

Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry



*Michael Thurston
and Nigel Alderman*

WILEY Blackwell

Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry

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To Emily, Abby, Katie, Megan, Lisa, and Olivia

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Introduction: “Postwar,” “British,” “Irish,” and “Poetry”

History is now and England.

The year is 1942 and Britain has been at war for almost three years. Amidst the wreckage of urban aerial bombardment, some of which he directly witnessed as a volunteer air-raid warden, the poet T.S. Eliot contemplates the role poetry might play in the redemption of a fallen world. At a moment that seems to stand outside time, at a site that seems the margin where world and underworld overlap, he confronts a figure for the literary tradition he has inherited, a “familiar compound ghost” who speaks in the voices of Stéphane Mallarmé, William Butler Yeats, and, most of all, Dante. The news for poetry is not good at this moment. Uttered within the world, inextricable from the world, it is, like the world in which it speaks and is spoken, irredeemably fallen. For Eliot, all it can do is fail and in its failure point the way to the real and living possibility of redemption in destruction of all ties to the world. Eliot’s figure for that redemptive destruction condenses the saving flame in which the Holy Spirit appeared to the Apostles at Pentecost and the dive bomber raining destruction on London and Coventry. Now, and in England, history is the purgative and purifying fire of destruction. And yet, at Little Gidding and in “Little Gidding” – the fourth of Eliot’s *Four Quartets* – a stillness is created out of ritual, out of repetition, out of things of the world (like language) turned upon themselves to indicate the presence of divinity in empty spaces and silences.

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Rhythm is the/symphony/of angels.

The year is 2000. For the moment, Britain's wars are mostly cultural, with parties, classes, races, and regions vying for power and position. Resident at a London tattoo studio and clothing shop, where the Poetry Society has placed her for the year, poet Patience Agbabi contemplates the relationship of language and divinity. She hearkens to traditions of inspiration – the literal idea that the poet's words are infused with the breath of a supernatural source – and condenses classical and Christian references in her figure for poetic language. History is nowhere, explicitly, in this short lyric written to celebrate her residency at the Flamin' Eights Tattoo Studio, though it appears throughout Agbabi's work, most often in the form of the same literary tradition (somewhat updated) to which Eliot pays court. In "Off the Shelf," for example, Agbabi engages Yeats through the mediating figure of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, and in the title poem of her 2000 volume, *Transformatrix*, she takes on the sonnet by synthesizing many of the form's most recognizable traditional voices. Once again, the news for poetry is both good and bad. On the one hand, the dominant lyric tradition Agbabi inherits and encounters is one from which people like her – black, openly bisexual – have been largely excluded. On the other hand, the lyric is reenergized as it is reclaimed: the cultural center is rejuvenated as it is occupied by the once marginalized. Agbabi reclaims, revises, and renews the lyric from her particular cultural position. After all, just a few years after her residency at the tattoo studio, Agbabi served as a writer in residence at Eton. "Wings elevate/words into/rhythm."

Eliot's "Little Gidding" was first published in *The New English Weekly* in October 1942. The magazine had also been the first publisher of the second and third of the *Four Quartets*, "East Coker" and "The Dry Salvages." Descended from the influential *New Age*, a magazine that had in the 1910s and 1920s published a number of modernist writers, *The New English Weekly* had been edited by A.R. Orage until his death in 1934 and continued to be a highly regarded review of English politics, arts, and intellectual life. That December, the poem appeared in a pamphlet form. "Little Gidding" made its first appearance as the concluding movement in Eliot's *Four Quartets* when the group was published together in the United States in May 1943 and then in the British edition in October 1944. The American edition of *Four Quartets* was brought out by Harcourt, Brace and Company and the British edition by Faber and Faber; both had long been Eliot's publishers and he worked as an editor at Faber.

Both companies were important mainstream publishers of poetry (as well as work in other genres) from the 1930s forward. Harcourt had been founded in the first decade of the twentieth century, and the firm grew in stature and importance during the 1930s, while Faber, founded in 1929, quickly became a central publisher of poetry in Britain.

Agbabi's untitled lyric was "published" as a tattoo inscribed by the artist Naresh into the skin of model Joelle Taylor in April 2000. A photograph of that tattoo was reproduced as a postcard and sold by the Poetry Society, the organization under whose auspices Agbabi had been resident at Flamin' Eights. It has not appeared in any of Agbabi's books to date; Michael Thurston discovered the poem in an essay by the critic Lauri Ramey, who has been one of the few to write about this poet, and he consulted the postcard in the Saison Poetry Library.

We could continue in this vein for quite some time, listing the differences between Eliot and Agbabi, from his monarchist politics and High-Church Anglicanism to her radical feminism and association with S/M style, from his Nobel Prize and the scholarly industry that has, for over half a century, produced detailed exegeses of his poems to her performance art and increasingly frequent appearance in surveys of contemporary poetry, avant-garde poetry, and women's poetry in Britain. In short, however, Eliot represents the beginning of the period covered by this book and also certain ideas about poetry and certain institutions and practices involved in the production of poetry, while Agbabi represents the endpoint of this period (the first decade of the twenty-first century) as well as a quite different set of institutions and practices.

The differences are important, of course, but we want also to take note of what the two poets have in common. As even these brief quotations and references suggest, both poets are steeped in the English literary tradition. Both are concerned with the role poetry might play in society. Both are drawn at once to the notion that poetic language is somehow elevated, otherworldly, able to provide access to experience that everyday language cannot capture and to the anxiety that poetic language might distort truth, might mislead readers in unfortunate ways. For all that British poetry has changed since the middle of the Second World War and for all the variety that inheres in "postwar British and Irish poetry," these continuities will remain, perhaps surprisingly, in view.

As the title suggests, this is a book about poetry produced in Britain and Ireland after the Second World War. More than that, though, it is a book about *reading* that poetry, about how to parse the difficulty in some of this

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work, how to describe the pleasures in some of it (difficulty and pleasure are not mutually exclusive), and how to recognize the relationships among parts within a poem and the relationships among poems within this period. In the chapters to come, we hope to show how poets deploy the resources of their medium as well as their attention, care, and passion in their efforts to comprehend their culture and how the efforts of readers to comprehend the poems can open up the texts, revealing their imaginative and linguistic richness and enriching their readers' imaginative and linguistic resources. If those aims are large (and they are), the steps we take toward them are manageably small. We begin, as we have with these excerpts by Eliot and Agbabi, by attending to the words on the page, by remaining aware of how the pages came to our hands, and by wondering about the significance of specific locutions in specific locations.

It is also useful to acknowledge that we come to poems carrying assumptions and that our assumptions might mislead us. Staying with these opening examples for the moment, we might think for a moment about the question of cultural centrality and marginality. Most readers will have heard of T.S. Eliot. His poems are frequently taught in schools and universities, they appear in major anthologies, and they are often referred to in a variety of cultural conversations. His position at Faber and Faber and his Nobel Prize for Literature, along with the reading and reputation of his work, grant him a central position in most narratives of twentieth-century British poetry. Many readers will not be familiar with Patience Agbabi. This is of course partly due to the simple fact of her youth; she has not been producing poems long enough to have achieved an Eliotic reputation. But Agbabi is also less well known because she writes from a marginal cultural position, as a black bisexual woman interested in the oral performance as well as the print publication of poetry.

We tend to assume that one of these poets is central and the other marginal and that these locations are fixed. Let's try reversing these assumptions as something of a heuristic exercise (a heuristic is a sort of shortcut, a fiction held for the moment to suggest some provisional truths). One of these two poets emigrated to England and was awarded a scholarship at Oxford, while the other was born in England and read English literature there. One spent years working at a bank and wrote before and after business hours until a successful literary career could be launched, while the other from early on enjoyed the support of the state. The "marginal" poet of the pair, Agbabi, has in fact inhabited the cultural center represented by Oxford, the Poetry Society, and Edinburgh's

Canongate press, while the “central” poet, Eliot, came to England after university, intending to stay for a short time, remained partly because of the outbreak of war, published his first books with small independent presses, and became a British citizen more than ten years after he took up residence in England. While our original assumptions remain valid (Eliot really *is* at the center of many discussions of twentieth-century poetry and, by virtue of his gender, race, and class, had access to the means of literary production in ways unimaginable to most descendants of Nigerian immigrants to England, like Agbabi), the binary oppositions critics and literary historians use to organize and make sense of the literary landscape, while useful and important, are rarely as neat as they often appear to be. While we will be offering our own binaries in this book and while we find them useful as readers and critics, we will also be reminding readers that these frameworks are critical fictions whose terms should be only lightly and knowingly held.

Before going further with analyses of poems or narratives of poetic careers, we want to spend this introductory chapter making some clear and explicit definitions of the key terms in this volume’s title. Just like such oppositions as center versus margin, terms like “postwar,” “British,” “Irish,” and “poetry” seem to be simple and intuitive, but in fact they obscure judgments that are often both complex and contested. “Postwar,” for example, seems a simple temporal marker, a convenient way of periodizing twentieth-century literature. There is a body of literary expression that was produced before the outbreak of war in 1939, and another produced after the conclusion of hostilities in 1945. Since this dividing line comes close to cutting the century down the middle and since the Second World War is in so many ways a rupture in the story of the century (everyday life throughout Europe, Asia, North Africa, and North America changed in numerous ways because of mobilization and conflict), the war provides a handy cutoff. But there are some problems with this simple organizational approach. For one thing, the century’s pie might be sliced in various ways, and it is not at all clear that the Second World War really divides the period down the middle. The First World War brought about crises and shifts in societies’ self-understandings and their structures at least as fundamental as those associated with the 1939–1945 conflict, so that the first half of the century might need to be seen in several parts (pre-1914, the First World War, and the interwar decades). Similarly, the conclusion of the war in 1945 did not bring about an end to armed and ideological conflicts. The Cold War began in some ways even before the guns fell silent in Europe, and the

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British Empire engaged in numerous smaller conflicts in and over its own colonies during the decades following the war. In addition, the field of reference of the term “postwar” is not literary at all and so might not be the best way to describe a period of literary production. After all, many of the writers active before 1939 continued their careers after 1945 (and wrote during the years between, as well). Even if we agree that the historical dividing line (Britain was one way before 1939 and another after 1945) really is a useful dividing line, are we right to assume that it applies to literature?

There are, after all, more strictly literary (or at least cultural or aesthetic) ways to divide the twentieth century. Chief among these is the shift from modernism, which is seen to dominate the first half of the century, to postmodernism, which rose to prominence during the second half. A problem here, however, is that neither of these terms encompasses anything like the whole of poetic production in either period. While modernism, represented by such poets as Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Mina Loy (and, in other genres, by writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett), casts a large shadow over the years between 1910 and 1940, plenty of writers during those decades wrote in ways the term does not explain, account for, or include. By “modernism” we generally mean writing (and other artistic work) that rebels against the conventions that were widely accepted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conventions having to do with “realistic” representation, with narrative coherence, with “appropriate” themes in poetry, and with the order and closure provided by traditional verse forms. Confronting the changes wrought upon their world by new technologies (the telephone, the radio, the automobile), by new ideas (especially the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, the political theories of Karl Marx, the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, and the philosophical work of Nietzsche and Bergson), and, finally, by the Great War’s destruction of assumptions of social and moral coherence, modernist writers and artists deployed fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness narration, intentional incoherence, free verse and other refusals of traditional form, and, often, the heavy use, both as structure and as texture, of allusion to express and attempt to comprehend the chaos in which they found themselves.

At the very same time, however, many, perhaps most, writers in Britain and Ireland either continued writing as they had, and as a couple of generations had, before the 1910s, or they returned to the conventions that had dominated then as an explicit rejection of modernist tenets, practices,

and works. Writers hoping to achieve literary careers through sales of their work in the marketplace tried to deliver what readers wanted, and while *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Molloy* might be the texts from the period most often read (and assigned in classrooms) now, they were not the big sellers of their day. Those were, instead, books like Gertrude Atherton's *Black Oxen* and Warwick Deeping's *Doomsday*. In the poetry world, the lists of the mainstream publishers and the contents of the mainstream magazines continued to feature Georgian verse throughout these decades, and even some of the important poets of the 1930s (W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and others) reacted to modernism by returning to, revising, and rejuvenating traditional forms. The variety of literary styles in play during this, or any, period is one thing that makes temporal markers drawn from literature just as difficult as any other terms we might use.

That variety is, if anything, even more pronounced in the later twentieth century. For the period covered by this volume, the temporally appropriate term might be "postmodernism," but that term has, for three decades now, referred much more frequently and powerfully not to the period following the age of modernism but, instead, to a specific set of philosophical insights and associated aesthetic practices. If Nietzsche was one thinker with whom the modernists were coming to terms, careful readers and critics of Nietzsche, perhaps none more than Jean-François Lyotard, are those whose ideas have informed postmodernists. If many modernists sought to rediscover or rewrite the kind of "grand narratives" that had underpinned the social and artistic order before the Great War and that had been shattered by the war, many postmodernists have been influenced by Lyotard's conviction that the age of these *grand récits* is over. Postmodernism is skeptical not only about the possibility of recovering a coherence that once existed but also about whether that coherence ever existed to begin with. Moreover, postmodernism is skeptical about any singular and incontrovertible truth. There are, instead, multiple truths, their momentary veracity depending upon the circumstances of the moment and the position from which they are examined or experienced. If the great novel of modernism is Joyce's *Ulysses* (and we are not saying it definitively is), then the great novel of postmodernism might be *Gravity's Rainbow*, by the American novelist Thomas Pynchon. Where Joyce looks back to the *Odyssey* as a way to ground the encyclopedic reference and stream-of-consciousness narration in his novel, Pynchon looks around at the momentarily coherent myths of big science and the military industrial complex of and after the

Second World War as a way to erode any sense of solid ground beneath his ironic narrative. And if the great poetic monument of modernism is *The Waste Land* (again, we are not saying it necessarily is), then the great monument of postmodernism is... .

In fact, it is difficult to determine a single great poetic monument of postmodernism, in part because postmodernist poetry (as we will show later in this book) resists the notions of singularity, greatness, monumentality, and, sometimes, poetry itself. Certainly if pushed, we would look to the ironic historical citation of Kamau Brathwaite, to the tricksterish and thoroughly serious slipperiness of Paul Muldoon, or to the experimental or linguistically innovative poetry of J.H. Prynne.

Ultimately, though, we are more interested at this point in explaining why “postmodern” simply will not do as a way to capture poetry produced in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. One reason is simply that the term “postmodern” has come to have such a specific meaning, and the styles to which the term refers, while important, are not the only ones available during these decades. We might point out three useful ways to think about this variety. The first is the continuity of modernism. Some modernist poets continued their careers well into the second half of the century, writing in ways close to, if not identical to, the ways they had before the war. More than this, some of the poetries that we might call postmodernism can also be seen as extensions of modernism itself (indeed, some critics argue that all of postmodernism might more usefully be seen as critically extending modernism). Alongside the continuity of modernism, we can certainly see a reaction against modernism (and postmodernism, for that matter). That reaction takes a number of forms, and we want here to caution against any simple reading of it as a conservative or formalist retrenchment. From the work of “Movement” poets like Philip Larkin through that of Nobel Laureates Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott and on to such present-day poets as Don Paterson, we can see many poets choosing traditional verse forms, continuous narrative, and the expression of a conventionally realistic psychology that stands against core modernist poetic strategies. Finally, the increased access to publication available to poets who, until the 1950s, had quite little – women, people of color, working-class writers, writers from “peripheral” regions within Britain and from the “peripheral” areas of the British Empire – brought new points of view, new areas of subject matter, and new poetic voices into visibility and, eventually, prominence. If, as Eliot wrote in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the classical literary tradition embodied “the mind of Europe,”

poetry in Britain and Ireland in the decades following the Second World War gave voice to multiple minds, both European and not.

“Postmodern poetry,” for these reasons, among others, simply does not do, then, as a way to categorize or describe the work this volume surveys. (Some writers have suggested typographically differentiating terms so that, e.g., “postmodern” might carry the specific philosophical and aesthetic meaning the term has come to have and “post-modern” might indicate simply temporal sequence, but as we have suggested, modernism itself still seems to be in operation and temporality is a vexed and complicated thing when it comes to aesthetic and cultural styles.) Why not, then, choose a simple, straightforward, and, perhaps, noncontroversial term such as “late twentieth-century poetry”? Such terms are unsatisfying for two reasons. First, they get very cumbersome very quickly. The title of this book might already be a bit of a mouthful; imagine it with the extra syllables of “late twentieth and early twenty-first century.” Second, and more important, the simple temporal descriptors leave out important information that “postwar,” for all its potential insufficiency, usefully brings. For if we think about the less immediate effects of the war on literary culture in Britain and Ireland during the decades after 1945, we find important influences on the poetry produced within that culture.

So let’s return to “postwar” and its utility for our purposes. Just as there are problems with “postwar” as a periodizing term with respect to poetry, we have a number of ways to address those problems. Clearly, since the term is indeed in the title of this book, we have found it sufficiently useful to warrant sticking with it. We want to be clear, however, that we are sticking with it, at least partly, as a heuristic, as, that is, a framework that is explicitly recognized as a fiction useful for the insights it enables. On the one hand, then, we can point to some direct ways in which the events of 1939–1945 might have altered the course of poetry in Britain. At the level of subject matter, of course, the war provoked poets to absorb and attempt to comprehend things poets before the war need not (and probably could not) have imagined: enormous numbers of military casualties in protracted and highly mechanized battles, enormous numbers of civilian casualties due to the aerial bombardment of cities, the simple fact of a second outbreak of cataclysmic warfare within a generation of the end of the First World War, the bureaucratized and horrifically efficient conduct of genocide in the death camps of central Europe. And these provocations affected the formal choices that poets made as well. If the fragmentation and confusion of modernist poetry resulted from the dislocations and dissonance attendant upon

the First World War, many poets found those resources insufficient in the face of the daily cataclysm of the Second World War. As we have indicated, while some poets (like Eliot) continued to write in ways fairly continuous with their work of the 1920s, many younger poets sought new ways either to open their work to the stresses of the time or to close the work off from what surrounded it, by returning to the closed lyric forms of the tradition, for example, and to a symbolic vocabulary of myth as opposed to history.

On the other hand, the most powerful changes the war brought about for poetry were not these *immediate* ones but were instead those *mediated* by the institutions in and through which poetry is produced and consumed. While the destruction of cities and the deaths of civilians demanded responses in the moment, the longer-term consequences, to give just a few examples, of demobilized military personnel receiving university educations, of writers educated in the colonies emigrating to pursue their careers in the cities of Britain, of postwar economic hardship and its knock-on effects on social mores (including standards of literary decorum and taste) shaped the literary landscape for the next two generations. We will go into more detail about some of these mediations in the next chapter. For now the point we want to make is that “postwar” serves not just to nominate the period of time after the Second World War but also to suggest the social changes brought about by the war.

While we can make a fairly straightforward case for the usefulness of “postwar,” a term like “British” is more difficult. We can begin to suggest the difficulty by turning to Seamus Heaney, who objected to being characterized as “British” when he was included, and, indeed, given pride of place, in Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s 1983 *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*. In “An Open Letter,” published as a pamphlet by the Field Day Theatre Company (located in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland), Heaney pointed out the problem of casual acceptance of terms like “British.” “Be advised,” he wrote, “my passport’s green./No glass of ours was ever raised/To toast *the Queen*” (1985: 25). That green passport, Heaney argues, marks him as Irish, not British. But Heaney grew up and was educated and began his career in, and was a citizen of, Northern Ireland, still (however complicatedly and controversially) part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. National nomenclature, he makes clear in this 198-line poem, matters.

