does also use full rhyme (42–43). Maxwell often uses repetition in rhyming positions (14, 25, 40, 66). Schemes are frequently quite irregular and can vary from stanza to stanza. See, for example:

Is that the thing with the Empire? Hey I cracked it
Clint, that's how you guys
did it, you sold people shit
then kicked their ass.

There's a *US* merchant marine? You're shittin me.
Sign me up I tell you.
There's a million bucks to you
mi amigo

and meanwhile put your fucking hands up. Cool
merchant marines rule.
Catering corps I guess I'm
catering corps. (61; original emphasis)

In three stanzas, assonance echoing abab in stanza 1 shifts in stanza 2 to a pattern of no rhyme followed by bb in which two words in rhyming positions are actually repetition. If “me” in line 1 rhymes, it is with the opening word “mi” of line 4.

The third stanza quoted above consists of a couplet followed by two non-rhyming lines. Such disarray is highly functional and highly wrought. It accords well with a world of destruction and disorientation. But it certainly does not make for easy reading. *The Sugar Mile* is a much more demanding text (not necessarily a better text) than Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*.

6. Accessible Pasts

The majority of texts in my sample is set in the past. Even those who do not have such a setting demonstrate a close and functional relationship with the past. All show a clear aim to make the past available and accessible to contemporary readers. In Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, the setting is Londinium, a provincial capital within the Roman Empire, in the early 200s of the common era. The place setting is realized in some detail: Londinium's streets, markets, shops, wharfs, inns and clubs, housing developments. The surrounding space is wild and untamed. But Londinium is part of a wider world. The Roman military has turned its attention to savage Caledonia (a source of the main character's slaves). It is also part of a multi-national, globalized world. The narrator-protagonist Zuleika's family has come to Britannia from what is now the Sudan; the Emperor Septimus Severus hails from North Africa (and speaks an odd Latin embodied in the poem by his article-less English); Londinium teems with people from all corners of the Empire.

Like Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, Barber's *The Marlowe Papers* is a historical narrative. The setting is late Elizabethan England, London and its surroundings, the Low Countries and other parts of Continental Europe. The setting is rendered with a close attention to detail, both squalid, vigorous, and charming. The sensational story material is the stuff of historical fiction, film and TV series. Christopher Marlowe (the text's narrator) does not die in a tavern brawl in 1593. For incautious remarks on religion he is in danger from the paranoid, censorious, and repressive Tudor state, and so his friends in high places (for he has been a foreign agent for the very Elizabethan regime that now threatens him) substitute a dead body for his person, giving out that he has been stabbed. They convey him secretly abroad where he spends a decade in exile on the Continent or under an assumed identity and in hiding in England. In the meantime he continues writing for the theatre, in the cause of literature, self-expression, and to the profit of actors and theatre managements. In a cunning move to conceal Marlowe's role, the authorship of his plays is assigned to a provincial nonentity called Shakespeare. Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* is, as a retelling of the Troilus and Criseyde material, a historical piece too. The setting is the later stages of the Trojan War and the characters fall in and out of love against the background of ancient Greek religion, politics and warfare. Clothes, artefacts and customs are of the distant past.

Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile* is set in more recent pasts: 1940, 2001, and 1878,

all linked by the large loss of civilian lives in bombings and an accident, and by persons involved in them. In *At the Time of Partition*, Alvi's subject is one of the major events of recent world history, the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 after the end of British imperial rule. Traumatic and bloody, it has shaped the fates of millions of people for decades. "*Over half a million lost their lives, / 220,000 went missing,*" notes the narrator in an aside in italics (9). Alvi has two central topics within her text. First, the narrator (whom one can identify with the author herself) recounts an accident to her uncle, who as a young boy is struck by a passing truck and has "a damaged mind" in consequence (9). In the vast movement of populations resulting from the Partition, he is further lost by the people with whom he travels from India to Pakistan. A second topic relates to the central figure of the poem, the narrator's/poet's grandmother, in charge of five children (a further one lives in Britain) who must make the decision to leave Ludhiana in India for Lahore in Pakistan. Her story involves the pains and danger of flight and migration, the displacements and violence of Partition. It also involves the complexities of finding a new home and settling down in it. Grand historical events and personal, family experiences interweave throughout the poem within the context of Partition.

