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## The Unaccompanied: Poetic Expressions of the Working Classes in England

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**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.

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### 1. Introduction

What is the English working class? Since Friedrich Engels' epochal description,<sup>1</sup> the members of this social class defined themselves more or less rigidly. Until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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 subversive<sup>4</sup> (Lock 2021, 2). When members of the working class did write verse, it was very often – in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> century: workers versus bosses, Black versus White, North versus South, male versus female. In the liquid, globalised world of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, a short and exemplary detour should be undertaken here, by taking a closer look at the Jubilee Reading List 2022, to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Jewish authors are also missing,<sup>10</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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,<sup>12</sup> 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 Leigh<sup>13</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> Currently, Geoff Hattersley is working on a poem cycle dealing with the ambiguous influence of new technologies on the lives of ordinary people.<sup>17</sup>

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> McFarlane also evokes historical precedents of 20<sup>th</sup> 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).<sup>19</sup>



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.<sup>20</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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*<sup>21</sup> 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](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](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](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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