And national nomenclature is complicated. It at once names and obscures the consequences of historical struggle. Setting Heaney’s case to one side for the moment (we’ll return to it when we address “and Irish”

later in this chapter), it is useful to think through what exactly we mean by “British.” Often, especially outside Britain (wherever that is), the term is simply and unconsciously conflated with “English,” so that many Americans, for example, are surprised to discover that Wales and Scotland have their own football/soccer teams. This conflation occludes both the distinctive linguistic, literary, and cultural heritages of Wales and Scotland and the centuries of combat (sometimes military, more often ideological) between the English center and the Scottish and Welsh margins. It is often easy to forget that both Wales and Scotland were subdued by England only after centuries-long military efforts that involved not only large numbers of deaths in battle but also the destruction of Welsh and Scottish towns and villages, the transportation of Welsh and Scottish women and children to England and servitude, and the forcible annexation of Welsh and Scottish territory. Even after the legal unions with England, the ideological conflicts continued, with English efforts to extirpate the Welsh and Scottish languages continuing into the twentieth century and with Welsh and Scottish Nationalists working to preserve their cultural traditions even as they fought – sometimes violently – to keep England, in the form of language and landowners, out.

While Wales was legally joined to England by the sixteenth-century Laws of Wales Acts (the Parliamentary “Acts of Union” granted Royal Assent by Henry VIII in 1536 and 1543) and while Scotland was united with England by corresponding Acts of Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments in 1707, Nationalists in both countries have continued to push back against the “United” in United Kingdom. Since the successful devolution referenda in 1997, the governments of Wales and Scotland have taken on some powers once held by the Parliament at Westminster, but Nationalist movements in both countries continue to press for complete independence. Against this horizon, it is not clear that a poet like Gillian Clarke in Wales or a poet like Kathleen Jamie in Scotland is best seen as “British.” Both Clarke and Jamie write in English (though both occasionally include in their poems words or phrases in their countries’ local languages). The question becomes more vexed still when we ask it about Gwyneth Lewis, who writes in both English and Welsh, or Menna Elfyn, who writes only in Welsh, or, similarly, when we ask it about Don Paterson or Tom Leonard, who often write in Scottish dialect, or Robert Garioch or Sorley MacLean, who wrote mostly in Scots Gaelic.

And what of writers from parts of the world more recently colonized by Britain and, in many cases, more fully released from the empire after the

Second World War? One of the material circumstances included in “postwar,” of course, is the shrinking of the British Empire from the late 1940s through the 1960s. The combination of Britain’s deep economic difficulties after the war (the nation was left almost bankrupt by the war’s end) and anticolonial agitation in some of the empire’s distant possessions led ultimately to the withdrawal of British control and the winning of independence by the people of India, Ceylon, and Burma in the 1940s, of most of Britain’s African colonies by the end of the 1950s, and of Caribbean colonies in the 1960s. Several effects followed upon these episodes of decolonization: the British economy was affected by the loss of overseas markets, immigration to Britain from the colonies accelerated, and a widespread sense of political and cultural failure – of the end of the British Empire’s century of global expansion and dominance – appeared throughout British writing.

Most germane for us are the ways decolonization affected literary culture. For example, literary institutions independent of the metropole grew up in some former colonies. Theater companies, writing workshops, small magazines, and publishers supported the local literary scenes, in which, often, the legacy of colonial education (including a thorough steeping in the classics of the English literary tradition) mingled with local languages, belief systems, historical references and narrative, and even musical styles to produce hybrid voices and forms. At the same time, increasing immigration beginning in the late 1940s brought a number of writers, with their colonial educations, experiences, and accents, to the cities of the British archipelago, where they became involved in a newly emergent immigrant literary culture.

The question that these biographies, careers, and works pose for us at this point is, how and to what extent are these writers or their works “British”? Poets like Kamau Brathwaite (from Barbados), David Dabydeen (Guyana), Jean “Binta” Breeze (Jamaica), or Sujata Bhatt (India) are often included in anthologies of British poetry or British literature and in syllabi for courses on British literature or British poetry. Are they British because they were born in colonies that had yet to win their independence, because they were partially educated in the British Isles or spent part of their working lives there, or because their work has something thematic to do with life in London or Leeds as well as Kingston or Gujarat? At the same time, some poets very important in the literary cultures of (former) colonies – Lorna Goodison (Jamaica), Christopher Okigbo (Nigeria), even Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott (St. Lucia) – often do not appear in these anthologies,

though their claims for significance are at least as compelling and their work's relation to matters "British" is just as (in)direct. Any simple standard for inclusion (or exclusion) that we could set here would present as many problems as it solved. We could include as "British" poets from former colonies who spent some of their working lives in the British Isles or whose work appeared under the auspices of publishers located in the British Isles, but these measures would leave out poets and poems that have been influential on subsequent poets in Britain and have had powerful cultural effects within Britain.

Some critics – Jahan Ramazani, among others – have argued that the ease and frequency of transatlantic travel, for poems as well as for poets, has rendered these national labels obsolete. Given the changes of location and, sometimes, of citizenship for poets in the twentieth century, it might make sense to define taxonomies beyond the national. Our position on the utility of "British" as a descriptor for the poetry we treat in this book is something like our position on "postwar": as a self-consciously and somewhat ironically or tenuously held guideline, it helps us to include poets who, for a variety of reasons, are important within a literary landscape whose borders, while shifting and porous, are in some general ways discernible. Often, they are best discerned by noting differences rather than by trying to define essences. By "British," for example, we know, generally, that we do not mean poets born, educated, and mostly published in the United States. ("American," of course, is as contested in its ways as "British" is, but that is the subject of some other book's first chapter.) Postwar American poets of various kinds work to comprehend a culture driven by rising consumerism, by sudden ascendancy to superpower status, and by Cold War tensions construed as bipolar (the United States vs. USSR). These were not the concerns faced by most British poets, whether they wrote in Bristol or Bridgetown. The vastness of the American landscape, made newly accessible by the construction of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s as well as the widespread availability of automobiles and very cheap petroleum, fueled the imaginations of many American poets in the first decades after the war. Many British poets confronted a sense of straitened opportunities and immobility. Postwar American poets enjoyed the rise of creative writing programs and an increasing number of university teaching positions in the 1950s, as well as a number of new literary magazines associated with colleges and universities that provided publishing outlets and a thriving cultural conversation about poetry and poetics. British poets tended to have fewer opportunities to teach at universities, but many found support from the state (in the forms

of fellowships and bursaries) and occasional employment with the BBC. The differences in these institutional literary support systems help us sketch what is distinctive about postwar British poetry, as opposed to American.

Even a differential definition of “British” in this context is one to hold as a productive problem rather than a confident assumption. Some important poets who began their careers in Britain (Thom Gunn, Donald Davie) moved permanently to the United States. Others (Ted Hughes, Fred D’Aguiar, Geoffrey Hill) took up teaching posts in the United States and then returned to Britain either permanently or repeatedly. By the same token, some writers of the so-called British Poetry Revival in the late 1960s and 1970s were heavily influenced by American Beat poets and the experimental work of Americans Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, while Sylvia Plath, born and educated in Massachusetts, moved to Devon with Hughes, her husband, and died in London during the bitter winter of 1963. Nevertheless, the texture of Hill’s work (though he lived and taught for decades in Boston, Massachusetts) is inescapably English, from the Midlands settings and Anglo-Saxon histories of *Mercian Hymns* to the deeply dyed threads of allusion throughout his oeuvre, while a sense of alienation, of being not quite at home abroad, suffuses the poetry of Gunn in San Francisco and Plath in London. While the complications are worth admitting into arguments and readings, the distinctions indicated by these national labels continue to be at once legible and useful.

We promised, a while ago, to come back to “and Irish,” and the time has come to do so. In “Open Letter,” Heaney chafes at the “British” label in spite of (or because of) his upbringing in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The image of the green passport as a figure for Irishness seems not to recognize the border that has, since 1922, separated the six counties of Northern Ireland from the Republic of Ireland. While it shares some aspects with the broader problem of (post)coloniality (and, indeed, it has been studied in precisely these terms during the last two decades) and while it bears a strong resemblance to the situation in Wales or Scotland, the relation of Irishness to Britishness, poetically as well as politically, is an especially vexed one after the brutal history of repression in Ireland and the continuing sectarian troubles and tensions following partition and the establishment of the Free State. We acknowledge that peculiarly difficult history here by at once including Irish poetry with British and separating Irish poetry from British. That’s a lot of work for the conjunction “and” to do, however, so let’s take a moment to flesh out the specifics of the relationship the word constructs.

To begin with, we need to make clear that by “Irish” we mean poetry produced on the island of Ireland without regard to the border separating Northern Ireland and the Republic. While the political boundary retains controversial significance in the realm of international relations and while there may indeed be differences between the institutional matrices and the broad poetic palates on either side of the border, we are persuaded by the argument put forward by Seamus Deane, an important figure in the Field Day Theatre Company and publishing group and editor of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, that the island as a whole shares a history and culture best understood not as fractured along its internal border but by its relationship with Britishness. Under this reasoning, Eavan Boland, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (all from the Republic) and John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Ciaran Carson (all from Northern Ireland) are Irish poets.

What, though, of that relationship to Britishness? On the one hand, most poets writing on the island in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries write and have written in English (though in saying this we should note the tremendous achievement of Irish-language poets). In addition to writing in the English language, these poets are deeply informed by the English poetic tradition. We see this, for example, in Heaney’s and Muldoon’s predilection for the sonnet and in their habit of alluding to Anglo-Saxon and Renaissance English poets. On the other hand, the specific character of the Irish social and political situation and the specific linguistic and literary legacies of Irish culture also profoundly shape these poets’ work. Irish myths and legends, Irish place names, words, and figures of speech appear in poems by all of these poets (and many of their contemporaries). Part of the brilliance of Irish poetry in the twentieth century has been the fusing of these strands to create startling and powerful hybrids. In “The More a Man Has, the More a Man Wants,” for example, Muldoon adapts the rhyme scheme, and often the iambic pentameter, of the Shakespearean sonnet as his stanza, but he puts that stanza to work in a madcap narrative tracing an Irish character (Gallogly, whose name derives from “gallowglass,” in Irish, *gallóglach*, meaning mercenary warrior) through a series of adventures in and around Belfast. Much of the island’s poetry is itself constructed by something like our “and”; it synthesizes British and Irish languages, allusions, tropes, and narratives. This productive tension is one we hope to keep in play both in the title of this volume and in our discussions of Irish poetry in the chapters to follow.

While the final word in our title seems simple, it will probably come as no surprise after the preceding discussions of “postwar,” “British,” and “Irish” that “poetry,” too, requires some glossing. Think for a moment of the brief text by Patience Agbabi we discussed at the beginning of this chapter: a few short lines incised into the skin of a model and photographed to be reproduced on a postcard. Is such a text what readers typically have in mind when they use the word “poetry”? Aren’t poems more substantial? Aren’t they intended for printing on paper and reproduction in the pages of magazines and books, rather than tattooing on skin and reproduction on postcards? At the same time, given the obviously wrought character of Agbabi’s language and that language’s simultaneous naming and performance of features associated with poetic form, upon what grounds could we disqualify the text for the label “poetry”?

Confronting the experimental texts produced by concrete poets, “language poets,” or sound poets, texts in which meaning is subordinated to material properties of language, many readers respond by denying that such texts are poetry. Poetry, they might say, is supposed to be expressive. It is supposed to provide access to intellectual understanding and emotional experience. It is supposed to be the arrangement of meaningful language into aesthetically pleasing patterns, including but not limited to meter, rhyme, and traditional stanzas. Poetry is that sort of literary expression represented by such grand monuments of the literary tradition as the sonnets of Shakespeare, the blank verse of Milton, and the “emotion recollected in tranquility” of Wordsworth. It is the literary expression continued after modernism in the work of such recognizably “poetic” poets as Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney. At the same time, some readers and writers (far fewer than the type we just described) who value experimental work find the regularly metrical and rhyming stanzas (or the free-verse first-person confessional lyric that has come to dominate the pages of many literary reviews) to be mere “verse” rather than poetry. For these readers, poetry is not a matter of expression in skillfully arranged (and conventionally recognizable) language. It is instead the turning of language upon itself to reveal or unleash an authenticity that is typically hidden by conventions of meaning or expression. Poetic language is characterized precisely by its resistance to instrumentality or clear communication. It is the irruption of the chaotic “real” into the conventional “normal,” the interruption of the settled “said” by the open-ended “saying.”

A survey of the catalogs of poetry publishers, of the range of literary magazines that publish poetry, of the critical studies produced by academics and the polemics of practitioners, of the blogs and online discussions devoted to poetry and poetics shows that each of these positions, and pretty much any point between them, has its adherents in the contemporary poetry scene. A retrospective look like the one Peter Barry provides in his 2006 book, *Poetry Wars*, reveals similar fault lines in the literary landscape three decades ago; when experimental “radicals” who had no patience for mainstream verse took over the Poetry Society and its magazine in the early 1970s, mainstream poets who scorned the “antiliterary” productions of the “radicals” fought back to regain control of the institution. Neither side had much good to say either about its antagonists or their “poetry.” And if we look back farther still, we find in the prefaces to antithetical anthologies and the pages of reviews scathing articulations of the line between “poetry” and its opposites or others.

Our practice in this book is to read as “poetry” what is offered by poets or publishers under that label. Rather than drawing boundaries or offering limit cases, we are interested in how different ideas about poetry produce different kinds of poetry, in how these different sorts of poetry address the specific challenges of their historical moment, and in how the varieties of poetry themselves produce new ways of reading poems, as well as writing them.

In the chapters that follow, we first sketch the historical situations of British and Irish poetry in the postwar decades. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of major historical events and trends that shaped this period. In Chapter 3 we focus on the literary institutions that are the closest and most immediately important context for poetry, from educational institutions through publishers (large and small), magazines (large and small), and the range of formal and informal networks established by workshops and collectives. The body of this book is the set of chapters that follow these framing chapters. In them, we at once offer readings of some important poems and suggest ways to read these poems and others like them. We have arranged the poems along formal and thematic lines. Chapter 4 follows several formal and generic paths through postwar poetry, focusing in turn on the sonnet, the elegy, and the ekphrasis. In Chapter 5, we turn to poems of place, poems in which the landscape is explored and interpreted. One force often read in the landscape is history, and in Chapter 6 we turn to poems that contemplate the writing of history more explicitly. Chapter 7 returns to genre as its central preoccupation; in it, we discuss

several types of long poem: the phenomenological meditation, the fragmented epic, the narrative poem, the lyric sequence, and the “slim volume” of lyrics as a unified poetic work. In Chapter 8, we survey a range of poetic explorations of subjectivity and identity. We close the frame opened by Chapters 1–3 in Chapter 9, by suggesting some ways in which the poets we discuss throughout the book might productively be thought of in groups and movements through the anthologies they make. We conclude with a brief gesture toward the range of poetics that in various ways lie beyond the key words of this volume’s title.

A Brief Historical Survey

Poems are situated. That is, they are produced, circulated, and read in specific historical circumstances. It is useful, then, to have some sense of the situation, of the “facts on the ground” in Britain and Ireland during the decades after the Second World War, before we turn to discussions of particular poets and poems. In this chapter, we will sketch in broad strokes the kind of portrait we typically have in mind when we hear or use the phrase “historical context.” We will say a bit about the major historical events and trends that shaped the lives of poets and their readers, and we will describe the spirit of the times as it can be discerned from the accounts of historians and the recorded memories of people who lived through them. This kind of basic historical knowledge is valuable to us as we read the poems of the period. Tony Harrison’s long poem *v.*, for example, makes much richer sense when readers know not only that it was written in the wake of the 1984 miners’ strike but also that the strike itself was the climax of a long-brewing conflict between government policies and workers’ assumptions, a signal that the social contract that had largely obtained in Britain since the late 1940s was being radically renegotiated. The significance of the poem’s tone and diction is clarified in important ways if readers understand that the political *events* of the strike at once emerged from and contributed to a broader cultural atmosphere (what the literary critic and theorist Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling”) in England in the late 1970s and early 1980s, an atmosphere palpable in many of the other cultural productions of that period.

At 3:00 in the afternoon on Tuesday, May 8, 1945, Winston Churchill delivered a speech at 10 Downing Street to announce that hostilities in the European war that had raged since September 1939 had effectively ended and that the war would be declared formally over just after midnight. The speech was broadcast across the United Kingdom by radio, and in public spaces from Whitehall to village greens at the furthest edges of the archipelago, radios were amplified by loudspeakers so that all could hear the welcome news. From 3:20 until 4:00, the BBC followed the broadcast of Churchill's speech with a program of "Bells and Victory Celebrations," and the crowds that had gathered in many places celebrated with bonfires, fireworks, and parties. Meanwhile, the photographer, Cecil Beaton, wrote in his diary that his Kensington neighborhood was "quiet as a Sunday" and that there was, to his mind, "no general feeling of rejoicing. Victory does not bring with it a sense of triumph – rather a dull numbness of relief that the blood-letting is over" (quoted in Kynaston 2008: 9).

Both kinds of reaction make historical and emotional sense. After six years of overwhelming and total warfare, Britain was at last at peace. But the nation had suffered tremendously and had all but bankrupted itself in the process of defeating (with its allies) the Axis powers in Europe. And within months of delivering that speech, Churchill was out of power, his Conservative party having lost the general election in a landslide, leaving Clement Attlee to form the first majority Labour government in Britain's history.

As Alan Sked points out, Attlee's government faced an unenviable task of social reconstruction, with parts of England's industrial base and, more importantly, parts of its cities destroyed during the war; with millions of servicemen demobilized in the eighteen months after the war; and with shortages of food requiring continued (and sometimes increased) rationing. As an objective correlative for the sense of privation that complicated the celebratory tone of British life in the first few postwar months, David Kynaston recounts the Cup Final in April 1946 (the first played since early in the war), which saw both a burst ball (evidence of an ongoing leather shortage) and a postgame celebration with ginger beer for the winning Derby County side (no champagne being available).

Attlee addressed the economic problems by securing what Roger Eatwell has called the "Social Democratic consensus," a domestic policy generally agreed to by both the Labour and Conservative parties. The consensus, according to Sked, comprised "a mixed economy, the welfare state, Keynesian economic policy and economic corporatism in domestic affairs" (2003: 41). Persuaded that government had a duty to manage the economy and perhaps

emboldened by a widespread sense among citizens that government action could be positively effective (given the evidence of mass evacuations, rationing, and centralized planning and control during the war), Attlee's government set about implementing the key components of the welfare state. These were described in the party's election manifesto for 1945, *Let Us Face the Future*, and were embodied in two Acts of Parliament passed in 1946: the National Health Service Act and the National Insurance Act. At the same time, the government undertook to nationalize certain industries and sectors of the national economy, taking control of the Bank of England and the coal industry in 1946, the railways and gas industry in 1947, the iron and steel industries in 1949, and, as a consequence of the creation of the National Health Service, many of the nation's hospitals beginning in 1946.

As Sked writes, this domestic consensus was accompanied by a general consensus regarding Britain's foreign relations as well. Its main components were "support for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a special relationship with the United States, the peaceful transformation of empire into Commonwealth, an independent nuclear deterrent, and – eventually – membership in the EEC/EC/EU" (2003: 40). To describe British foreign policy of the late 1940s–1970s in this way, though, is to occlude a great deal of difference, disagreement, and violence. The difference and disagreement were largely internal, with vocal minority communities within Britain opposing, for example, not only the development of "an independent nuclear deterrent" (the United Kingdom's own nuclear arsenal) but also the continuation of a nuclear arms race between the emergent "superpowers" (the United States and the USSR). The phrase "peaceful transformation of empire into Commonwealth" hides the violence with which colonies in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean expressed desire for independence; the violence with which the empire met these anti-imperial movements (especially in India and Kenya); and the disruptions and dislocations involved in the transfer of power once independence had been achieved.