The relationship of Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* and Agbabi's *Telling Tales* to the past is more ambiguous. Tempest's story of contemporary lower-class London life is brought into relation with a mythological and ancient context, as I have indicated above. Characters are seen as figures from ancient legends, and this is a central aspect of the author's intent. They are the brand new ancients of the title. Their story is both a particular and a universal one, contemporary and timeless. As one commentator indicates, the situation in Agbabi's text – a slam competition aboard a London bus *en route* to Canterbury – only makes sense in the context of the Chaucerian intertext (Davies 63). Would such a competition be possible? Why would the participants become involved in it? Thus, the past enables the contemporary texts. The stories the participants tell are all, however, firmly contemporary. Nods to the past are all paratextual – in the designation of the Chaucerian tales that contemporary narratives are modelled on (for example, the first tale "Emily" by Robert Knightley is also called "The Knight's Tale," and this strategy is followed with the other narratives) and in the marking of the various stages of the journey to Canterbury (Old Kent Road, Shooter's Hill, Dartford, and onwards to the travellers' destination).

Both Tempest's and Agbabi's texts bring the contemporary into relation with the past, Tempest through the universal archetypes underlying her characters, and Agbabi by making the textual past an enabling device for modern stories. Maxwell and Alvi put the past in a more complex relationship with the present inasmuch as both foreground the process of reconstruction of a past course of events and experiences. In *The Sugar Mile*, the two main time settings (1940 and 2001) are linked in the person of Joey, an Englishman in a bar in New York, who is a survivor of the 1940 bombings in London, and who will be close to and perhaps a victim of the

imminent September 11 attack on the US city. Through the figure of the English poet Glenn, and his notes and drafts, the process whereby the past is recounted in the present is made clear. The same is true in *At the Time of Partition*. A central topic in the text involves the narrator/poet herself. She chooses to tell “the family story” in the present (9). She tries to put herself in her grandmother’s place (14), but is frank about her inventions (27, 39). As demonstrated above, her doubts about her telling this story recur throughout.

In all the texts in my sample, however, there is a clear attempt to bring the past into the present, to make the past available to contemporary readers. Evaristo makes this aim explicit in interviews. She declares that she wishes to seize the British past and make it accessible and usable for modern Black readers (Valdivieso 18; Gunning 167). The multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan nature of her setting in *The Emperor’s Babe* is part of this intent (Gunning 165–166). Maxwell’s story in *The Sugar Mile*, also, is primarily told by lower-class Londoners, who are not ethnically homogeneous. Joey and his family are identified as foreign, either Italian or Jewish (17). Tempest, too, identifies her brand new ancients as young, urban, relatively poor, and lower class, engaged in all kinds of socially questionable activities, and dragged down by low-paid work and the trials of modern urban life (5). The story tellers and their characters in Agbabi’s *Telling Tales* are similar. Much more ethnically diverse than Tempest’s, they include Nigerians, Welsh, Geordies, Scots, West Indians, Mancunians, a writer from Zimbabwe, and several others. As commentators have noted, this is *The Canterbury Tales* designed for a young, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, and ethnically diverse context (Davies 64; Waterman 23).