Jed Esty observes that foreign and domestic met (or collided) in the structure of feeling captured in such phrases as "postimperial," "little England," and "shrinking island." As the empire "transformed" by releasing colonies, many in the British archipelago felt a shrinking of opportunity, a reduction in their nation's power and presence on the world stage. The combination of housing and food shortages, unemployment, and tense industrial relations in the domestic economy with decreasing international prestige, increased immigration, and exacerbations of economic difficulties led to suspicion and

strife often expressed in popular culture and cultural practice. Trade unionists, for example, were often represented in films as strike prone and bloody minded, while immigrants were prevented by many landlords from renting flats in certain areas of cities.

The postwar consensus, then, is complicated, and those complications track through phenomena as disparate as the general elections of the 1950s (each of which Labour lost, ceding the Prime Minister position to Churchill in 1951, to Anthony Eden in 1955, and to Harold Macmillan, upon Eden's resignation, in 1957), the reaction to the Suez crisis in 1956, and the simultaneous hostility and curiosity with which West Indian immigrants were received in London, Liverpool, and elsewhere. The increasing Conservative majorities through the 1950s suggest some skepticism about at least certain aspects of nationalization and the welfare state. Pitting Britain against some of its allies from the Second World War (those emerging superpowers) and involving British corporate as well as government interests abroad, the Suez crisis captures many of the tensions around Britain's role in the wider world. When Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser moved to nationalize the Suez Canal in September 1956, British interests were threatened. The nation relied on oil transported through the canal, and Eden viewed the canal as an essential conduit for troop movements as well as trade. In cooperation with Israel and France, the United Kingdom undertook military action against Egypt. The United Kingdom hoped for continued, and even strengthened, influence in the Middle East by holding control of the canal and removing Nasser from power. The action was opposed, however, by both the United States and the Soviet Union, and their pressure forced British and French withdrawal before the strategic aims could be achieved. The United Kingdom was forced to confront its diminished power to affect the turn of events in strategically important regions. The crisis hastened Eden's resignation and was felt as a blow to national prestige. At the same time as the Suez crisis struck this blow, increased immigration from colonies and former colonies, especially from the Caribbean and Africa, was having an impact on civic and cultural life in British cities. Where the 1951 General Census gave the nonwhite population of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland at about 75,000 (mostly located in port and heavily industrial cities), by the 1961 census the figure had quadrupled to over 330,000 (Saggar 2003: 314). On the one hand, this rise provoked attitudes of suspicion and hostility, with the formation of anti-immigrant groups like the Birmingham Immigration Control Association and the Southall Residents' Association and the emergence of a Parliamentary force arrayed

against immigration (2003: 315). On the other hand, the cultural rejuvenation promised by figures like the calypso genius, Lord Kitchener, who arrived in London from Jamaica in 1948, received positive support in the media and in the community.

The first decade or so after the war brought different challenges to Ireland. Having maintained neutrality during the Second World War, the Irish Free State did not suffer the widespread bombing of urban areas or manufacturing centers that British cities (including Belfast, Northern Ireland) did. While Germany did conduct some air raids on Ireland, the Free State did not experience anything like the destruction seen elsewhere in Britain. As a consequence of its neutral stance, Ireland received a good deal of criticism and prejudice from Britain in the years following the war, from Winston Churchill's comments in his VE Day speech that it would have been "quite easy and quite natural" to attack the Free State (Britain had, after all, invaded neutral Iceland in 1940) to the United Nations (UN) Security Council's rejection of Ireland's application for membership in the UN. (The Republic, formed by the Republic of Ireland Act in 1948 and finally separated from Britain by the Ireland Act in 1949, was admitted to the UN only in 1955.)

As Roy Foster and others have suggested, the effect of the country's neutrality and the international response to it was to exacerbate the insularity of the Free State/Republic. The old enmities of the Revolution and Civil War gave way to new divisions, but government control still alternated between two Nationalist parties: the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. In 1948, the Republic formed its first multiparty government, a coalition including Fine Gael, the Labour party, and the Republican-socialist Clann na Poblachta (founded by Sean MacBride, whose parents were the famous Nationalists John MacBride and Maud Gonne). With its trading and other international relationships limited for some years after the war, Ireland was thrown back upon itself, with the twin forces of cultural nationalism and the Catholic Church working together to render the new nation something of a parochial backwater. Where the British government established the National Health Service, for example, the Irish government's effort was defeated after vigorous resistance by the church, which owned and controlled the majority of hospitals and other medical facilities in the country. Similarly, with no social welfare system comparable to that built in Britain during the late 1940s, Ireland faced severe difficulties with unemployment and poverty, including strikes and demonstrations.

The cultural consequences of Irish insularity were, perhaps, even more obvious than the economic and political consequences. The Republic became infamous for its censorship of literary and cultural productions during the 1950s. While the Committee on Evil Literature, founded in 1926, had lasted only as long as it took the group to create and file its report (which resulted in the censorship of numerous books), a Censorship of Publications Board continued to work in the Republic. Bans remained in place for books that had been declared unsuitable for Irish readers in the 1920s, and new publications by John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, D.H. Lawrence, Robert Graves, and others were banned. Irish writers, too, felt the force of the Censorship Board; during the 1950s, the Board banned work by Austin Clarke, Benedict Kiely, Kate O'Brien, Brendan Behan, Frank O'Connor, and Sean O'Faolain. While the nongovernmental Arts Council of Ireland opposed censorship and worked to award innovative artists and writers throughout the 1950s, bans on new books by Irish writers like Edna O'Brien and John McGahern continued through the 1960s.

Caught between the economic, political, social, and cultural worlds of the United Kingdom on the one hand and the Republic of Ireland on the other, the province of Northern Ireland occupied a unique position. Citizens benefited from the British welfare state, but members of the large Catholic minority faced discrimination in the distribution of social welfare as well as employment. Where Belfast was, in many ways, similar to other northern British industrial centers during the 1950s, the religious and cultural divisions within the city led to tension, especially along the border between the Catholic Falls Road neighborhood and the adjacent Protestant Shankill Road neighborhood. As David McKittrick (2002) writes, tensions also simmered in the province's second largest city, Derry/Londonderry, especially when members of the Protestant and Loyalist fraternal societies (the Orange Order, the Apprentice Boys) celebrated the defeat of Catholic Irish rebels at the Battle of the Boyne with marches through the city every twelfth of July. Political and cultural tensions occasionally broke out into open violence. When the Republican radical paramilitary, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), carried out raids along the border of Northern Ireland in an effort to overthrow British rule in the province and bring about a united Ireland (beginning in 1956, with the so-called Border Campaign), the Stormont government interned hundreds of Republican suspects under the Special Powers Act. Over the course of the decade's last half, ten IRA activists were killed and more than four hundred interned, while half a dozen members of the British Royal Ulster Constabulary

(RUC) were killed and over thirty wounded. The stage was set for the “Troubles” that would erupt at the end of the 1960s from the combination of sectarian tensions within Northern Ireland and pressures from outside the province, emanating from both Britain and the Republic.

Ireland, on both sides of the border, was mired in what would become a decades-long process of working out how two countries and two cultures could inhabit one island, especially in light of the other, larger island just to its east. Within Britain, the dominant mood of the 1950s might be summarized in Alistair Davies’s phrase as one of “post-imperial melancholy” (in Sinfield 2004: 2). Davies locates this melancholy in a variety of cultural sites and practices – “the cultivation of empiricism in philosophy, of the figurative in painting, of realism in fiction, of the personal voice in poetry, and of the comic and the domestic in film and television” – and sets these against the “dominant forms of artistic modernity in postwar America and Europe” (Sinfield 2004: 2–3).

Changes came about in both Britain and Ireland during the 1960s as the result of several intertwined historical forces. As Alan Sinfield, among others, has argued, however, the 1960s as we remember and imagine them did not really begin until the middle of the decade (2004). The stage for change was set in part by the dismantling of the British Empire that began in the years immediately after the end of the war. This sped up considerably, so that by the mid-1960s, many of the empire’s African and Caribbean colonies had achieved independence. To describe it this way, though, is to obscure the widespread and vicious violence that accompanied, resisted, and enabled decolonization in Kenya, Cyprus, Aden (later Yemen), and Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe). In Kenya, for example, thousands were forcibly displaced from Nairobi, and the British not only detained leaders but also engaged in torture, beating of prisoners, concentration camps for Kenyans detained without trial, and bombing of tribal areas in which it was suspected that guerilla fighters were hidden and supported. In addition, the international situation for the British Isles continued to be determined largely by the combination of Cold War tensions between the United States and the USSR and the difficulties of European trade and the erosion of the sterling currency’s value.

Cultural tensions at home derived from several key problems. First, race relations continued to be fraught in spite of an economy that had, by the early 1950s, successfully settled into peacetime stability and nearly full employment. One exacerbating factor was the long-standing shortage of housing in some urban areas. While workers from the Caribbean were actively

sought out and invited to immigrate by some employers (including the National Health Service and London Transport), prejudice against black immigrants often made life difficult for the newly arrived. As Sheila Patterson wrote, on the basis of research she conducted for her 1963 book, *Dark Strangers*, the conventional “black” phenotype “is associated with alienness, and with the lowest social status. Primitiveness, savagery, violence, sexuality, general lack of control, sloth, irresponsibility...” (quoted in Sinfield 2004: 127). At the same time, though, blackness connoted “athletic, artistic, and musical gifts,” as well as “an appealing and childlike simplicity.” The musical and other cultural contributions of black immigrants to a community might (or might not) be appreciated, but the combination of intense competition for jobs in a difficult economy and of lingering prejudices (largely an inheritance of justifications for imperialism) led to rioting and violence against black immigrants in, for example, Nottingham and Notting Hill in 1958.

Racial tensions intersected with an emerging tension between generations. By the late 1950s, children born just before the war, children whose parents had fought and survived the war, whether as combatants or civilians, had reached young adulthood. The consensus that united the major political parties in support of the welfare state and the special relationship with the United States had dominated the youths of these young adults, and the contradictions inherent in that consensus often affected these citizens most acutely. On the one hand, the welfare state provided greater security against poverty than this generation’s parents had enjoyed; on the other hand, government attention to domestic security tended to mean a reduction of Britain’s presence in global politics. On the one hand, the special relationship with the United States offered a mode of transatlantic cultural identification; on the other hand, the (repeatedly thwarted) efforts at joining the EEC and then the European Common Market offered a mode of European cultural identification. (Both the United States and Europe enjoyed greater economic growth in the late 1950s and early 1960s than Britain.) On the one hand, the Cold War produced enormous and ineluctable anxiety over the possibility of nuclear war; on the other hand, the popular culture of the United States, from films like *Rebel Without a Cause* to musical figures like Elvis Presley and Bill Haley, provided both energy and release. The proprieties insisted upon by an older generation came to be felt as both outdated and irritating, and the youth culture imported from America provided vocabularies and practices of resistance, refusal, and revision. These were especially attractive to young people as unemployment rose and the sterling currency was devalued in the early 1960s.

To take the temperature of this period, one could do worse than to glance at a handful of films that were at once controversial and popular in Britain during the early 1960s. Based on Alan Sillitoe's novel, the 1960 film *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, starring Albert Finney, followed the plight of a Nottingham factory worker whose weeks of drudgery are relieved only by weekends of drinking and sex. Arthur Seaton flouts social conventions; he struggles to avoid the settled life of work and marriage his society has scripted for him; he conducts an affair with the wife of a coworker (the film's crisis involves her pregnancy with Arthur's child) even as he courts another young woman. The sacrifices and lifestyle of the generation that had been adults during the war are held up (by Arthur, at least) for ridicule and rejection, though the film suggests no way out for the young man. At the end, he faces the same prospects of work and marriage that he struggled against at the beginning. Extramarital pregnancy is also the crisis in Tony Richardson's 1961 film, *A Taste of Honey*, but here the complications arise not from either partner's marital status but from the fact that the young woman is white and the young man is black. Based on Shelagh Delaney's play, the film begins and ends in familial dysfunction, with the protagonist, a young woman named Jo, living with her alcoholic mother. Jo's brief sexual relationship with a black sailor leaves her pregnant. Her mother's new relationship leaves her effectively homeless. Jo finds brief respite with a gay roommate, but when her mother leaves her new boyfriend, the supportive household falls apart. Jo is left with her mother again and with neither visible means of escaping her grim circumstances nor any suggestion that life will be better for the next generation. In 1963, John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar*, based on the novel by Keith Waterhouse, follows the comic adventures of Billy Fisher, stuck in a (literal) dead-end job in a Yorkshire mortuary and fantasizing about grand new lives for himself. Like Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, Billy is caught up with two young women, each of whom wants to marry him and draw him into a settled life. He is also strongly attracted to another, Liz, who is free-spirited and offers escape to London. In trouble at work, at home, and with both of his fiancées, Billy is on the verge of leaving with Liz when he suffers a crisis of confidence. He intentionally misses the train to London, letting Liz go on her own and resigning himself to a life of continued frustration and compensatory fantasy.

These tensions, brewing throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, found full cultural expression by the middle of the 1960s. The "sixties" might be seen in political terms to begin with the Labour victory in the 1964 general election,

which brought Harold Wilson into the position of Prime Minister. In cultural terms, Philip Larkin marks the moment of change “in 1963/(Which was just too late for me)/Between the end of the Chatterley ban/and the Beatles first LP” (1988: 167). The Labour party won its first (narrow) majority since 1951 in the October election (and was partly enabled even to this fairly feeble achievement by the Profumo scandal that had severely weakened the Conservative government). The party took over an economy that had begun to falter, largely as a result of a trade deficit. Even as it struggled to address the economy, the Wilson government introduced or supported measures to legalize homosexual activity among males, to reform divorce laws, to legalize abortion, to address racial discrimination, and to abolish theater censorship. Government policy was not the only, and probably not the most important, factor in the cultural shift associated with such labels for the period as “the swinging sixties.” Widespread and long-simmering dissatisfaction with the available cultural roles for both men and women, especially among the middle and working classes, and similarly long-standing desires for greater freedoms – expressive, sexual, and economic – led to overwhelming popularity for rebellious cultural voices.

Those rebellious voices were perhaps loudest in the clubs where rock bands performed, but they were also clearly audible in the streets when youth identifying with one or another “subculture” made their presence felt in the public sphere. The Beatles, whom Larkin uses as a metonym for the advent of “sexual intercourse,” were, of course, enormously popular, not only in Britain but also in the United States. Other bands that also drew much of their sound from African American rhythm and blues and from American rock and roll (the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Yardbirds, the Animals) came to dominate the English pop music scene by the middle of the 1960s, and in the latter half of the decade, these acts were joined by The Who and Led Zeppelin. While many British youths consolidated their rebellious attitudes through what the cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg calls “affective commitment” experienced in the consumption of popular music, some took their rebellion further by committing through dress and a variety of social practices to one or another youth subculture (1992). In his influential book, *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige describes the components of Teddy Boy and Mod styles and locates the roots of these competing subcultures in reactions to economic factors and to the presence of West Indian immigrants and their own music and social scenes (Hebdige 1979). Where the disaffected working-class Teddy Boys of the late 1950s had co-opted African American rhythm and blues (even as they often fought West Indian immigrants in the

streets during “race riots” in London and elsewhere) and juxtaposed the music to an exaggerated faux-Edwardian wardrobe to mark their difference from the mainstream of society, the Mods of the mid-1960s were, as Hebdige writes, “more subtle and subdued in appearance” (1979: 52). They took up the short haircut and suit with tie of the buttoned-down English middle class but “quietly disrupted the orderly sequence which leads from signifier to signified,” undermining the “conventional meaning” of their dress and haircut. At the same time, the Mods performed their “emotional affinity with black people” (1979: 53) by consuming what Hebdige calls “the more esoteric soul imports” (1979: 53), and they performed their resistance to the workaday world by engaging in amphetamine-fueled weekend parties, often in such holiday spots as Brighton and Blackpool. Generational conflict became a crucial lens through which various social tensions were focused.

While social changes brought certain dislocations and disruptions (including the sporadic violence of “race riots” and trade union strikes) in England, Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland in the 1960s, they erupted with real and sustained violence in Northern Ireland. As David McKittrick (2002) writes, the Catholic and Republican communities (which overlapped but which should not be seen as identical) had, since the partition of 1922, experienced discrimination in employment and various forms of prejudice in political and social life. Movements for Catholic civil rights grew throughout the 1960s, especially in the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, and, along with the criminal activity of Republican paramilitaries, provoked suspicion and reflexive hardening of positions among the Protestant and Loyalist communities (which similarly overlapped but were not identical). These reactions intensified in 1966. That year, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a Loyalist paramilitary, attacked a Catholic-owned shop in the Protestant Shankill Road of Belfast. The group issued a declaration of war against the IRA and undertook a series of shooting attacks against Catholic businesses and individuals. In 1967, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) began a civil rights campaign, which included, in 1968, marches to protest housing discrimination, the gerrymandering of electoral districts, and the “Special Powers Act,” which had, since 1922, granted the RUC the capacity to hold suspects without trial and to take extraordinary measures to keep the peace.

These rising tensions exploded in 1968, when Catholic civil rights marchers in Derry/Londonderry went ahead with a planned march in spite of a government ban. The marchers were attacked by the RUC and

three days of rioting ensued. Similar sequences of events transpired in Belfast later in 1968 and early in 1969, and in the summer of 1969, violence wracked Derry/Londonderry again when Catholic residents of the Bogside area protested a march through their neighborhood by the Loyalist Apprentice Boys. Violence, in the form of riots, protests and counterprotests, shootings, and bombings continued through the 1960s and early 1970s, peaking in 1972. Militants on both the Nationalist and Loyalist sides increased the frequency and virulence of their attacks, while the governments of Northern Ireland and of the United Kingdom met the troubles with violence of their own, from the internment of hundreds of people (the vast majority Catholics, not all of them Republican or Nationalist) to the militarized reaction of police and, finally, the introduction of British troops into the cities of Northern Ireland.

The bloody year of 1972 began with British soldiers shooting into a crowd of civil rights demonstrators in Derry/Londonderry on Sunday, January 30. The Provisional IRA, a violent splinter group of the Irish paramilitary, conducted over 1000 bombings that year. Because many of their targets for bombings were commercial sites, they also killed a number of civilians. For their part, the Loyalist paramilitaries kept up terrorist campaigns of their own, typically involving the torture and murder of suspected IRA and Provisional IRA members. The high casualties during this year brought the British government to intervene, superseding the Stormont government in Belfast and putting Northern Ireland under direct rule from Westminster through the Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act. Only in 1998, fully thirty years after they began, could these “Troubles” be said to end (and they threaten to break out again from time to time even now) with that year’s “Good Friday” peace accord, agreed by Loyalists, Nationalists, and the British government. What this means is that citizens in Northern Ireland (and, to a lesser extent, in British cities in which the IRA carried out bombings) lived under the constant threat of violence for over a generation.

As Sked argues, the 1970s saw the dissolution of the political and social consensus that had largely held during the decades after the Second World War (2003: 53). The underlying cause of this was the continuing erosion of the British economy under stresses from multiple sources. International economic factors affected the economy in Britain. The system of fixed currency exchange rates associated with the postwar Bretton Woods agreements ended in 1971, and the pound sterling entered the market of floating exchange rates in 1972. This was followed in 1973 by an energy

crisis, a consequence of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)'s decision to limit production of oil and to increase the price of oil fourfold on the global market. A new balance of payments crisis ensued as Britain struggled with these inflationary pressures. At the same time and perhaps as a consequence, labor disputes became increasingly fractious and frequent. Inflation was a persistent problem, and it peaked at almost 27% in 1975, in spite of government efforts to control wage increases. A stubbornly high unemployment rate in the early part of the decade, along with the effects of inflation on the value of workers' pay (and, at least in the minds of Conservative thinkers, overweening power and militancy on the part of trade unions), led to a miserable climate in relations among labor, management, and the government. Where the Wilson government had sought in its *In Place of Strife* labor policy document both cooperation from unions and the option of legal restraint on strikes deemed unofficial, the Conservative government of Edward Heath (elected in 1970) took a sterner line against unions in its Industrial Relations Bill of 1971. Major strikes in 1972 showed that the unions were willing to challenge the government on behalf of workers.

The difficult economic conditions Britons faced during these years provoked widespread dissatisfaction with government. Labour lost control of government in 1970. Unhappiness with Heath's government but lingering distrust of Labour, amidst a climate of industrial unrest (including a strike by the National Union of Miners), led to an ambiguous result in the February 1974 general election; with no clear majority, Labour formed a minority government under Wilson. Another election that October brought Labour a slim majority of three. With the election of Margaret Thatcher to leadership of the Conservative party in 1975, the stage was set for a wholesale renegotiation of the domestic consensus in Britain. While the Labour party continued in power, first under Wilson and then, upon his resignation in 1976, under James Callaghan, and finally, from 1977, in a coalition with the Liberal party, the Conservatives developed a platform and a strategy that would enable not only a return to government in 1979 but also a consolidation of power through the 1980s.

The nadir of postwar British economic and social life might have come with the so-called Winter of Discontent in 1978–1979. Economic woes and labor strife combined with the most severe winter since 1962–1963 to wreck the government. Public resentment of unions rose over labor actions (local authority unions conducted numerous strikes in an effort to win larger wage increases for workers, gravediggers and refuse collectors struck,

and nonmedical workers with the National Health Service picketed hospital entrances), while the Labour and Liberal parties were held responsible and seen as ineffectual. Youth subcultures of the mid- and late 1970s took a more aggressive turn against the values of older generations. The most prominent punk rock band, the Sex Pistols, recorded and released a single, “God Save the Queen,” whose lyrics linked the British monarchy and fascism, whose music assaulted listeners used to smooth production and easy vocal harmonies, and whose sleeve was illustrated with an image of Queen Elizabeth II with a black stripe over her eyes like that seen in pornographic photographs of the 1950s. Their LP included a song – “Holidays in the Sun” – that made light of the Holocaust and the Second World War in ways calculated to disgust the generation that had fought and lived through the war. The dress, dance, and social styles of this subculture adopted and adapted markers of marginality, wearing markers of outcast status as badges of honor and invading public spaces to forcefully make themselves visible. For a large segment of British society, youth culture seemed to be sick in ways that registered the society’s disintegration. The government that could neither right the economy nor control the unions was held responsible, at least when the 1979 election came around.

One way to understand the renegotiation of the consensual social contract that had generally governed British life since the end of the war is offered by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who describes the structure underpinning the Thatcherite consolidation of the 1980s as “authoritarian populism.” In his book, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, Hall argues that “Thatcherite politics are ‘hegemonic,’” by which he means that

the aim is to struggle on several fronts at once, not on the economic-corporate one alone; and this is based on the knowledge that, in order really to dominate and restructure a social formation, political, moral and intellectual leadership must be coupled to economic dominance.

(1988: 154)

Where trade unions, left-leaning intellectuals, and Labour politicians focused on the economic well-being of their constituents or cohorts, Hall suggests, Thatcher and her allies in the Conservative party of the mid- to late 1970s understood that popular feeling in the nation could be harnessed, through a variety of institutions and cultural practices, to the right-wing economic agenda of denationalization and the unraveling of the welfare state. A key here was the deployment of “patriotism” and

“British values” in the service of a Conservative economic and political agenda. Branding as “unpatriotic” the miners who went on strike during the oil embargo of the early 1970s, Edward Heath offered a preview of this tactic. Under Thatcher in the late 1970s, the “national interest” was so tightly identified with the interests of capital that resistance to those interests (such as agitation for improved wages and/or working conditions) was defined as “a conspiracy against ‘the British way of life’” (1988: 23). Any crisis in British society (such as the one suggested by aggressive youth culture) was said to have, at its heart, some agents conspiring to upset the consensus that would otherwise have produced a harmonious society. In order to protect the real interests of “the people,” identified repeatedly through education, the media, and popular culture as identical to the interests of capital (this is the “populism” in Hall’s phrase), first the Conservative party and then, after the 1979 election, the government were granted the power to repress “everything which threatens or is contrary to the logic of the state” (that’s the “authoritarianism”) (1988: 23).

The Conservative victory in the 1979 general election was also accompanied by the defeat of Nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales. As Tom Nairn argues in *The Break-up of Britain*, Nationalist desires had simmered beneath the postwar consensus, in part as a displacement of dissatisfaction with the economic and political settlements of the period. Long encouraged by Labour governments (though the Labour party itself was divided on the issue), movements for devolution in the two nations grew through the 1970s. In 1969, Harold Wilson established a commission to analyze current constitutional relations between Scotland, Wales, and England. The divisions within Labour on the subject of devolution, the economic turmoil and labor unrest of the 1970s, and the deeply entrenched resistance to Scottish and Welsh nationalism in the newly dominant Conservative party led to severe setbacks for Nationalists at the end of the decade. In the general election that brought Thatcher to power, the Scottish Nationalist party collapsed. In Wales, a national referendum on devolution (the St. David’s Day referendum) failed, with almost four times as many voting against devolution proposals as for them. As unhappy as many might have been about it, the Union Jack flag continued to wave as a symbol of *British* nationalism (which was strongly identified with the *English* state).

The miners’ strike of 1984, which we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is a key moment in the consolidation of this renegotiation of the postwar social contract. For many Conservatives, it had been Edward Heath’s failure adequately to deal with the National Union of Miners in

1974 that had led to the downfall of his government. Disagreement between the union and the government over national coal policy again came to a head in 1984, when the National Coal Board, which administered the heavily subsidized industry, undertook to close a number of coal mines it had deemed unprofitable (this meant the loss of thousands of jobs in the coal industry). Determined to break the power of industrial unions, the Thatcher government prepared in advance for the anticipated reaction among coal miners and in coal mining areas by stockpiling coal and converting some power stations to run on petroleum instead of coal. The announcement of pit closures in March was met immediately with strikes, first at threatened mines and then, as the NUM coordinated these local actions, across the nation. The strike continued for almost a year, ending early in March 1985, when the NUM's membership voted to return to work without having agreed new terms with the Coal Board. Along the way, the strike cast into sharp relief the gulf between those in British society hewing to the old postwar social contract and the newly emergent social formation in which state power aligned with the interests of capital. Police were mobilized to disperse pickets and to enable strike-breaking workers access to mines and other workplaces, and the government took a hard line against providing or allowing financial relief for miners whose families went for months without wages and, in many cases, endured severe poverty as a result. In June 1984, about 5000 miners confronted a similar number of police, many armed with truncheons and some mounted on horseback, at the Orgreave Coking Plant in South Yorkshire. After a series of provocations from both sides, police on horseback charged into the line of miners.

The Thatcher government mobilized patriotism, comforting notions of "Britishness," and the image of enemies both foreign (especially Soviet communism) and domestic (workers and others who agitated against the equation of the national good and the interests of capital) in support of efforts to denationalize industries, such as coal, steel, and railways, and to dismantle parts of the welfare state that had been in place since the Attlee government. As Sked writes, Thatcher cut government spending on housing and transport. She led her government to cut direct taxes on income and wealth while increasing more regressive indirect taxes (2003: 49). The close relationship between Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan symbolized a renewal of the "special relationship" between Britain and the United States, and these two Conservative administrations provided mutual reinforcement and strength both on the global stage and

in each nation. Thatcher maintained as hard a line in Ireland as she did against Soviet communism, and she proved her willingness to go to war to defend British interests when, in 1982, her government reacted to the Argentine invasion of the disputed Falkland Islands by sending the British Navy to retake the islands. The British victory in this two-month conflict elicited from many Britons enthusiastic support for Thatcher and her government. Repeated electoral victories consolidated both Conservative power and the new consensus.

The party's strength was complicated by ongoing disagreements over Britain's relationship with the European community. Under both Labour and Conservative governments, the United Kingdom had sought entry into the European Common Market in the 1950s and 1960s. Those efforts had been thwarted by vetoes from France. In 1975, the Conservative party had supported entry into the European Community in a national referendum, but during her premiership Thatcher opposed joining the European Union, which united a number of EEC member states under a common currency. After achieving deregulation and a smaller role for government in Britain, she spoke often and explicitly about the dangers of inviting regulation and intrusion from an international governing body located on the continent. Other influential voices in the party, though, strongly advocated integration in the economic union of Europe. Only at the end of her period in government, in 1990, did Thatcher agree to British entry into the Exchange Rate Mechanism, which preceded the European economic union of the Maastricht agreements (Sked 2003: 51).

The Conservative party's hold on government weakened during the 1990s, but the ideological renegotiation that began in the 1970s has been maintained all the way up to the present. Discontent with Thatcher within her own party, culminating in a leadership challenge by Michael Heseltine, led the Prime Minister to resign in 1990. She was succeeded by John Major, who led the party through a fourth consecutive general election victory in 1992. These intraparty tensions and the relative weakness of Major as a leader (weakness exacerbated by continual challenge for leadership from within the party) softened the party's electoral dominance and opened the way for the Labour party's return to power in the 1997 general election. That change of government was also enabled by the rise of Tony Blair, who ascended to leadership of the Labour party after John Smith died suddenly in 1994. Under Blair, Labour surged to a resounding victory in 1997. But the Labour party that came to power after eighteen years of Conservative dominance was not the Labour party that had governed in

the 1960s and 1970s. Blair rose to leadership of the party in part by leading a drive to revise the party's platform, shifting from its traditional commitment to socialism and the nationalization of industry to a so-called Third Way, a government from the imagined political center. In effect, this meant acceptance of the Thatcherite terms of economic and social relations (just as Bill Clinton, in the United States, largely accepted the outlines of Reaganism). Blair led Britain into increased economic integration with Europe, continued many of Thatcher's policies regarding taxation, and introduced policies – student tuition fees in higher education, market reforms in the health-care system, reduction of some welfare payments, and increasing surveillance of the population through identity card requirements and closed-circuit television (CC TV) cameras in British cities – that a Conservative government might not have been able to achieve.

One major political change during Blair's premiership, however, involved the devolution of governing power from Westminster to national assemblies in Scotland and Wales. After the failure of the St. David's Day referendum and the collapse of the Scottish Nationalist party in 1979, the Nationalist parties in both nations continued to seek devolution but had to face the Thatcher government's recalcitrance on the issue. Blair and the Labour party ran in the 1997 election on the promise of devolution for Scotland and Wales, though, and after the election successful referenda on devolution created semiautonomous assemblies in Wales and Scotland. Parliamentary acts of 1998 granted these assemblies control over the spending of national budgets and limited powers on other local issues. Agitation continues in both nations for expanding the governing power of the national assemblies. The majority in a Welsh referendum in 2011 supported greater power for the assembly, and in Scotland the devolution debates cross over into debates about the desirability of complete independence from the United Kingdom.

Blair's government also presided over an important change in politics in Northern Ireland. At the height of the Troubles there, in 1972, the Parliament of Northern Ireland had been suspended and direct rule from Westminster reimposed on the nation. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, attempts were made to reinstate devolved government in Northern Ireland as new assemblies were created, but none of these succeeded amidst the country's climate of violence and mistrust. Instead of restoring devolution, the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985; under this agreement, the two governments would cooperate in matters regarding security and a political process aimed at peace in

Northern Ireland. When the Provisional IRA declared cease-fires in the middle of the 1990s and when the former American Senator George Mitchell brokered peace talks in 1997, a peace agreement for Northern Ireland (the “Good Friday Agreement”) was concluded in 1998. Under this agreement and a series of additional agreements involving the governments of Britain and the Republic of Ireland, political power was again devolved to Belfast.

Just as Thatcher joined with US President Reagan to emphasize the special relationship between the two countries, Blair developed strong relationships with American Presidents Clinton and George W. Bush. He supported the latter’s drive to invade first Afghanistan (in response to terrorist attacks on targets in the United States on September 11, 2001) and, in 2003, Iraq. In addition to solidifying the relationship with the United States (and to standing well apart from some European powers opposed to the Iraq invasion), the Blair government’s actions served to project and promote British military power in Asia and the Middle East.

Tony Blair won second and third terms in 2001 and 2005 but each time with decreasing electoral popular support and increasing internal conflict within the Labour party. The decrease in support was linked to an unease with Blair’s foreign policy (especially the Afghanistan and Iraq wars and his corresponding close ties to President Bush), to a concern about economic policy, and to a growing sense of governmental dishonesty. In 2007 Blair resigned and was replaced by Gordon Brown who as the Chancellor of the Exchequer had been in charge of the economy throughout Blair’s premiership. Accordingly, he promised to continue neoliberal economic policies with their emphasis on controlling inflation by keeping interest rates low and on supporting the financial sector. He defended this policy by pointing out that there had been consistent economic growth from 1997 onwards.

In Ireland, the 1990s had seen unprecedented growth to such an extent that its economy was compared to the growth of such Asian economies as Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, and it was given the name “Celtic Tiger.” Driven by the service, informational, and property sectors, the economy grew at high rate for near to a decade. Bertie Ahern’s Fianna Fáil government came to power in 1997 and was re-elected in both 2002 and 2007 on the strength of this economy, with Brian Cowan replacing Ahern as Taoiseach in 2008. For the first time in the state’s history, immigration began to outpace emigration, and Ireland, especially Dublin, became a symbol of the mobile, cash-, and consumer-rich transnational young

employees of the informational industries. Culturally, the influence of the Roman Catholic Church declined dramatically both in the wake of a series of scandals and in the face of increasing secularization.

In Britain, culturally, the ten years of the Blair government became linked to the idea of “Cool Britannia,” in which Britain, especially London, was celebrated and advertised as a center of innovation, particularly in the culture industries. More often than not, the images produced were imbued with a sense of historical irony through the use of pastiche while explicitly embracing their status as commodities. In the various fields of popular music, art, fashion, and tourism, allusions to the past were used to celebrate the consumer culture of the present. In contrast to the parodic critical irony of punk imagery, the ubiquitous “Keep Calm and Carry On” slogan embossed on everything from t-shirts to iPod sleeves exemplified the dominant mode of cynical and ironic pastiche. Blair’s government, in turn, emphasized the advertising and selling of “Britain” through media spectacles such as the Millennium Dome and, in 2005, the winning of the hosting rights for the 2012 Olympics.

However, economic growth came to a juddering halt in the early years of Brown’s premiership, culminating in 2008 with the worst national and international financial crisis since the Wall Street Crash of 1929. At the heart of the crisis lay the massive increase of borrowing in all sectors of the economy (from the personal, private, business, financial, public, to governmental levels), borrowing that had fueled the economic growth of the previous decade. Furthermore, this borrowing had been enabled through increasingly complicated financial transactions that bundled this debt together and sold it through repeated transactions. The collapse of the US subprime mortgage market was followed by the meltdown of the US housing market. This, in turn, led to severe strains on the banking industry, a massive constriction on credit, and a worldwide recession. In Britain a number of banks (most importantly Northern Rock and the Royal Bank of Scotland) collapsed and were essentially taken over by the government. Unemployment rose dramatically and Britain entered into a recession. In common with the US government, Brown departed from the neoliberal orthodoxy of the previous three decades by shifting to a more Keynesian response that emphasized government spending to stimulate the economy.

With the 2010 election, thirteen years of Labour government came to an end, and with no party having an absolute majority, the David Cameron-led Conservative party joined with Nick Clegg’s Liberal Democrats to form a coalition government. Returning to neoliberal economic orthodoxy,

Cameron's government emphasized cutting government spending, keeping interest rates and inflation low, and further extending privatization, particularly in the education and health sectors. In 2011 a series of large-scale riots broke out in the major cities of Britain, especially in London. Their causes continue to be debated. Looking over the postwar period as a whole, it is notable how frequently riots have occurred. Each of the main decades has seen large-scale civil unrest, such as the 1958 Notting Hill riots, the 1969 riots in Derry/Londonderry and Belfast, the 1979 riot in Southall, the Brixton and Toxteth riots of 1981, and the poll tax riots in 1990. Each successive incident has raised unresolved and continuing questions about the nature and future of British society. There seems, however, to have been a consistent agreement about the link between such unrest and various forms of economic, social, racial, and ethnic discrimination and inequality.

In Ireland the effect of the financial crisis was even more severe. The collapse of the property market both home and abroad revealed that Irish banks had overextended themselves to such an extent that not only was their solvency under threat but also that of the state itself. In spite of significant protests, the Irish government acceded to the demands of the European Union and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to guarantee the debts and to follow austerity measures in return for receiving economic support in the form of further loans. To many, it seemed that Ireland's historic position as the first twentieth-century nation to win independence from the British Empire had been betrayed by its leaders and that the state entered the twenty-first century having lost control of its economic sovereignty. In the election of 2011, Fianna Fáil was overwhelmingly defeated. Enda Kenny's Fine Gael came to power in a coalition government and continued to follow the economic measures agreed upon with the European Union and the IMF. Entering 2013, for Ireland as for Britain, the immediate economic future looked bleak.

The period under question in this book can be bookended by the two London Olympics of 1948 and 2012. As the media delighted in announcing, the differences between the two are striking. The BBC's Peter Jackson and *The Guardian's* Simon Rogers pointed out that they cost £750,000 in 1948 and £9.3 billion in 2012; in 1948 people could listen to the events on radio in about fifty countries, whereas in 2012 the global audience was estimated to be four billion on radio, TV, and the Internet. In 1948 there were about 4000 competitors from about sixty countries, very few of whom were women; in 2012 there were about 10,000 competitors from

over 200 nations, and the number of men and women was divided evenly. The athletes in 1948 were housed in military barracks and were on rations, whereas in 2012 custom-built luxury apartments were built as a form of urban development. Great Britain's virtually all-white 1948 Olympic team won twenty-three medals, three of which were gold; the multiethnic team of 2012 won sixty-five medals, twenty nine of which were gold (Jackson 2012: n.p.; Rogers 2012: n.p.). The two dominant figures of the Great Britain's 2012 track-and-field team were Jessica Ennis and Mo Farah. Ennis was the daughter of a Jamaican father and English mother and trained in, and was closely identified with, Sheffield and Yorkshire; Farah was born in Somalia, joined his father in England at eight, is a devout Muslim, and trains in the United States. The unpaid amateurs of 1948, with their part-time training schedules, were replaced by the commercially sponsored professionals of 2012, with their full-time, regimented, and extraordinarily complicated training schedules, where the cycling team, for example, knew the effect of an extra ounce on a competitor's bicycle.

Such stark differences raise what Fredric Jameson regards as the central problem facing critics who seek to represent and interpret the past: how do we negotiate the "peculiar, unavoidable, yet seemingly unresolvable alternation between Identity and Difference" (1988: 150). If we make the past too different from us, he points out, then it becomes impossible to understand and the connections between then and now are lost, but if we make the past too similar to us, then the past also disappears since it now becomes identical to us. For literary critics, such historical context as this chapter provides also raises the question of the relationship between such narratives and events and individual poems. Poems don't simply reflect their historical context; rather, they represent it – often in oblique ways. History, then, is mediated in and by poems. Tracing these processes of mediation enables us to access the larger historical forces at work in poems in a way that not only goes beyond content and allusions but also explains what makes poems distinct and individual utterances. In the next chapter, then, we chart the institutional structures within and through which postwar poems have been published and read.