It is also through language that the authors of my corpus of texts bring the past into the present. The setting of *The Emperor’s Babe* is the 200s CE, but the Londinium in it is deeply anachronistic and evidently fictional, as is noted by Bruce King (147). It contains, *inter alia*, a Cophthall Avenue (92), a “take-away caff in Bond Court” (113), and a “des res postcode of EC4” (126). The language spoken is appropriately disjunctive. Severus remarks “that what Picts call *Real McCoy*, it was simply / a case of what Gauls call *déjà vu*” (141). Zuleika says of herself: “This Über-babe is Übercharged, even now. / I’m buzzing” (118). Throughout in narration and in direct speech the text contains a striking mixture of 2000’s contemporary and demotic language with usually ungrammatical dog Latin. For example, Zuleika’s father boasts that his daughter is “married to Roman nobilitas. Veritas princess.” To which Zuleika responds silently “Blah, blah, bloody-blah” (38). This linguistic *mélange* is part of the text’s humour and recurs throughout. It also serves to bring a quasi-historical Londinium, already sounding like modern London in its diversity and cosmopolitan features, close to the modern metropolis.

Characters’ language in *The Sugar Mile* is similarly demotic and contemporary. This is evident in New York, for example in Raul’s speech (8–9), “But hey you’re sitting on Joey Stone’s Own Bar Stool / so I got to believe you, right.

Him and his issues.” It is also the linguistic colouration of the London voices, for example, Robby’s words “That about tops it / really, know what I mean. Nice day, Robby? / Yeah, not bad. Got bombed to buggery. Sorry” (49). More formal language is appropriate to the current voice, for example, that of the Warden (67), but it is an exception among the lower-class voices of the bombed. The language used by the narrator and characters in *Brand New Ancients* is similarly and suitably informal and non-standard. For example, among many: “Kevin don’t see it” (7); “ain’t” (10); “he doesn’t show nobody else” (20); “she don’t want to stare long” (34); “Then he’s stood up and he’s went to the door” (35).

The language in the texts in *Telling Tales* is very varied, but it is usually demotic and contemporary too. It is often neutral, neither unduly formal nor informal (1, 57, 77). But it is often informal and non-standard, for example: “don’t” (instead of doesn’t) (5), “My husband’s old an crap in bed” (7); “off her tits, / *Gimmegrassordieyoushits!*” (11); “use ta be one” (41); “for his own bod” and “too many bevvies” (91). There are several other examples. There is also a range of dialects: Tyneside (21–27); Nigerian English (31–37); Welsh-English (38–40); and Slavic (perhaps Polish) article-less English (105–106). One tale consists almost entirely of the titles of pieces of popular music (49–53). Another tale is written (and recited?) in text messages with the abbreviations and symbols widely used with that kind of text (88–90). The linguistic situation on the bus is very fluid, but all is vibrantly contemporary and predominantly highly informal, what Karen McCarthy-Woolf sees as part of a “democratic poetics” (52). Linguistically Barber’s *The Marlowe Papers* and Alvi’s *At the Time of Partition* are not demotic and informal in the same way as the texts discussed above. Alvi’s narrative is written, however, in a largely neutral language, neither formal nor informal, but eminently accessible to a wide range of contemporary readers. However, in an Author’s Note, Barber makes explicit her linguistic anachronisms “to avoid cod Elizabethan and strike a balance between authenticity and readability” (409).

The aim of “readability,” which I wish to gloss further as accessibility and attractiveness to a contemporary audience, to bring the past into the present, is key in what I have noted above about the texts in my corpus. With regard to Evaristo’s and Agbabi’s narratives, this aim is clear. But it is also true of Tempest’s and Barber’s. In *Brand New Ancients*, there is a constant drive to make the poem accessible to a contemporary urban and young audience: the popular story material, the every-person names, the language. Even the myths and legends that Tempest chooses as points of reference are relatively well-known. The poem is also intended to be a performance piece. “This poem was written to be read aloud,” declares the author in a paratext on a title page (n.p.). In addition to its other features conducive to accessibility, *The Marlowe Papers* is furnished with a “*Dramatis Personae*,” guiding the reader through the large cast of characters, and extensive notes (410–438), further explaining characters and situations and grounding them in documented accounts. Despite its very complex and wide-ranging story

material – espionage, love affairs, doings of the literary world, theatrical performances, travel, illness, betrayals, brawls, gaol time, avoiding arrest and capture, being spied on by malevolent persons, sea voyages, meals in inns of various categories in various countries – the text is user-friendly.