The Literary Landscape

Poems are produced and read in specific historical circumstances, to be sure, but they are produced and read in even more specific *institutional* circumstances, and in this chapter we will sketch in more detail this material matrix of literary production and consumption. Just as it is useful for readers of Harrison's *v.* to know about the conflict between the Thatcher government and the National Union of Miners in the middle of the 1980s, and just as it helps to have a sense of how those years felt to many in Britain, it is important that Harrison processed those events and sensations through literary forms he had learned as a student of classics and linguistics at the University of Leeds (and, before that, as a scholarship student at Leeds Grammar School) and that the poem was published by Bloodaxe, a press with specific commitments to the poetry of northern England and Scotland as well as to the legacy of late modernism. Moreover, the ways we read the poem might (and ought to) be influenced by its initial reception, a reception elicited not only by the poem in print but also by a controversial television presentation of the poem on the BBC's Channel Four (the station dedicated to cultural programming) and by a reprinting of the poem in its entirety in *The Independent*, a liberal newspaper with national circulation. Furthermore, as important as Arthur Scargill or the Battle of Orgreave is for an understanding of the poem and its meanings and significance, the quatrain and scenario familiar from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," the dramatic mingling of dialects and diction registers found in classical tragedy and folk drama, and the mediation of the political through the layers of culture are the crucial means by which the poem's meanings are produced.

Reading Postwar British and Irish Poetry, First Edition. Michael Thurston and Nigel Alderman.

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In this chapter, we trace some (by no means all) of the important institutional sites that have shaped the course of British and Irish poetry after the Second World War. The stories we tell here are informed by an assumption we share and that we want to make explicit from the beginning: poems are constructed of choices that a poet makes, selections from an available range of options, including thematic, rhetorical, formal, and generic possibilities. The extent and variety of that range is determined by the interactions of numerous institutions through which poetry circulates, from the schools in which readers first encounter poetry and learn how they are to respond to it, to the publishers and magazines that decide which kinds of poetry are to be put before the reading public, and to the workshops and discussion groups in which young poets try out their work on small and, usually, sympathetic audiences. We want to emphasize the interactions here because, of course, what happens in one area of the world we are sketching affects what happens elsewhere in that world. More specifically, the number and variety of institutional sites in the poetry world enables the existence of competing notions of the range of available options. As one sense of what poetry is and ought to do becomes dominant, other senses persist in their local sites, and the debates, over time, sometimes shift the sense of the acceptable. In addition, one kind of site might develop, over time, into another; a small group of poets sharing their work and thrashing through their ideas about poetry might begin a magazine, and the magazine might become a publishing concern, and the publisher might sponsor readings and workshops, some of which might in turn develop their own print presences. Students who read one kind of poem in school might grow up to write and publish a quite different kind of poem, which might find its way into the curriculum and onto the syllabus and exams, thereby altering the sense of poetic possibilities for subsequent generations of students and potential poets. If the poems to which we will turn in later chapters of this book respond to the sort of historical contexts we narrated in the last chapter, they do so, in part, by responding to the specific and textured contexts of the literary world made by institutions like those we describe in this chapter.

Poetry in Universities and Schools

The interrelationship between the various levels and institutions of education and other cultural apparatuses forms an important part of the context of postwar poetry. In his work *Distinctions*, the French sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu detailed the interconnections between France's cultural producers and commentators in the various realms of French culture – university, high school, state bureaucracy, media, and so on – and revealed how this was a relatively small network of people, more like three degrees of separation than the usual six. Something similar could be done for Britain since most people who engage in some aspect of the poetry business, whether writing, publishing, reviewing, or filming, whether in a small or large publishing house, whether in the mass or niche media, whether in journalism, television, or radio, will almost certainly have been educated at a university or college. Indeed, probably the majority will have been educated at an even smaller number of universities. As well as indirectly influencing general cultural and social reproduction, universities and colleges of further and higher education also directly affect what and how poetry is taught and read. They do this in a number of ways: they train the teachers who will teach in the school systems; they set or help set the exams, and hence the curricula, that structure the educational system; and they are the goal toward which students are pointed and for which they are prepared.

The most influential department of English in Britain in the twentieth century was the University of Cambridge, and its crucial figures were I.A. Richards, William Empson, F.R. Leavis, and, although he was never a member of it, T.S. Eliot. Significantly, as Chris Baldick observes, the Cambridge English department was created considerably later than elsewhere in England – the first chair of English was only established at University College London in 1828, followed by chairs at further London colleges and other universities as they developed later in the nineteenth century and reached Oxford in 1893. In all cases, however, as Baldick and Terry Eagleton point out, there was a strong philological basis in order to make the subject respectable. There was very little critical or analytical study of literary works. English, however, was not introduced at Cambridge until 1917, and it did not become a separate department until 1926. This delay is of crucial significance because it meant that the department was constructed at a time when the idea that “English” should be the central subject in the Humanities was becoming educational orthodoxy. This idea had gained support throughout the nineteenth century, but it wasn't given state support until 1921 with the publication of the Board of Education's Report, “The Teaching of English in England” (Baldick 1983: 92–107). This document asserts with nationalist and religious fervor that the proper teaching of English in England can restore the nation to its former greatness. An immediate consequence of this climate of

opinion was that Cambridge English, as Raymond Williams writes, “became the first [English] course in England to allow a practical separation between literary and linguistic studies” and “what happened, in very complex ways was a redefinition of ‘true English’ partly behind the cover of [this] separation from philology” (1991: 181). Instead of beginning with *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon, the Cambridge curriculum began with Geoffrey Chaucer’s Middle English iambic pentameter, and instead of ending in the nineteenth century, it finished with the contemporary writing of what later became the canonical modernists. (Indeed F.R. Leavis was investigated by the police for wanting to lecture on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which was banned for obscenity.) In other words, the degree began with the “General Prologue” with its famous opening “Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote” and culminated in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with its response, “April is the cruelest month.”

Consequently, as Williams argues, the discipline’s theoretical paradigm was in “close relation to a new modernism in the contemporary writing and especially to a cultural and pseudo-historical version of this in Eliot: The ‘dissociation of sensibility’” (1991: 187). According to Williams, Eliot argued that there had been a separation of thought and feeling sometime in the seventeenth century which had continued apace over the next three hundred years to produce a modern culture of individual alienation and social instrumentality (1991: 187). For Leavis, this historical paradigm enabled him to argue that this alienation could be healed through the careful study of literature, especially the national literature. He helped create a vision of English departments as, in Williams’ words, “minority carriers of a common tradition, an ‘Englishness,’ of the literature that was made to stand for the ‘Englishness’ of a people” (1991: 221). The continuing influence of this paradigm can still be seen over debates about set texts, curricula, and canons. There still remains a belief that what “we” read, in some sense, generates a sense of who “we” are.

Most importantly, the early Cambridge English department generated a new critical methodology that remains central to any and every literary department: practical criticism or close reading. (This book itself bears witness to its power and continuing relevance.) In a series of lectures, later published in *Practical Criticism* (1929), Richards gave a number of poems, anonymously, to his undergraduates and asked them to comment on them. He was stunned by their lack of attention to the particular; the majority of comments seemed impressionistic, vague, and general. He and his colleagues began to construct a way to talk about language that seemed more analytic, more accurate, more

formal, and more scientific. A student of Richards, William Empson, quickly wrote a book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, which formalized many of the techniques that were being discussed. The most famous example in the book occurs when Empson refers to Shakespeare's comparison in sonnet 73 of growing old with the consequent yellowing of skin and teeth and losing of hair to the ruined choirs of a destroyed abbey:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

Empson explains why the comparison works in the following passage:

Because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and Narcissistic charm suggested by choirboys suits well with Shakespeare's feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the Protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of Puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

(1955: 5)

Here we can see the analytic range and power of this type of close reading: it remains close to the lines, teasing out a dense paragraph essentially from only three words ("bare ruined choirs"); it touches on psychology (how an old man with a young lover feels); it makes historical and sociological claims; and it brings them altogether by ending with an all-encompassing aesthetic claim. The power both of this methodology and the ideology of what Baldick calls the "social mission of English study" meant, in Eagleton's words, that "[Although] in the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all, by the early 1930s it had

become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else” (1996: 27). (The publication of the completed *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1928 is also significant since its sheer size, its anatomy of definitions, its etymological histories, and its supporting exemplary quotations provided a new and rich way for writers to approach language.) Indeed, perhaps the majority of the postwar poets mentioned in this book have been educated in departments of English at further or higher levels.

The compromise between the methodology (close reading) and the ideology (a vision of the national culture) began to break down in the 1960s for a variety of complex social and ideological reasons. Through the figures of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, the emphasis on culture led to the formation of British cultural studies which declared that “culture was ordinary” and criticized the Leavisite emphasis upon “high culture.” The desire for a more scientific mode of analysis led to an increasing distrust of the idea of “great artists” and an emphasis upon the structural codes and systems of language. As a consequence, what Baldick terms the “social mission” of English departments had by the 1970s shrunk, and, as Brian Doyle observes, “the conception of English as a central force for sustaining the national cultural ‘heritage’ would become largely the property of the right” (1983: 120–21).

Throughout the 1980s and the succeeding decades, there has been a broadening of both what texts are taught and the ways in which they are taught. The entry into the field of English of theoretical approaches – structuralism, poststructuralism, Marxism, various forms of psychoanalysis, feminism, deconstruction, postcolonialism, queer studies, and so on – has transformed the ways in which we think about texts and society and has extended our vocabulary and our understanding. The content of the curricula of English departments has similarly expanded to include any and every form of communication, both verbal and visual. Nevertheless, at the center of the field still remains the patient and analytic close reading of signs and sign systems, of words and syntax, and of the form in which, and through which, content is molded.

Of course, students study poetry much earlier in their careers than at university, and the combination of the poetry they study and the sorts of questions that inform their study exerts a powerful influence on the poetries they might imagine and explore. Most students’ first encounters with poetry (as something to study rather than the rhymes and poems they have simply enjoyed) take place through the medium of the textbook or teaching anthology. The contents and organization of such volumes tell

us quite a bit about how the range of poetic styles and possibilities is implicitly defined. There are many examples of this kind of book; we will discuss only a couple of representative titles. Barry Spurr's *Studying Poetry*, first published in 1997 and now in a second, updated edition, advertises itself as "a comprehensive guide to the study of poetry in English for senior secondary pupils and undergraduates and their teachers" (2006: vii). Spurr writes that the chief problems students have with reading poetry are explication and contextualization. He promises, then, to introduce students both to techniques of close reading and to "the periods of history which are relevant to the understanding and appreciation of the cultural heritage to which English culture belongs" (2006: vii). Notice the assumptions that underlie the fairly innocuous prose here. In saying this book is a "comprehensive guide," Spurr suggests that it covers *all* of the poetry that really *is* poetry, which is an indirect way of saying all the poetry that matters. Why does this poetry matter while other poetry might not? Because it conforms to the definitions implicit in Spurr's description of poetry's value and importance. Its language is complex and compressed, but it provides "insights into and interpretations of the human condition" (2006:vii). Poetry that sets out to trouble assumptions about linguistic clarity, formal accessibility, and "the human condition" will not be addressed. Spurr also assumes that the poetry worth studying forms part of a fairly narrow band of expression, the English cultural heritage. More than this, he assumes that students, once properly taught, will not only understand but will also appreciate that culture.

Spurr's assumptions inform and guide the contents and organization of his book. His second chapter, "Describing a Poem," begins with the argument that readers encountering a poem should first "endeavor to identify its principal theme" (2006: 13). Only after they have done so should readers consider the poem's style, by which Spurr means "details of vocabulary (word-usage), syntax (or grammatical structure), punctuation, rhythm and rhyme and all the host of components and devices of poetic diction" (2006: 22). He illustrates points about theme with Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" and points about style with Stevie Smith's "Not Waving But Drowning" and Philip Larkin's "Talking in Bed," three poems in rhymed metrical verse. Implicit here is an equation between "poetry" and such verse. The text is interrupted, from time to time, with discussion questions and assignments for students. These tell us something about the volume's assumptions as well. Students are asked to comment on the thematic significance of Arnold's quotation of Sophocles and on the thematic

and stylistic effect of Smith's use of repetition. At the end of the chapter, they are assigned an essay on Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," in which they should describe the poem's themes and give an account of its style ("the lyrical stanza, the vocabulary and imagery, the combination of thought and emotion") (2006: 29).

None of these things we have pointed out is wrong. The range of what a student might come to count as "poetry," though, is limited by Spurr's prescriptions and the assumptions that underlie them. The volume's survey of literary-historical periods and the set of "special studies" that highlight individual poets confirm that limited range. The bulk of the book covers poetry before the twentieth century, from Chaucer through Tennyson, the "cultural heritage" students should come to "appreciate." The twentieth century's examples of "modernism" and "after modernism" present continuity with this tradition; Yeats and Eliot are the exemplars of modernism, and the period after modernism is illustrated by Robert Lowell, Philip Larkin, Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes.

In *Reading Poetry: An Introduction*, Tom Furniss and Michael Bath are explicit about their book's origins in the classroom. The book began as a course for first-year undergraduates at the University of Strathclyde. Their aims differ somewhat from Spurr's; they make no claim for the comprehensiveness of their guide, acknowledging that their "choice of examples is usually determined by their intrinsic interest or their relevance to our argument" (2007: xv), and they add to the skills of close reading an emphasis on history and literary theory, especially as these complicate "assumptions about what poetry is, and what reading it involves" (2007: xiv–xv). In the chapter called "What Is Poetry? How Do We Read It?" they call attention to the taken-for-granted nature of definitions of poetry and argue that students should think consciously and critically about their assumptions as they read. At the same time, the book begins its treatment of poetic form with rhythm and meter, and its examples, while drawn from a broader range of poetic voices than Spurr's, are also heavily weighted toward rhymed metrical verse. The modernists included by Furniss and Bath add only William Carlos Williams to Yeats and Eliot; the poets after modernism add variety of background (Jean "Binta" Breeze, David Dabydeen, Grace Nichols, and Derek Walcott are included, among others), but not much variety of attitudes about language, form, and poetic purpose.

Our purpose here is not to point fingers and call attention to failings in textbooks. Rather, we hope to suggest that textbooks contribute to what we might think of as the poetic imaginary, the range of things that might be

written or read as poetry. And these two fairly typical examples, for all they do well, sketch a mainstream and somewhat limited poetic imaginary.

Textbooks, of course, are not the only technology by which educational institutions implicitly shape the poetic imaginary. They are joined by syllabi and teaching anthologies, whose contents are marked as especially important and valuable because they receive the imprimatur of the school and/or the state, and by the exams and papers through which students demonstrate their mastery of the texts and techniques that have been set for them, whose assumptions about poetry and its value are visible in the questions they pose. There are, of course, numerous anthologies of poetry available to students. Some cover the entire span of English literary history, some gather poems by women or poems that have to do with a specific theme or poems from some more limited chronological period (or some combination of these). There is also, it should be said, an increasing number and variety of anthologies of experimental or linguistically innovative or otherwise nonmainstream poetry available as well, though these tend to be produced in smaller print runs than the typical academic or popular anthology. All of these can suggest to students and young poets some of the many ways poems can work.

The anthologies that probably have the greatest presence in young readers' experience of poetry, though, are those that are linked to the exams they will take, whether the GCSE or the advanced (A level). These tend to be conservative and mainstream in their selections. The AQA Anthology for English/English literature (2004), for example, includes a sampling of pre-1914 poets and then focuses on two contemporary poets: Seamus Heaney and Gillian Clarke. The poets representing pre-twentieth-century poetry are the ones that have been appearing on syllabi and exam papers for generations. The inclusion of Heaney and Clarke as exemplary contemporary poets suggests several things. First, the educators and administrators compiling the exam acknowledge the importance of the "periphery" of the United Kingdom with this Catholic poet from Northern Ireland and woman poet from Wales. And, with Clarke, the examiners and curriculum developers also acknowledge the value of poems that speak from the vantage point of women. At the same time, the exemplification of contemporary poetry by these two poets, like Spurr's representation of poetry after modernism by means of Lowell, Larkin, Hughes, and Plath, emphasizes continuity with the lyric tradition and forecloses discussion of variation from or resistance to that tradition. Both Heaney and Clarke write first-person lyric poems in which the experience of the speaking subject is made

to figure a broader thematic insight. Moreover, the poets' elegiac, familial, and landscape poems are selected; while this situates the poets in fairly wide tributaries of the mainstream (which is why we devote considerable attention to elegy and landscape poems later in this book), these choices tend to emphasize aspects of the poets' work that is most continuous with the tradition. When Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy were later added to the GCSE reading, the tonal range of poetry offered as models was expanded, but the essential rhetorical and formal options remain fairly limited, and poetry that reaches beyond these means remains invisible.

The questions to which students must respond when they write about these poets show that the mainstream educational institutions' ideas of poetry have not changed much since exams included the sorts of questions of which Alan Sinfield (2004) has been so critical (in a discussion of just such exam questions from earlier postwar decades). Students taking the GCSE these days are invited to compare the presentation of relationship between the speaker and an other in a couple of Armitage poems, to explain how Armitage makes a poem interesting to them, how Clarke or Heaney writes about family relationships, or how poets use "memorable imagery." It goes without saying that students will find Armitage's poems interesting, just as they will the imagery in poems by Clarke or Heaney (and just as students responding to the questions Sinfield quotes would have found Shakespeare to be good and powerful). More than this, the exam questions' focus on theme naturalizes the assumption that poems organize language in order to communicate or convey a theme, an assumption that might well obtain in a majority of postwar poems, but one that many poets have set out precisely to trouble.

It is against just such unexamined orthodoxies that Allen Fisher pokes his tongue into his cheek by titling a collection of his experimental poems *Poetry for Schools*, just as Denise Riley titles one of her collections *Marxism for Infants*.

Faber and Faber

When Geoffrey Faber first became involved in the publishing concern that came to bear his name, it would have been difficult to predict that the company would become, as Peter Middleton describes it, the publisher that "dominated the publication of postwar British poetry" (2009: 248). In 1924, Scientific Press, Ltd., specialized in publications for medical

professionals and its most popular and lucrative title was a magazine for nurses. In 1925, though, Faber hired the poet T.S. Eliot as the company's literary adviser, and in 1929, parting company with his partners in the business, Faber sold *Nursing Mirror* and transformed Faber and Gwyer into Faber and Faber Limited – a press dedicated largely to the publication of contemporary literature (Rose and Anderson 1991: 115). Allowing Eliot a great deal of freedom in selecting poetry titles, Faber was soon publishing the work of Ezra Pound, W.H. Auden, and Stephen Spender. By the beginning of the Second World War, Faber was a central institution of literary modernism, publishing not only the work of first-generation modernists like Eliot and the newer work of the Auden generation but also a wide selection of early 1940s poets whose work was in one way or another experimental or adventurous. After the war, though, as Eliot's own tastes turned in more conservative and formalist directions, the publisher's poetry list followed suit. While a number of modernist poets continued to publish with the company, Faber also became the home of the Movement, taking on poets like Thom Gunn and Philip Larkin (Middleton 2009: 248–9).

As Middleton argues, Faber has been the most influential press in postwar British poetry publishing for two key reasons. First, the combination of its market position and editorial preferences makes the Faber taste almost by definition the mainstream taste. Having grown to all but corner the market in poetry intended for mass circulation, Faber could impose the judgment of its editors (first Eliot and then those who followed him). The company was able to achieve this position in the market not only through canny judgments about public taste but also, and perhaps more importantly, through hard-nosed marketing and political persuasion. Facing a proposed wartime sales tax in 1940, Faber organized a public campaign and mobilized a network of supporters ranging from booksellers to the Archbishop of Canterbury to exclude books from a so-called tax on knowledge, and the company was a founding member of National Book League and a prominent member of the Publishers' Association (Rose and Anderson 116). Seeing the success Penguin enjoyed in the paperback marketplace, Faber began publishing first-run paperbacks in 1957 and was able to dominate the paperback poetry market.

Book design was a factor in the company's market success. Artists in the 1930s contributed to the development of a distinctive Faber and Faber typeface and to successful designs for bindings and jackets; the layouts designed by Berthold Wolpe beginning in the 1940s became those most immediately recognized by readers. The house style of the publisher,

Middleton writes, “strongly projected the impression that this was not just ordinary poetry, this was Faber poetry, poetry of a reliable type and circumscribed mode, above all a poetry of high standards rooted in, but having grown beyond, modernism” (2009: 248). In addition to helping Faber to consolidate its market position, book design is also the second way in which the company’s dominance of the marketplace has powerfully affected poetic taste. As Middleton writes, the house style of Faber and Faber has consisted not only of such features as typeface and elements like the immediately recognizable repeating “ff” design of paperback covers over the last two decades or so but also of standard trim size and page layout. These, as he points out, “approximate the standard size of fiction... paperbacks,” and since they are “designed for the mass-market bookshop,” the designs were not flexible enough to accommodate the “design ambitions of open field poetry or visual experimentation” (2009: 249). Intended for the mainstream book-buying consumer, Faber and Faber poetry volumes enforce by their very material makeup certain expectations regarding the “well-made poem” for a mainstream audience.

We can infer from the features of the typical Faber page and from the trends visible in the company’s back catalog of poetry titles some of the salient features of that “well-made poem,” and these matter for the purposes of understanding British and Irish poetry of this period. Poets learned in part by what they read as the contemporary period style, and this was largely to be found between the covers of Faber and Faber slim volumes; and poets who sought careers often shaped their work, whether consciously or not, so that it fit within the parameters of that period style as it was embodied in these books.

What, then, is the typical Faber page like? Faber and Faber poetry paperbacks measure eight inches by just under five inches. What this means, as Middleton writes, is that the page holds about twenty-two lines of poetry (on a page that also contains a poem’s title; about twenty-eight lines otherwise) and, as a consequence, “does not readily allow for long lines, stepped margins, or more than the most simple visual patternings, and works best with the internal rectangularities of stanzaic verse” (2009: 249–50). There is more flexibility than Middleton suggests; Ted Hughes’s 1967 *Wodwo*, for example, includes both prose and a piece set as a dramatic script, and the pages are able to accommodate these layouts as well as the stanzas of his lyric poems. The point is a good one, though. The Faber page is ideally suited not only for stanzas but especially for shorter stanzas of shorter lines, which are able to fit

with plenty of white space. Longer lines and longer stanzas easily make the page of the typical Faber volume feel crowded.

Sure enough, when one glances through the publisher's enormous back catalogue of poetry volumes, one finds a heavy preponderance of what Middleton calls "stanzaic verse." The poems almost always consist of lines that begin flush to the left-hand margin and almost never contain lines that must be continued as indentations on the line below. They tend either to divide into fairly regular stanzas or verse paragraphs or to appear as unbroken rectangular blocks. The vast majority of poems appear on a single page. And the roster of poets includes by and large those poets who worked with either traditional or nonce stanzas or in a free verse that breaks readily into fairly short strophes. We need only look to the company's contemporary promotions to see how central such poetry is to its self-image. In 2010, Faber and Faber commissioned new cover designs for half a dozen volumes the press had published during the last forty years; these volumes were rereleased in hardcover, with the new designs, to celebrate the press's history as a major poetry publisher. The six books are Simon Armitage's *Kid*, Wendy Cope's comic verse collection *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*, Larkin's *The Whitsun Weddings*, Alice Oswald's *Dart*, Don Paterson's *Nil Nil*, and Plath's *Ariel*. Oswald's book includes prose sentences between lyric stanzas, but otherwise these volumes share the qualities that seem best suited for the page as designed by Faber and Faber.

Does size matter? When it comes to distribution of books in bookshops, it seems to matter a great deal. In a 1984 interview, Reality Studios founder and now Reality Street publisher Ken Edwards describes the difficulties Allen Fisher found in distributing large-format books:

On the other hand, in terms of bookshops and the general reader, A4 is not attractive. I don't know if Allen Fisher told you, he's had interesting experiences with trying to get things ditributed [sic] in the States where they won't touch anything that's A4 size, no matter what it is. While A5 or smaller is fine, so he sold lots of copies of *Ideas on the Culture Dreamed Of* which was a tiny little book, but they wouldn't touch *Defamiliarising* which was A4.

(1985: 4–5)

We should be clear here: we have nothing against the well-made lyric poem. Nor do we dislike the poetry published by Faber and Faber. As a part of the situation in which poems are produced, reproduced, circulated, and consumed, however, the book design associated with this very

important and culturally central press has an influence on the kinds of poems many poets might imagine as possible to publish. And with its dominance of the British poetry marketplace from the end of the war at least until the 1980s (when competitors increased their share of the market), Faber's house style and editorial preferences loomed large in the landscape of the possible for poets who hoped to reach a wide audience with their work.

Different Currents in the Mainstream: Penguin Modern Poets

If Faber and Faber dominated the British market for slim volumes of verse, Penguin challenged with its Modern Poets series. The series, which began publication in 1962, produced one or two volumes each year. Each volume gathered poems by three contemporary poets (the poets chose the poems of theirs that would appear in the volume). Penguin had for decades boasted a distinctive look for its paperbacks, and the familiar colored spines of its literature titles were already commonplace by the 1960s. For the Modern Poets series, Penguin designers developed distinctive covers. The first half-dozen volumes' covers were illustrated with x-ray or negative photographic images of natural objects – leaves, flowers, a fern – and later volumes' covers were based on close-up photographs of stones, geodes, and trees. Uniting the series was a cover layout that gave the series title and the poets' names in a black box in the upper quarter of the cover, with a consistent title typeface and spine layout, all of course including the Penguin logo.

The combination of three poets per volume allowed greater aesthetic flexibility than the Faber list accommodated, and the editorial ambition of the series seemed to be a broad aesthetic inclusiveness. Where the first volume in Penguin's series offered work by Lawrence Durrell, R.S. Thomas, and Elizabeth Jennings, the fifth concentrated on American "Beat" poetry (Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti), the sixth gathered "Group" poets Edward Lucie-Smith, George Macbeth, and Jack Clemo, and the twelfth provided space and visibility to British Poetry Revival poets Jeff Nuttall, Alan Jackson, and William Wanting. These volumes are important because while Penguin's presence was not as large or ubiquitous in the poetry marketplace as Faber's, they kept visible some important currents of the mainstream not included in the Faber lists.

These currents included, in 1968, a volume devoted to the popular Liverpool poets, Roger McGough, Brian Patten, and Adrian Henri. This was the only volume in the series with its own title (*The Mersey Sound*). This volume has gone on to sell over 500,000 copies and has become one of the best-selling poetry anthologies in postwar literary culture.

The Liverpool poets illustrate how complicated the idea of a poetic mainstream can be. Where many academic readers of poetry will gravitate toward a press like Faber as the center of postwar poetic culture because the press's poetry list was curated first by T.S. Eliot and then by poets much in the model of those he published, many readers of poetry outside academia think of the mainstream not as a canon constructed in this way but, instead, as the range of poetic voices that were most accessible to and popular among the culture at large. While the academic and "highbrow" literary world in the late 1960s spent a lot of time with the work of Larkin, Gunn, and Hughes, very large numbers of readers preferred the Liverpool poets. Dedicated to the proposition that poetry should be a popular rather than an elite art form, that it should express the emotions and attitudes of the people (especially the young), the Liverpool poets wrote and performed more like pop musicians than like Geoffrey Hill or Charles Tomlinson. They read their work in pubs and music clubs, and some (with the help of the influential DJ John Peel) produced LPs of their work, read with musical accompaniment.

Though the three poets' work evinces variety, both among the poets and within each one's oeuvre, the popular appeal of the Liverpool poets derives from some shared features: their focus on recognizable, everyday experiences, their preference for free verse and demotic diction, and their bringing together high and low cultures in a single frame of reference, leveling distinctions with irony and humor. Brian Patten describes quotidian routines in drab surroundings in "After Breakfast" and adolescent frustrations and fantasies in "Schoolboy." Similarly, Roger McGough recounts the constant low-grade suffering his bus conductor narrates to him and meditates on the sadness of a lipstick-stained glass. McGough often writes whole poems without capital letters and mingles flatly descriptive or narrative language with a winsome estrangement (often brought about by running words together), while Henri and Patten reach for a pop modernist lexicon and syntax. Patten riffs on Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" and Tennyson's "Maud," and both McGough and Patten include Batman and Robin in poems, while Henri brings Maureen O'Hara into an elegy for T.S. Eliot (one can only imagine Eliot's reaction to the

news that “it was as if a favourite distant uncle had died...and I didn’t know what to feel”) and juxtaposes brand names, “navyblue schooldrawers,” and Dada artists in “Love Poem.” Henri often achieves a tart humor, especially in his Liverpool versions of the very short police blotter stories Felix Fenelon had famously published in French newspapers decades before (“Bearded Liverpool couple put out of misery in night by drip oil heater, court told”). While the Faber poets were winning prizes and praise, these three, with their anthology going through multiple printings and graced with a cover that sets it well apart from the preceding volumes in the Penguin Modern Poets series, might well have been the strongest current in the mainstream circa 1968.

The initial series of Modern Poets volumes ceased publication in 1979. In the early 1990s the series was revived along the same lines as the earlier version. The estranged natural images of the first series’ covers were replaced with colorful abstract paintings, but the rest of the design layout was similar. This new series sought a similar variety of voices, though the emphasis and selection principle shifted from aesthetic similarities to similarities of identity. For example, the series gathered in one volume three Scottish poets (John Burnside, Robert Crawford, and Kathleen Jamie), in another three black poets (Jackie Kay, Merle Collins, and Grace Nichols), and in another three women poets (Carol Ann Duffy, Eavan Boland, and Vicki Feaver). On the other hand, the tenth volume in this series was a volume of experimental poets (Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver, and Iain Sinclair). After thirteen volumes, the new series too was closed.

Widening the Mainstream: Carcanet, PN Review, and Bloodaxe

Faber’s dominance of mainstream poetry publishing continues to this day, but it has been joined in the last three decades by two presses that began as upstarts and have become central institutions in the dissemination of poetry in the mainstream literary marketplace in England, Scotland, and Wales. Carcanet moved into book publishing with a series of pamphlets that were initially intended to accompany the closure of the *Carcanet* magazine that had been founded by undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge in 1962 (Carcanet Archives). While the magazine had managed to stay in production for seven years, it was in dire straits by the late 1960s. The pamphlet series, including titles by Peter Jones, Gareth Reeves,

Grevel Lindop, and Ishan Kapur, reached an audience of around 300. When the pamphlets, published in 1969, were well received, editor Michael Schmidt and others transformed the magazine into a publishing house. In 1972, at the invitation of Professor C.B. Cox of Manchester University, the company moved from Oxford to Manchester, where its offices are now located. (An archive of Carcanet company records and correspondence is held by the Manchester University library.)

Where the important postwar editorial voice at Faber and Faber was T.S. Eliot, and where the books that shaped the company's list and suggested its taste and style were early books by Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn, and Ted Hughes, the important early editorial voice at Carcanet, Ltd., was Schmidt, and a highlight of the company's early list included Edwin Morgan's Scots translations of poetry by Vladimir Mayakovsky. The combination of Morgan's style, the Scots dialect, and the aesthetic of modernist revolutionary poet Mayakovsky stands out starkly against Faber's taste for the well-made poem. If Eliot's retrenchment from the modernism of his own early career was, as Middleton argues, key to Faber's postwar taste, the continuation of modernism by a variety of means was key to Carcanet's, especially in the press's early years. This made sense given *Carcanet* magazine's origin in Schmidt's sense that "good new poetry was being willfully ignored by the major publishers" (*Carcanet Archives, Administrative History*). The early 1970s saw the press bring out work that fell into four categories. Each year, Carcanet published at least one edition of work from an earlier period of English (or European) poetry that had, in the eyes of the company's editors, been forgotten or marginalized; in 1972, for example, the press published an edition of Crashaw's poetry and an anthology of poems by English monarchs, in 1973 the poems of Charles of Orleans, and in 1974 an edition of the poetry of Rochester, with reactions from his contemporaries. In addition, most years saw the publication of at least one (and usually more than one) anthology of contemporary poetry from outside of England. In 1974 alone, Carcanet published anthologies of new poetry from Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, after publishing, in 1973, both an anthology of recent American poetry and a collection of essays about recent American poetry. Along with these anthologies, the press kept up a continuous stream of volumes of verse in translation; these years saw the publication of books by Daryush, Gorbanevskaya, Esenin, Jozsef, and Takagi, as well as Michael Hamburger's anthology of East German poetry in translation. Finally, the press produced a small number of volumes by British poets. Schmidt's

Desert of the Lions came out in 1972, Edwin Morgan's *From Glasgow to Saturn* in 1973, Jon Silkin's *The Principle of Water*, and C.H. Sisson's *In the Trojan Ditch* in 1974.

It is impossible completely to separate Carcanet from the magazine that Schmidt and Cox founded to accompany the press's books in 1973, and a brief digression into *PN Review* usefully helps us to complicate the sense of a mainstream in British poetry of the 1970s. Initially published as a biannual called *Poetry Nation*, in 1976 the magazine became *PN Review*, a key alternative to the London poetry establishment and its journal, *The New Review*. As Schmidt and Cox write in their "Editors' Note" for the inaugural issue of *Poetry Nation*, they set out to fill the need they saw "for a magazine that expresses and explores the growing consensus among poets and readers of poetry" (1973a: 3). That consensus, they held, accepted a good deal of disagreement about the ends of poetry but consisted in agreement about its proper means: "the necessary intelligence that must be brought to the poetic act (whether of writing or of reading), the shaping of adequate forms, and, equally important, the responsibilities to a vital linguistic and formal heritage, to a living language, to a living community." Schmidt expands upon the centrality of form in his essay, "The Politics of Form," which opens the section of commentary and reviews (about two-thirds of the issue are taken up with this prose, after forty-five pages of poetry). There, Schmidt argues that traditional poetic form, which he all but equates with "accepting and pursuing standards of perception and expression" (1973b: 50), is the truly radical poetic commitment, where the alleged "cultural radicalism" of American open-form poets and their British "home-grown rhetoricians" is "the latest and most extreme expression of the bourgeois self-regard" summarized in the axiom "I am a poet, therefore what I write is poetry" (1973b: 50). The editors of *Poetry Nation*, then, are intent on "shoring up the crumbling literary edifice" by advancing and advocating the work of poets who, in one way or another, commit themselves to form as "a prime objectifying tool" (1973b: 51). Those poets, in this first issue, include Movement stalwarts Donald Davie and Elizabeth Jennings alongside Charles Tomlinson, Douglas Dunn, Fleur Adcock, and C.H. Sisson.

Schmidt's polemic assumes that a great deal of the poetry being published and read in Britain when he writes in 1973 is characterized by the absence of form and all that he associates with it. This assumption should lead us back to the complexity of any notion of a mainstream in British poetry, for even a cursory look at the books Faber and Faber were publishing at the time shows that the dominant publisher of poetry books

in the country was not publishing a lot of what Schmidt sees as the main current against which his magazine (and Carcanet) must swim. The key poetry volumes Faber published in the four years before *Poetry Nation's* first issue were Seamus Heaney's *Door Into the Dark* and *Wintering Out*, Auden's *Collected Shorter Poems*, and Ted Hughes's *Crow*.

Indeed, the question of just what is mainstream bubbles beneath the surface of almost every sentence in Schmidt's editorial. Instead of a reaction to the lists published by Faber, Schmidt's essay (and the editors' note for *Poetry Nation*) is provoked by the popularity (especially among younger poets and readers) of a range of poetries, from American "Beat" and "New York School" poetry to the enormously popular Liverpool poets to the poets associated with the British Poetry Revival (many of whose poets were also heavily influenced by American free-verse movements), an increasingly voluble and visible presence in the London literary scene. (We will have more to say later in this chapter about these poets and their influence through the culturally central institution of the Poetry Society.) In 1976, when *Poetry Nation* became *PN Review*, Schmidt again opened the inaugural issue with a broadside that captures the multiple currents and eddies hidden by the term "mainstream." Indeed, Schmidt explicitly complains of the tribes that dominate the contemporary scene:

the 'clamorous' (*that* always) old maids of the daily and weekly journals...,
minions of political or literary faction (the ghosts of forty years ago recur),
or agents for vested interests (Group and later groupings).

(1976: 1)

These are joined by the "poets of commitment," for whom political position trumps poetic performance, and those poets who "abandon form" and thereby abdicate "intelligence and artistic imagination" (1976: 1).

Against this rising tide that threatened the custom and ceremony of poetic form and the English poetic tradition, *Poetry Nation* and *PN Review* offered poems and commentary intended to steer something of a middle course between what Schmidt sees as the outmoded reticence of the Movement and the immaturity of the vocal "opposition." More than that, though, the two magazines offer criticism itself. The importance of criticism is explicit in Schmidt's editorials; he argues that it is at once "in part to blame for the state of affairs in England" and one element of the solution, for "it is the job of serious criticism to engage the writer, examine the terms on which he addresses us, his success within those terms, and

the wider validity of them” (1976: 3). The critic’s task, in fact, is to re-describe the mainstream and then to direct readers and writers back into it. But the importance of criticism is perhaps better seen in the space both magazines devote to it. We mentioned that two-thirds of the pages in *Poetry Nation*’s first issue were taken up with critical prose; the proportions are even more striking in the first issue of *PN Review*, and where there are several pages (even before the section of reviews at the back of the issue) that contain only prose, only ten pages (of sixty-five) contain only poems. Carcanet, then, might best be seen as one wing (the publishing arm) of a two-part institution shaping the literary landscape, the realm of the imaginable for readers and poets alike, with *Poetry Nation* and *PN Review*, especially in their critical pages, functioning as the commentary wing that explicitly limns the borders of that realm.

In the late 1970s, the poetry-publishing field was joined by another upstart endeavor, Bloodaxe Books. Based in Newcastle upon Tyne, Bloodaxe was founded by poet and critic Neil Astley in 1978. Twenty-five years old when he founded the press, Astley writes in “The Story of Bloodaxe” that he was brought to Newcastle, to poetry, and to publishing by the combination of a radicalizing six-month stay in Paris during the upheavals of 1968 and the experience of being trapped beneath a collapsed house when a cyclone struck Darwin, Australia, where he had been working for a newspaper (2008: 238). Like Carcanet, Bloodaxe explicitly set itself against the geographical and cultural center represented by London and the literary establishment there (epitomized, still, by Faber and Faber). The press is named for Eric Bloodaxe, the tenth-century Scandinavian King of Northumbria whose presence in Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* made him a convenient figure for both the culturally marginalized locale of northern England and the experimental tradition, a continuation and extension of literary modernism, exemplified by Bunting. These margins – geographical, cultural, and aesthetic – defined the press in its early years and continue to be a point of pride for the press, which boasts in its publicity materials that it has the most substantial lists of women poets and of Caribbean and black British poets among British publishing houses.

While neither Carcanet nor Bloodaxe is a press seeking to embrace the avant-garde, the two together have at once competed with Faber in the mainstream of contemporary poetry and expanded the mainstream in important ways. Most obviously, Carcanet and Bloodaxe have brought a great deal of poetry in translation to the British poetry market. This has the effect of broadening the range of aesthetic possibilities for readers and writers alike.