7. Non-Narrative in Narrative

One of the most striking aspects of recent narrative verse in England is that it has substantial non-narrative elements. As I have noted above, in Evaristo's *The Emperor's Babe*, the metrical base of the poem is a free verse line that fluctuates around ten syllables and three to four main stresses. But several sections have much shorter lines with fewer main stresses (22–26, 107–108, 184, 236). These sections are often less narrative than lyrical utterances. For it is part of the text's variety and its transgressive quality that substantial parts of what is clearly a narrative poem (mediated eventfulness) are not really that. Narrativity is not entirely absent in such passages, because it cannot be, but is subordinated to expression of feeling. Zuleika likes giving lists (which are usually non-narrative or where eventfulness is attenuated). For example, she conveys the rich variety of Londinium streets thus:

[...] there were pearl-sellers
 goldsmiths, robe-makers, cloak-makers,

 cabinet-makers, embroiderers, dyers,
 tanners, workers sitting on stools outside

 or doors wide open to shops,
 money-changers lurked in doorways [...] (40)

Other examples of Zuleika's penchant for listing abound (42, 63, 74, 103–104, 105, 121, 128–129, 130, 146). Narrativity is also attenuated in a variety of ways in several passages throughout the text. For instance, one notes this in Zuleika's description of her made-up, luxuriant appearance (107–108), and in her presentation of her state of mind as she awaits her period (109). The lack of what is usually classed as event is most evident in the passages of erotic rapture, surely one of the central sections of the text, which detail the emotional intensity of Zuleika's and Severus's passion for each other. It is noteworthy that these are post-coital and although far from eventless, these events are intimate and small scale (139–150, 151–159, 160). For example:

I feel the sweep of your lash on my skin,
 for my boy slips inside himself again,

to return to his core, his composure,
and I am left rowing with his legions inside
a galley on a barren horizon,
when the battle is finally over. (159)

Emotion and unmediated lyrical utterance are dominant here. Events are small-scale or metaphors for Zuleika's sense of momentary abandonment.

In Maxwell's *The Sugar Mile*, a similar striking and disruptive aspect of the text is the juxtaposition of narrative and non-narrative passages. It is clearly a narrative poem (on the border of a verse novel and a novel in poems – see Roger Caldwell (9)), although a highly elliptical one. For example, the implied narrative, the hidden schema/script, of the September 11 attack is, as is the nature of such schemata/scripts, not narrated (Hühn and Sommer 2009, 233). The distribution of the story materials over several speakers, who, in any case, are not strictly recounting events, but rather expressing emotional states or impressions, further attenuates the degree of traditionally understood narrativity in the text. But many passages are, certainly, predominantly narrative, for example, Joey's accounts of moving through the bombed streets (78–80, 108–117). It is, however, worth noting that narrative becomes highly attenuated in many parts of the text. For example pages 3–9 consist of scene setting and general reflection. Pages 74–75 are relatively event-free imagining of a future state. Pages 86–89 consist of dialogue, interior monologue, remembering, and reflection. At times, narrative – often opaque and disjointed, as one might expect in an account of the Blitz – is displaced by reflection and emotional state. *The Sugar Mile* is disturbed at every level, in a manner that enacts the disturbances, repeated throughout history, that it presents (Caldwell 9). One of these levels is embodied in the shifts from narrative to non-narrative.

The Marlowe Papers is clearly a narrative poem and (in Stahl's terms, a verse novel) and narrative there is aplenty. The relatively long text, as I indicate above, is full of eventfulness. Sometimes events are given in past tenses (for example, 140–143), sometimes in historic present. One example can stand for many:

Hog Lane, just after two, three years ago.
After a meal of mutton and cold beer
with Thomas Nashe, I'm strolling back to work
on *Doctor Faustus* when the Devil himself
calls out behind me [...].