Unfamiliar voices from different literary traditions bring new thematic, rhetorical, and formal possibilities for poetry, and these two presses have insistently made new poetry available in translation. In addition, both presses have sought to bring voices from all over Britain into print and into bookshops. From early on in the history of each press, Welsh and Scottish poets figured prominently in the lists, and this continues to be the case. Bloodaxe, especially, has also included a number of black British and Caribbean poets, whose work also often expands the range of available voices. Both presses benefited from the closure of the Oxford University Press's poetry list, with Carcanet absorbing most of the poets previously published by Oxford and Bloodaxe picking up a few. Bloodaxe has, especially in the last decade or so, opened its list to some more experimental poetry, for example, by publishing J.H. Prynne's *Poems* in 1999. (It is perhaps worth noting that while Faber and Faber depends almost entirely on sales for its profits, both Carcanet and Bloodaxe are supported by grants from other sources; each regularly receives support from the Arts Council of England, and Bloodaxe also receives funding from Northern Arts.)

Just as the typical Faber paperback's dimensions and page design affect the range of formal choices a poet might imagine as having at hand if he or she hopes to reach the press's wide audience, the design of Carcanet's and Bloodaxe's books influences such choices. The trim size for both presses' typical paperback volume is slightly, but only slightly, larger than Faber's (8.5 by 5.5 inches). As a result, a Carcanet page can carry thirty-six lines in addition to an italicized and slightly larger title, while a Bloodaxe page, with slightly larger type, carries about thirty-four lines plus a bold-type title. Like Faber's page, these presses' pages are best suited to stanzas or free-verse paragraphs. There are differences, though, both between Carcanet and Bloodaxe and between either of these and Faber. Like Faber, Bloodaxe almost never includes more than one poem on a page; when a poem ends, the end of the page is given over to white space and a new poem begins on the next. Carcanet often includes more than one poem on a page, with the result being that many more pages include parts of poems (e.g., the last half of one and the first half of another). This alone suggests a hospitable attitude toward longer and multi-section poems. While its typical page is not very different from the typical Faber page, and so is not amenable to the use of space and spacing often found in experimental work, Bloodaxe has sometimes been willing to vary typefaces within a single volume or a single poem. Jackie Kay's "Adoption Papers" sequence (in the 1991 volume of that title) goes beyond bolding or italicizing the

Palatino typeface in which most of the book is set to include lines in two other distinct typefaces (to distinguish among personae). And Bloodaxe has published volumes in different trim sizes when necessary to accommodate an experimental poet's unorthodox use of the physical space of the page. Prynne's *Poems* is 10 × 6 inches, and its pages allow for the stair-stepping and varying indentations of lines and stanzas that are key to the poet's work.

Tributaries: Poetry Presses in Wales and Ireland

A dolmen is a megalithic tomb, a small chamber formed by standing stones, and, typically, a large stone supported atop them. Often, all that remains of a dolmen now is this bare structure, a flat capstone balanced on a set of stone uprights; this appearance gives the nickname Giant's Footstool to the famous Poulnabrone dolmen in County Clare's Burren. With the appearance of a portal, the dolmen looks like a gateway to the ancient past. In 1951, the dolmen provided both the name and the image for the press Liam and Josephine Miller founded to publish Irish poetry. As Robin Skelton has argued, Dolmen followed such predecessors as the Cuala Press and the Dun Emer Press in a tradition of private publishing in Ireland. Unlike those predecessors, however, Dolmen aimed for a market niche beyond the very narrow subscription and collecting buyers upon whom Cuala and Dun Emer depended earlier in the century.

One key to Dolmen's success was a diverse list of publications, which, while all having to do with Irish literature, drew audiences interested in Irish writing from throughout history. Work by and about Yeats was central to the Millers' publications, but they also published an important edition of the ancient Irish poem the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (translated by Thomas Kinsella); another of Brian Merriman's eighteenth-century Irish classic, *The Midnight Court* (translated by David Marcus); studies of the Irish bardic tradition; and an edition of the plays of Dion Boucicault. The strength of the press's twentieth-century poetry list was largely work by poets in the generation immediately after Yeats. Dolmen published several books by Austin Clarke, including *The Echo at Coole and Other Poems* and *Mnemosyne Lay in Dust*. The press brought out Denis Devlin's *The Heavenly Foreigner* and *Collected Poems*, Patrick Kavanagh's *Self Portrait*, and Padraic Colum's *Images of Departure*. Among the next generation of poets, Dolmen published a number of books by Thomas

Kinsella, important work by Peter Murphy, and several of John Montague's books, including *The Rough Field*. Dolmen continued in operation until 1981, when Liam Miller died.

In 1970, Irish poet Peter Fallon established the Gallery Press in order to publish the work of a wider range of contemporary Irish poets. While some Irish poets were successful in getting their work into print through English publishers, and while Dolmen Press continued to publish a small number of books each year, Fallon saw the need for a publisher that could launch and support the work of new writers. Murphy, Kinsella, and Montague have published books with Gallery, and the press has brought out new books by a younger generation of poets (Harry Clifton, Eamon Grennan, Kerry Hardie, Medbh McGuckian) as well as collected poems volumes by Derek Mahon, Pearse Hutchinson, the Irish-language poet Michael Hartnett, and Ciaran Carson. In the United States, Wake Forest University Press has broadened the American audience for many Gallery poets by distributing their books in that market. Gallery has also evinced a commitment to publishing Irish drama, including plays by Thomas Kilroy and Marina Carr. While its emphasis was (and is) much more clearly on the work of contemporary poets, Gallery, like Dolmen, has established a strong relationship with the long tradition of Irish writing. The press has published several books in which a contemporary writer advocates for the work of an older or long-dead Irish writer (from David Wheatley writing on James Clarence Mangan to Seamus Heaney writing on Padraic Fallon to Vona Groarke writing on Oliver Goldsmith).

Together, Dolmen and Gallery have provided readers and would-be poets with a wide range of poetic voices, both of the present and from the deep and recent Irish pasts. As Eric Falci has pointed out in his recent book on Irish poetry since the 1960s, these were joined by Trevor Joyce's New Writers Press and its house journal, *Lace Curtain*; in the latter, Joyce's essays elaborate a set of aesthetic and political positions that widen the range of discourse in important ways. Together, these presses make available a rich and varied sense of the possible ways poems might be written, the possible avenues by which they might be connected to their communities, their national cultures, and their linguistic heritages.

The early 1980s saw the establishment of new presses in Ireland and Wales, each devoted to publishing the work of the country's poets. Together, these presses (which are not the only poetry presses in these countries but are the most prominent) have brought new visibility to the distinctive voices of these nations' poets. (While there are a number of small presses in Scotland that

publish Scottish poetry, both in English and in Scots Gaelic, none has attained a position of local centrality. This is, perhaps, due in part to the breadth of the Scottish poetry lists maintained by Bloodaxe and to the number of prominent Scottish poets who are published by Faber and Faber.) Both founded in 1981, Salmon Poetry (situated in Galway until 1995 and now located in the west of Ireland, near the Cliffs of Moher) and Seren Books (the press associated with *Poetry Wales* magazine and located in Bridgend, Glamorgan) have each brought out about half a dozen books a year. Each has published a range of books alongside poetry (fiction, memoir, biography, and other nonfiction), but poetry remains a central part of each press's mission. Seren is committed to publishing English writing in Wales (the name of the company is from the Welsh for "star") and is supported by the Welsh Books Council. In addition to volumes by such poets as Sheenagh Pugh, Glyn Jones, John Ormond, Ruth Bidgood, Tony Curtis, and Peter Finch, Seren has produced a series of "Poetry Wales Poets" volumes and several anthologies of contemporary Anglo-Welsh poetry. Along with the magazine with which it was originally linked, Seren is the most visible press in Wales for the nation's English-language poets. Salmon Poetry, too, began in association with a magazine; its namesake periodical was devoted to poetry from the west of Ireland. Self-consciously setting out to provide an alternative to the Irish mainstream, especially by promoting the poetry and careers of women poets, Salmon began with the publication of Rita Ann Higgins's highly regarded collection *Goddess on the Mervue Bus* and Eva Bourke's *Gonella*. The press has published six to ten books per year since its founding, and its list includes Mary O'Malley, Mary O'Donnell, Moya Cannon, and Theo Dorgan, among others. The press has also expanded to include books by British and American poets, including Adrienne Rich and Carol Ann Duffy. Supported by the Arts Council of Ireland, Salmon is a highly visible press whose books sketch the range of the poetic possible for the mainstream of Irish women's poetry.

Funding the Mainstream: The Arts Council and the Poetry Society

For centuries, the production of artistic work (including poetry) in Britain was funded by two main sources: patronage and the marketplace. Many writers in early modern Britain sought to please patrons (usually members of the nobility) in order to secure financial support for their work.

Beginning in the late sixteenth century, writers could also make a living by selling their work; this was initially confined to the theater, but by the late seventeenth century, it was becoming possible for writers to sell their work in print. Even as the marketplace became the central and typical means for funding literary production, patronage continued to be available to a small number of writers. The Depression of the 1930s, however, placed severe strain on both of these streams of financial support for writers and their work. By the end of the decade, the government more fully entered the fray and provided a new means of financing art, music, and literature.

In 1939, members of the Board of Education formed an informal committee to support the arts. Funded by a £25,000 grant from American philanthropist Edward Harkness's Pilgrim Trust, the Committee for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts provided financial assistance to a variety of cultural societies who had found it difficult to continue their activities. The committee received a Royal Charter in 1940, and John Maynard Keynes was named its chair in 1941. Opinion on how best to use the committee's funds split; some members set out to support local and amateur groups in order to sustain morale in the nation during the war where others (including Keynes) prioritized the support of culturally central organizations, typically located in London and with long histories (Hutchison 1982: 15–17).

In 1946, the CEMA was superseded by a fully state-funded agency, the Arts Council. Financed by the Treasury and reporting to Parliament, the Arts Council would bring direct state support to arts organizations and individual artists through grants, the grants to be awarded through a competitive process. On the one hand, the competition might help to keep the government at "arm's length" from the specific form and content of the works it would support; by emphasizing the quality of work to be produced, the government might avoid the appearance or reality of censorship. On the other hand, this emphasis granted at least implicit advantage to metropolitan and long-standing institutions (as well as to the performing arts and museums). Regional arts and cultural groups, as well as writers, seemed to be at a disadvantage in the competition for funding. Nevertheless, the new Arts Council supported almost fifty organizations, and by the middle of the 1950s, this number had doubled (1982: 171–72).

In contrast, the production of new literature (as opposed to the performance of existing dramatic literature) received a small proportion of funds from the Arts Council. The vast majority of the organization's funds subsidized the national opera, dance, and drama companies of England, Scotland,

and Wales, nine principal orchestras around the country, six major regional theater companies, and a variety of arts festivals and small galleries. Even in the 1980s, after literary organizations began to receive more funding than they had during the Arts Council's first decades, only £852,000 of the Council's almost £60 million expenditure went to support literature (1982: 172). Of this, only a small amount supported poetry, mostly through support for the Poetry Book Society founded by T.S. Eliot and others in 1953. As the Council's Literature Director, Eric Walter White, suggested in the mid-1960s, one difficulty with subsidizing poetry was that there were no organizations to which the money could be distributed (the Council had long resisted direct grants to individual writers and preferred to support publishers and publications) (1982: 106).

In 1964, as part of its effort to develop the arts in Britain, the Wilson government appointed Jennie Lee as Arts Minister. Lee submitted a White Paper on *A Policy for the Arts*, and one result was the formation of a new Literature Department and Panel. Part of this panel's remit was the distribution of small grants to writers (as well as to publishers and magazines). When disputes over the policy for making grants to writers came to a head in the mid-1970s, the Arts Council commissioned a report on the system (published in 1981 as *Writers and the Arts Council*). Even before the report was released, however, the Arts Council announced that it would cease distributing grants to writers, with the exception of five bursaries intended for "established writers of high literary merit." As a result, the Arts Council has, for the most part, supported institutions in which poetry circulates rather than individuals by whom poetry is produced.

Since the late 1960s, the Arts Council has supported poetry in three key ways. We might think of these as, respectively, support for the production, publication, and preservation of poetry in Britain. First and most directly, the Council subsidized the Poetry Society, which had been founded in 1909 to promote the appreciation of the medium. As Peter Barry writes in his book, *Poetry Wars*, the Arts Council's support for the Poetry Society was a fallback from an initially more ambitious plan to develop a National Poetry Centre (including a bookshop, a venue for poetry readings, and a distribution service for poetry books via the mail) in London. In 1971, the Arts Council devoted funds to the Poetry Society's planned Centre at its Earls Court property. (As we will see shortly, a good deal of controversy ensued.) In addition, the Arts Council provided subsidies for individual publishers; we mentioned earlier that Carcanet and Bloodaxe both receive funding from the Arts Council (and Bloodaxe receives additional funding

from Northern Arts, a regional subsidiary of the Arts Council), and other publishers were subsidized by the Welsh and Scottish Arts Councils (semiautonomous groups operating under the Arts Council of Great Britain umbrella). Finally, the Arts Council established a Poetry Library (now the Saison Poetry Library, located in the Southbank Centre), which would buy two copies of almost every poetry volume published in the country, as well as issues of numerous poetry magazines large and small.

All three of these means of support for poetry have the power to shape the notion of the possible for poetry. Poets are influenced by the sorts of poetry that seem, at a given moment, to be possible, and that possibility itself might be understood as including not only what is imaginable as the kind of poem that could be written but also as the kind of poem that could reach a reader, that could have any kind of life and presence in the world. The Poetry Library that the Arts Council maintains at the Southbank Centre shows the enormous range of forms that poetry might take, both on and off the page. Mainstream books and small-press pamphlets, magazines that circulate to thousands and those that are known only to scores of readers, broadsides (whether fine print or cheaply produced), and recordings (of staid behind-the-podium poetry readings or raucous ranting performances or poems chanted with musical accompaniment) and even photographs of poetry tattooed on the skin of a model (as we mention in our discussion of Patience Agbabi in this book's introduction) are available for inspection and emulation. The funding of presses by the Arts Council is more restrictive, with money supporting the likes of Carcanet and Bloodaxe but not going to an experimental press like Reality Street.

Sometimes the varieties of the possible collide on the ground of funding and institutional support. This famously happened in the early 1970s, when a group of avant-garde poets managed to take organizational control of the Arts Council-funded Poetry Society and editorial control of the Society's magazine, *Poetry Review*. Barry tells the story of this "Battle of Earls Court" in *Poetry Wars*. Briefly, a group of "radicals," experimental, avant-garde, or innovative poets, who had participated in a new Poets Conference organized by Bob Cobbing and others, were elected to the Poetry Society's General Council in 1970–1971. At the same time, the editor of *Poetry Review*, Derek Parker, stepped down at the end of 1970. The "radicals" selected as the new editor (after two interim issues guest edited by Liverpool poet Adrian Henri) Eric Mottram, a lecturer at King's College London who had for a long time been interested in the American Beat and Black Mountain groups of poets as well as the late modernist

experiments of Basil Bunting and others in the United Kingdom. Mottram, with Cobbing, quickly changed the contents and the appearance as well as the payment policies of the magazine, leveling the playing field by paying all contributors equally, opening the magazine's pages to the work of experimental poets, and increasing the size of the magazine (from its A5 to a larger format "better for visual poems & long poems") (quoted in Barry 2006: 22).

The changes these "radicals" brought to the Poetry Society at once expanded the range of the imaginable and provoked (by so doing) immediate and energetic reaction. Where *Poetry Review* had been a fairly staid (though, as Barry points out, not simply conservative) magazine for the most part, it now boasted pages of Beat-influenced, avant-garde, and concrete poetry, wildly illustrated covers, and long lists of publications and readings that tilted heavily toward the London experimental poetry scene. Where the Society's Earls Court premises had been host to an eclectic mix of readings and to a couple of amateur workshops, it now promulgated a program that tended toward the experimental and it closed its premises to the "Poetry Round" and "Poets' Workshop" groups (2006: 51–53). The Arts Council, especially in the person of Charles Osborne, responded with surveillance at meetings of the Society's General Council, while groups of poets unsympathetic to the aims of the "radicals" and groups of readers put off by the new directions of *Poetry Review* organized efforts to reclaim control of the Poetry Society. For a brief time in the middle of the decade, these conflicts were fodder for fairly voluminous newspaper coverage.

As such stories often do, this story ends sadly for the "radicals." Early on, a group of poets who felt themselves to be without representation in the current makeup of the Poetry Society's governance structure formed a Reform Group. With the help of Arts Council Literature Panel Director Charles Osborne, and with careful work through the parliamentary procedures of the Society, this group managed, by the mid-1970s, to remove Mottram as editor of *Poetry Review*; to initiate an Arts Council investigation of the Poetry Society, its funding and governance, and its affairs (the "Witt Investigation," described in detail by Barry in his book's fourth chapter); and to elicit the resignations of "radicals" on the Society's General Council. The Poetry Society eventually sought new premises, loaned its library to the University of York (the Arts Council's own Poetry Library moving to the Southbank Centre). The busy reading program that had been dreamt of for a National Poetry Centre materialized instead at other venues, some (like that of the Troubadour Café on the Brompton

Road) now partially funded by the Arts Council. Receiving about £60,000 per year from the Arts Council now, the Society continues to publish *Poetry Review*, to operate a number of poetry competitions, to host a few readings a year, and to run a very nice café in Covent Garden.

Start Your Own Revolution and Cut Out the Middleman: Poetry Workshops and Collectives

In the early 1950s, there was nothing new about poets, especially younger poets, gathering in a home or pub or university seminar room to read and critique each other's poems and to discuss issues of aesthetics. The post-war decades, though, saw such gatherings rise to the status of institutions, and these became important locations across the literary landscape. Small discussion groups and informal workshops provided environments at once supportive and productively critical for poets as they worked to find their voice, to develop and articulate their poetic commitments.

The first such gathering to coalesce into something more than an occasional meeting to chat about poems was initially convened by Philip Hobsbaum at Cambridge University during the autumn of 1952. In response to an ad Hobsbaum (with his friends Tony Davis and Neil Morris) had placed in the university newspaper, half a dozen student poets showed up to form a discussion group. Meeting weekly during the academic term, this handful of young poets (Peter Redgrove would go on to become the most prominent among them) were the beginning of what came to be called "the Group." When Hobsbaum graduated and moved to London in 1955, the meetings were held on Friday evenings in his flat. The Cambridge influence, though, particularly that of F.R. Leavis, who had been Hobsbaum's tutor, continued. The members convened not for casual chat but for serious critique guided by the principles of *Scrutiny* and the American formalism known as the "New Criticism." That is, the poems were read for their integration of all formal levels and materials into a unified thematic effect. If, as Edward Lucie-Smith wrote, these were "poets who find it possible to meet and discuss each other's work helpfully...with no axe to grind," and if there was, for members of the Group, "no monolithic body of doctrine to which everybody must subscribe" (1963: vii), there was, nevertheless, an intense focus on poetic form and especially on formal coherence and unity as the means for achieving affective and intellectual impact.

In 1959, Hobsbaum left London to study in Sheffield. Edward Lucie-Smith took over hosting and chairing the meetings, which were now held in his Chelsea house. Lucie-Smith and Hobsbaum edited *A Group Anthology*, whose publication by Oxford University Press in 1963 announced that the group now constituted part of the mainstream of British poetic culture. Members of the Group – Redgrove, George Macbeth, Peter Porter, Alan Brownjohn, Nathaniel Tarn, and Fleur Adcock – went on to publish numerous volumes of their own, to edit magazines and anthologies with major publishers, and to stake out their own terrain within the literary landscape as it developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

As Lucie-Smith writes in the “Foreword” to the Group’s 1963 anthology, the procedure, beginning in Cambridge and continuing through the workshop’s dissolution, was to maintain a mailing list of members and to send in advance copies of the poems to be discussed at the next meeting. For Lucie-Smith, this practice, more than anything else, explains the longevity and success of the workshop. The mailing list and advance distribution of poems, he writes, “has made matters much less temporary and chancy” and, more importantly, “has led to much closer and more analytical discussion” (1963: vii). The presence of the text, both in the hands of members in advance and at the meetings themselves, focused attention in what Lucie-Smith calls “relevant” directions: “We’ve been encouraged to pay attention to the text itself, rather than to biography or background, and we have been discouraged from making assertions which could immediately be disproved. Sometimes we may go into too much detail, but this still seems a fault on the right side” (1963: vii).