“Untrammelled shit.
Give me your sword,” he says to Orrell, “quick.
I'll slice his head off. Then we'll see whose brains

are bigger.” Clumsily, he wrests the sword
 from his large friend’s scabbard. Orrell shoves him off,
 annoyed to be handled. Yet eager to assist,
 he hands his yeoman friend a soldier’s blade.
 The rapier at my waist weighs half as much,
 but neither of us has experience. (79)

A great deal happens in the melee that follows. But it is striking (and appropriate, for this is poem about a playwright) how much of the narrative as a whole is taken up with dialogue (for example, 88, 112, 131). As befits a text about theatre people, substantial parts of the text are dramatic. But many are also lyric utterances. Eventfulness is attenuated and univocal, unmediated expression of feeling or general observation become dominant. Such a tendency is noted by Omar Sabbagh (156). There are many examples of this lyric quality in the text. Two must suffice. Just before the fatal affray in Hog Lane, Marlowe reflects on love and loss, on social hypocrisy and unhappiness in a chapter entitled “Soliloquy” (76–78):

What is a human being? Are we clay?
 Excrescences of light? Bright animals
 adopting gross stupidity? Or gods
 pelted in human skin, come down to play,
 create, destroy, find joy in misery?
 The moon squats on the mountains like a pearl.
 It only has to rise, and will be free. (78)

These lines are expressions of speculation not accounts of actions. Later Marlowe reflects on one of his hiding places. “If I must be imprisoned,” he declares, “let it be / in a house like this.” There follow some 13 lines of reflection and description, not event (261). Although the text is fundamentally and predominantly a narrative one, it is also in no small measure marked, in a very Elizabethan/Jacobean fashion, by the repeated presence of dramatic and lyric passages.

In keeping with its modesty of focus – for the grand events of history are seen through a family’s individual and domestic experiences – Alvi’s *At the Time of Partition* is oddly attenuated in terms of narrative event, oddly inasmuch as Partition itself was an event on a grand scale. There are passages of eventfulness: for example, a lorry strikes Athar (10–11), India is partitioned (15), ninety women jump in a well (17), and the grandmother looks for her son (42–42). She cooks:

She made paneer in her kitchen
 in their half of the house,

strained milk through a muslin bag
to separate the curd from the whey. (60)

But the text is constantly attenuated in terms of event. For example, Partition itself (a cataclysmic event) is presented not without verbs, but certainly mostly without verbs denoting change of state:

A line so delicate a sparrow might have
picked it up in its beak.

Not an artist's line, or a line of writing.

A line between birth and non-being.
A line that would mean death for so many.

The land itself at its calmest and most dignified
yielded to the line, lay still –

it didn't know what was coming. (12–13)

One further example among many is the scene of the dying man lying by the road:

Under the sparse shade
of a sparse tree
an old man lay dying
by the wayside, severed
from the moving world.
His wife fanned herself
with a tattered fan.
The grandchildren lolled.

What else was there to do

under the sparse shade
of a sparse tree,
the caravan gone? (33)

The figures are inert, the events minor; the question is what there is “to do.” The answer is nothing. In a world shaped by large-scale events, it is as if the narrator wishes to avoid event in her story. Is she distrustful of narrative? As I note above, she expresses her doubts about giving an account of the past. Certainly, at the

poem's end, she is sure it is "Time to return everyone / to themselves" (63), to free them from a narrative that she has always been hesitant of.

Surprisingly in *Brand New Ancients*, in such a narrative-centred and narrative-driven poem, there are passages that are better classed as lyric and discursive/reflective. For example, in the first seven pages of the text, the speaker makes her case that the gods and heroes are on the streets around us. She is not actually narrating events (1–7). Tommy's bliss with Gloria is relatively event-free (25) and Tempest follows it with a recurrent passage about the "brand new ancients" that are all around us (24–25), which is reflective and discursive not strictly story. Similar non-narrative passages occur throughout (26–28, 28–29, 42–43). The narrative drive of the text is impressive, but it also abounds in passages of general reflection.

Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow* is a retelling of a traditional narrative, and it, too, is undeniably a narrative text, albeit a highly elliptical one, as its seven-line sections miss out large parts of the material's *histoire*. It has a narrator who recounts events or gives characters' thoughts, feelings, and words. I have noted this aspect of the text above. But the narrative is not always event-centred. Troilus gives vent to his anguish, without a verb denoting action or change of state:

Where are her arms that last night were here?
 Where is her body where?
 Is this pillow all that's left for me to embrace?
 How can I persevere?
 Who right now stands in her presence?
 To whom right now does she listen?
 Who will speak for me right now in my absence? (177)

Criseyde does the same (203). In addition, the narrator, too, at times dispenses completely with event. Narrator becomes lyric voice here:

A place of softest snow
 A place of rise and fall
 A place of open paths
 A place of long curves
 A place of pale cloud
 A place of fine feathers
 A place without walls. (119)

The narrator does the same in other parts (47, 93). Even if these passages have verbs and events, they are secondary and peripheral ones, imagined, capturing mood and feeling, not directly related to the major events of the narrative. And in the passage from page 119 quoted above, there is zero narrativity. Thus, non-narrative elements occur in most of the narrative texts that I have chosen to discuss. Indeed, the only

one of the corpus that seems resolutely and exclusively devoted to event is Agbabi's *Telling Tales*. Her story-tellers eschew reflection, extended expression of emotion, and discursive comment. With them the story is always the thing.

8. Conclusion

The configuration of features of the texts outlined above prompts four general reflections. First, the existence of texts that combine features of the novel and verse, generating terms like “verse novel” or “novel in verse,” illustrates the classic formalist principle of de-automatization on the level of mode. The bringing together of two disparate categories of text enlivens and makes fresh both the novel and verse. That such a process runs through all levels of literature and its texts is argued by Viktor Shklovsky. He writes, “[a]utomatization corrodes things, clothing, furniture, one's wife and one's fear of war. [...] And so that a sense of life may be restored, that things may be felt, so that stones may be made stony, there exists what we call art” (qtd. in Shukman and O'Toole 35). *Mutatis mutandis*, I think this principle applies at the level of mode. Yury Tynianov comments in a similar way. “The dynamics of form,” he writes, “is a continual violation of automatism” (qtd. in Shukman and O'Toole 30). The transgressive and galvanizing nature of narrative verse is an important aspect of the category (Detmers 185, 190–191). Second, the existence of narrative verse in the early 21st century illustrates another formalist principle, this time one associated with the Polish scholar Ireneusz Opacki. In an essay published in 1963, Opacki argues that in any period there is a “certain hierarchy of literary genres,” with a “royal genre” at its head. In the development of literature, that royal genre will inevitably affect and attract other genres (120–121). According to Opacki, this is how literature proceeds. Thus, for the purposes of this essay, and drawing on the above analyses, I suggest that the novel is a “royal” form that attracts verse towards it.

Third, the relationship of narrative verse to narrative must be researched more thoroughly than I have been able to here. Two of the texts discussed above (by Maxwell and Alvi) evince an unease with narrative, an unease that is certainly part of late 20th-century and early 21st-century fiction. But a detachment from narrative is also apparent in the presence of lyric (and dramatic) elements in all but one of the texts discussed (Agbabi's *Telling Tales*). However, this attenuation of narrative needs much more attention and a much broader perspective than I can give it here. How prominent is such a feature in the narrative verse tradition? Is it more common in some periods than others? Is it purely a 21st-century phenomenon? Such questions open up possible lines of research. Fourth, several features of contemporary narrative verse that I discuss above are designed to ensure a wide readership. These include: popular story materials; unproblematic narrative and narrational technique; verse technique; and rendering the past accessible to the present. Thus, if one looks

to the future, one can speculate that the longer narrative poem, configured thus, has a future within English poetry.

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