In his “Epilogue” to the anthology, Hobsbaum illustrates that attention by quoting the discussion of a poem (he had taped the discussion, as he often did, and transcribes a good deal of it after presenting the poem that had been its object). The comments from members fall into a couple of predictable types. Some focus on inconsistencies in diction and figurative language, while others press on the moral meditation the poem conducts. A number of comments of the first type emphasize the need for the poem to “hang together” (and concern that it does not). Unity is clearly a prized attribute, a goal toward which the discussion is intended to direct the poet. One respondent interested in the poem’s thematic coherence has a lot to say about both the kind of people represented in the poem (as representatives of moral types) and the kind of poem this one is (a representative of a poetic type). Hobsbaum himself, in his summary of the discussion, suggests that the weaknesses of the poem were the weaknesses the Group’s

discussions generally sought to root out: “abstraction, eccentricity, an element of private jargon, a sensibility so subjective that it failed to relate to the outside world” (1963: 121). We can deduce from the discussion and Hobsbaum’s comments on it not only what the workshop’s practice was like but also, just as importantly, what assumptions undergirded and were reinforced by it, what impact the Group might have had on the imagined range of possible poetic styles.

Practice within such a group, which is after all a kind of local institution, produces certain aesthetic outcomes. While the themes and topics of the Group’s poets varied widely, the members shared assumptions (about the centrality of the text itself, about the “discussable” and rational nature of the “process by which words work in poetry”). In the case of the Group, Lucie-Smith names a couple of important tendencies; members produced a lot of “very frank autobiographical poems,” on the one hand, and numerous dramatic monologues on the other. There is, of course, also the deeper and unremarked tendency: the Group poets wrote first-person lyric poems, in traditional stanzas, nonce stanzas, and free verse, with the assumption that the speaking subject originated and rationally narrated impressions, interpretations, and emotions.

As Heather Clark makes clear in her discussion of what she terms the Ulster Renaissance of the 1960s, the local conditions in which such institutions operate affect the work they produce. If the well-made lyric Hobsbaum advocated might, in England, yield restrictive results, the same poetic prescriptions, when transplanted to Belfast (where Hobsbaum moved in 1962), enabled a young poet like Seamus Heaney to impose formal discipline on the volatile political environment of Northern Ireland and, in so doing, powerfully embody history in lyric lines.

At around the same time as the Group got under weigh, London poet Bob Cobbing began his own regular gathering of poets for discussion and workshop. This “Writers Forum,” which gave rise to a magazine and, later, a small poetry press of the same name, had a set of assumptions and aims quite different from those of the Group. If internal consistency and formal and thematic coherence were prized by the poets who read and discussed each other’s work in Hobsbaum’s flat or Lucie-Smith’s home, openness and indeterminacy and extra-semantic elements of language were valued in the Writers Forum. Where in the Group poems were copied by cyclostat and circulated in advance so that readers could refer to the page as they developed their critique, in the Writers Forum poems were sometimes spontaneously recited, sometimes performed via recording, sometimes

available as a single large sheet whose space was manipulated just as the canvas of a painting might be, with the placement of words determined by means other than their lexical meanings or grammatical relationships. Instead of tightening the craft of autobiographical poems or dramatic monologues, the poets of the Writers Forum pushed each other into new explorations of sound released from sense, of printing and typography and word as image, of poetry as incantation and oral performance. The workshop's location outside the mainstream and the members' dedication to exploration and experiment rather than publication or perfection led to an atmosphere characterized more by support than by critique. The poets in this group, however, were no less interested in finding an audience and circulating their work than were the poets of the Group. Rather than seeking to place their poems in mass-circulation magazines or publish books with Faber and Faber or Oxford University Press, though, these poets, especially with Cobbing's help, produced their own pamphlets and volumes, often under the auspices of Writers Forum itself (the press published over a thousand books and pamphlets between its beginnings in the early 1960s and Cobbing's death in 2002).

Much of the work developed at Writers Forum is difficult to reproduce in a book like this. Cobbing, for example, often experimented with the blurring and overprinting effects that could be achieved by manipulating a page as it printed in mimeograph machine or, later, on a photocopier. Some of his texts include images (or parts of images or ghosts of images), while others look as though type has been spilled across the page, with letters turned backward or upside down, with lines of type crisscrossing and obliterating each other. In *A Peal in Air*, the third volume of his collected poems, Cobbing describes the various types of poems he has produced:

1. typewriter poems where the word becomes image & the letters spin
 2. fugitive or ghost poems where words recede & ghosts of image focus
 3. graphic poems drawing with letters & thrust and tension stir
 4. photo-montage poems where the word is going going gone
- the distinction is unnecessary & artificial for the works have a unity on the edge of poetry and graphic art and typewriter camera letraset drawn letter and duplicator techniques combine to say kwatz!

(Cobbing 1978: np)

At the more reproducible end of the continuum of the poetry he produced with the Writers Forum workshop is "(for jack kerouac, one)," subtitled "fragment":

sasa kasee jo ook arsaka see
joass sackoo jusoo jaa
ajeck sojooka kee reko sooja jaake
aaeouauueeooeauo
okkuakeko jukokkua aeja reekokussa

(1976: 34)

This poem has neither the rhetorical consistency nor the controlled adherence to grammatical and stanzaic conventions nor the paraphrasable moral insight prized by Hobsbaum in his description of the Group's discussions. The atmosphere that assisted with its production, instead, valued risk, experiments with sound and repetition, the performance of a spirit somehow analogous to the one Cobbing found in the writing of the American Beat novelist Jack Kerouac. Where we are invited by Hobsbaum to imagine a group of poets sitting around his flat with annotated copies of the draft they are discussing, we might, when thinking of Writers Forum, imagine a group standing around a printing press or mimeograph machine, examining the results of one experimental manipulation after another, or listening, with no page to follow, as Cobbing or a colleague pronounced ungrammatical bits of sound or repeated words until they lost their lexical meaning and became just sound. The different practices in this space would yield commensurately different products.

Workshops and informal discussion groups also provided supportive environments, as well as critique and, often, avenues to publication for poets who found themselves outside the mainstream not because of their aesthetics but because of their identity. When Linton Kwesi Johnson began writing and performing in London in the early 1970s, for example, he found politically and poetically sympathetic audiences in the cluster of individuals and organizations around the Black Panthers and *Race Today* magazine. Johnson had joined the Black Panthers while still a student, and upon his graduation from Goldsmiths College, he founded a writing workshop within the organization. At the same time, he discovered a group of poets and musicians influenced by Rastafarianism and calling themselves Rasta Love. He collaborated and experimented with the group's members as he worked to bring music and poetry together in his own work. In 1974, he added to his circles of acquaintance the writers and editors of *Race Today*; the magazine began as the publication of the London-based Institute of Race Relations in 1969 (the Institute itself had been founded in 1958) (Niblett 2007: 387–88). Though the magazine

was not primarily a literary venue (its chief purpose, especially in the first few years, was to publicize the plight of minority groups in Britain and elsewhere, generally from a Marxist and internationalist point of view), it provided both publication opportunities and a support network for a number of black British writers. After a change of “ownership” in 1972, when the magazine moved from the auspices of the Institute of Race Relations to an organization called Towards Racial Justice, the political and aesthetic positions of the magazine emphasized what new editor Darcus Howe called “the revolutionary potential of the black population” (quoted in Niblett 2007: 388). A book-publishing affiliate, also called Race Today, was established, and in the early 1980s, the collective that had grown up around the magazine and press joined with two other presses (Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications and New Beacon Books) to organize the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books. Between 1982 and 1995, these annual or biennial fairs brought to Islington, Camden, and Brixton hundreds of writers, performers, publishers, editors, and activists. Just as important as these public faces of the group, though, were the frequent and informal discussions of work in progress and in press. While there is no doubt that Johnson or Jean “Binta” Breeze (who also moved through the Race Today circle) or others would have written and published their work without the collective, and while these poets participated in various other networks and groups as well (Johnson was a fixture in the Brixton reggae and dub scenes throughout the 1970s and 1980s), it is also clear that the combination of an articulated political vision and a group that both advocated and supported black cultural achievement was a valuable resource for these poets.

In a similar way, Arlen House, a feminist publisher in Ireland, organized writing workshops for women, who had few institutions to support their work and who were toiling in an atmosphere that often seemed hostile to their work and concerns. The press asked a dozen Irish women writers to lead workshops for women. Eavan Boland directed a number of workshops for the Arlen series. When the series concluded, a group of women writers decided to continue on their own; in 1987, they organized the WEB Women Writers’ Group, meeting, as “the Group” had, in members’ homes to discuss drafts of work. Limited to eighteen participants, the WEB group’s membership has changed over time, with new members invited to join when an opening arises. Since 1992, the workshop has met on Saturday afternoons in the Irish Writers Centre in Dublin.

Outside the Mainstream: The English Intelligencer

Some of the institutions we have in mind when we think of the situatedness of poetry are large and fairly powerful, able to achieve widespread influence and impact. Others are quite small, even fairly ephemeral. These small “institutions,” though, are sometimes able to make large contributions to the situation of poetry at a given moment. One such example is *The English Intelligencer* (TEI), which appeared only thirty-six times, lasted just over two years, and had, as its immediate audience, a group of poets no larger than sixty-five. The “magazine” (it is unclear whether it was intended as a publication or a set of working drafts and commentaries circulated among a group of workshop participants; the conception varied and altered) was, as its cocreator Andrew Crozier wrote, “an attempt to draw together various English poets whose work was thought of as ‘avant-garde’...and to provide them with a common meeting point” (Crozier, “Journal Description and Statement of Purpose,” in *The English Intelligencer* archive, Correspondence, Series A, Box 1, Folder 1). The confusion about the *Intelligencer’s* status is understandable; the groups of poems appeared with reasonable regularity, and some poets who had seen the pages wrote in and submitted poems as they would to a more regular literary review. Crozier, on the other hand, insisted in a letter to Peter Riley (copied to John James) that “The Intelligencer is hardly a magazine, and I’ve never regarded what has circulated in it as published” (included/reproduced in *TEI*, January 24, 1967). The “common meeting point” seems to have been a mimeograph machine on which Crozier reproduced the poems sent to him by the reader/contributors (at one point, J.H. Prynne, a central member of the group around the *Intelligencer*, wrote to Crozier with advice about how to make the mimeographs clearer and easier to read). About once every three weeks, he sent these packets of poems to the members of the *Intelligencer’s* list of readers (the changing lists themselves are included in some issues), and interspersed with the poems were announcements of forthcoming books by the poets, calls for commentary, and, increasingly, letters and essays articulating poetic priorities.

A handful of pages cranked out on a mimeograph machine and posted to a list of poets, some of whom were the ones whose poems appeared on those pages: this hardly seems an important literary “institution.” It has neither the endurance nor the ubiquity of Faber and Faber, of course, but it is also much more ephemeral even than a magazine like *PN Review* or the smaller and more narrowly focused *Grosseteste Review*. And yet these

bundles of pages formed an important part of the literary landscape of the late 1960s in Britain. On one level, *The English Intelligencer* matters because it provided a venue for visibility and dialogue among poets working outside the mainstream. In this regard, it functioned as something of a long-distance workshop, akin, perhaps, to those Philip Hobsbaum organized in Cambridge, London, and Belfast. Like “the Group,” the *Intelligencer* grew out of dissatisfaction with the way poetry was read in the mainstream (as well as with the poetry of the mainstream itself). While it was not immediately or entirely realized, Crozier’s ambition for the *Intelligencer* was for it to serve more as a channel for debate than for dissemination. In addition, the magazine served as a convenient means for spreading not only poems but also news of other poetry publications – magazines, chapbooks, and books. As such, it was a node in a network. This is important first because of the cultural work the enterprise did in its moment: avant-garde poets discovered the work of other like-minded poets and discovered an array of publications and small presses that they could then both patronize and seek to publish with. It is also important for us, as readers looking back and reconstructing the moment’s literary history, for it helps us to see how poems and discourse about poetry circulated in a community on the margins of the literary scene.

On another level, *The English Intelligencer* helped to consolidate one branch of British experimental poetry of the 1960s and after. The prominence, in its pages, of work by Prynne and of poets heavily influenced by Prynne (Crozier, Peter Riley) establishes the magazine as a key outpost of what, in retrospect, we might call the Cambridge wing of the emerging poetic avant-garde in Britain (Prynne taught at Cambridge University, Crozier and Riley studied there, as did Wendy Mulford, whose husband, John James, is another large presence in the pages of the magazine). Over the two years of its existence, *The English Intelligencer* narrowed and strengthened its specific version of avant-garde poetic practice and of the ideas that informed that practice. Early issues include many poems clearly influenced by American “Beat” poetry, free-verse poems on landscape and love, with titles like “Wide Sidewalks of Cortez” and “Thots from Yr. Postcard.” The titles of these alone suggest Allen Ginsberg or Gary Snyder; the American “sidewalks,” rather than the more familiar English “pavements,” and the typographical abbreviations are familiar from these poets’ writing (as well as that of such post-Pound poets as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley). “Wide Sidewalks of Cortez” gives a sense of the poems’ flavor:

to write about the places
I have come to but more
the places I came from
and the coming from
them to where I am now
and how I am now where
I am because of
where I was.

(*TEI* 1.1

[November 1966], 3)

These first poems in the issue turn out to be by John Temple, though a reader only discovers this at the end of Temple's poems. The poems themselves are privileged over the identities of the poets, about whom no information is given (in contrast to the contributors' notes section of most literary magazines). Along with Temple's American-influenced poems, the issue includes eight poems by Barry MacSweeney, a frequent contributor over the life of *The English Intelligencer* and a fixture in the London poetic scene of the late 1960s and 1970s. His poems here run the gamut from politics to love, from dialect quotations of striking beer draymen to somewhat jejune sex romp (in "In Bed") to lyric observation in the style of William Carlos Williams (in "Tree"). We are fairly deep into the issue before, in Crozier's "At Least I've a Roof Over My Head," we find anything like what has come to be the typical Cambridge style, influenced by Prynne and explicitly focused on the relationship of represented consciousness and observed external phenomena. Crozier's poem is followed by "To a Lady who sent me a copy of my verses at my going to bed," by the seventeenth-century poet Henry King, and, finally, by two poems of Prynne, whose "The Western Gate" concludes with something of an *ars poetica*:

Write a letter, walk across the wet pavement,
the lines are taut with
strain, maybe they'll
snap soon. The explosion
is for all of us and I dedicate the results
to the fish of the sea and the purity of
language: the truth is sadder but who
would ask me to hope only for that?

(*TEI* 1.1 [November 1966], 10)

Only after this does the magazine's "PROPOSITION" appear, a single sentence claiming that the magazine is "for the land and its language" and is being sent to a list of interested poets. (That this list is a "Who's Who" of poets who went on to become important in the advance of experimental poetry in Britain is testimony to the significance of *The English Intelligencer*.)

In a clear contrast with the eclectic experimental range of the magazine's early issues, later issues show a consolidation of the "Cambridge" style. This grows out of some readers' dissatisfaction with one or another of the different strains of poem on offer in the *Intelligencer*. John Turnbull, for example, writes a letter remarking on Temple's poems in the first issue and arguing that "it should be possible to avoid the more obvious sort of 'I, minimus, of West Hartlepool etc.,'" while other correspondents write in later issues to complain of the "unoriginally American stamp" in some poems. The magazine reaches a sort of crisis in the winter of 1966–1967, with the initial series concluding and a new series beginning in April 1967, under the editorship of Peter Riley rather than Crozier. The content of the magazine is largely dominated, from then on, by Riley's and Prynne's archaeological interests; these appear in essays, letters, and poems. The "ANNOUNCEMENT" published in that issue is a manifesto for such work, especially in opposition to the American-influenced work that appeared in earlier issues. Riley argues there that such work is reducible to formula: "poem = Physiological Presence + Cosmological Range." Against that, he proposes the attempt to recover a unity of experience that predates Greek civilization. "It is," he writes, "a matter of poetry, to rediscover the place of song" in processes of migration that relate to circumstances of geography, climate, and economics (*TEI* 2.1, April 1967, 1). This is, appropriately, followed by Prynne's "Aristeas, In Seven Years." By the end of the magazine's run in 1968, the contents are thoroughly dominated by Cambridge poets – Riley and Prynne, Crozier and Tim Longville, and Wendy Mulford.

We also see the tendency of the poetic community constructed in these pages in the advertisements for other magazines and presses that come to take up more and more space over the two years of the magazine's run. A snapshot of the network of which the *Intelligencer* is a part appears in the last complete issue (April 5, 1968). The last page includes notices for the *Grosseteste Review*, edited by Tim Longville and including work by James, Prynne, John Riley, and others; for James's own magazine, *2RI*, also including work by Prynne, along with Crozier, Feinstein, Mulford,

and others; for a new magazine “Peter Riley is contemplating,” with an address at which he will publish it; and for books published by contributors through the Ferry Press, Grosseteste Press, and Fulcrum Press (all associated with frequent contributors to the *Intelligencer*) and for Prynne’s *Kitchen Poems*, from Cape Goliard.

While the work of Prynne and Riley comes to dominate the magazine, though, it never takes it over entirely. We see this in the continuing presence in the pages of the *Intelligencer* of poems and prose by Elaine Feinstein, for example, or the exuberant ubiquity of Barry MacSweeney. His poems appear in almost every issue of the magazine, and his prose – in letters, in a blistering attack on a good deal of other contemporary poetry – frequently appears as well. In an early issue, MacSweeney’s “Plea Poem,” a graphic political poem abhorring the violence of the Vietnam War, establishes a counterpoint to the exploration of consciousness in and through language in poems by Crozier (“For Two Lovers in One Picture”) and Prynne (“The Numbers”) that follow it. Indeed, it is MacSweeney who gets the very last word, in the single page “Final Solution Issue” of September 29, 1968; the issue consists entirely of the poet’s “Farewell/my 20 Gauloises.”

The institutional presence of *The English Intelligencer* is not restricted to the “worksheets” Crozier, Prynne, and Riley sent around to their fellow poets and correspondents. Two final aspects of the magazine help us to see how it functioned as part of the array of literary institutions that enabled and influenced the production and reception of poetry in Britain during this period. It is easy to forget, and therefore worth explicitly recalling, that these institutions were, among other things, gatherings of individuals who led lives off as well as on the page and who interacted, sometimes, in person as well as through the post. A number of those involved with the *Intelligencer* got together for a week in March 1967, in the village of Sparty Lea, near Allendale, Northumberland. The plan was to spend the time reading, hearing, and discussing poetry and poetics. It appears, from correspondence and poems later circulated in *The English Intelligencer*, that some of this did indeed happen during the moments between long drinking sessions in the pub. One thing that clearly emerges from an eight-page collage of prose passages sent in by various contributors is that much of the conversation during the days in Sparty Lea had to do with whether and to what extent the assembled writers made up a coherent group and, if so, what kind of group. This explicit attempt to define boundaries, to articulate shared commitments, is one key element of any literary institution and an especially important

one for institutions that see themselves as outside of (and opposed to) the mainstream. It appears from the direction the magazine took after this “conference” that the answers to the questions posed were generally in the direction of the chthonic, linguistically innovative explorations of consciousness typical of Prynne, Riley, Crozier, James, and others.

But lines are drawn not only by those within a particular institution; they are also, often, inscribed by those in one or another way outside it. In some ways, the poets of *The English Intelligencer* could know they’d had an impact when a strange “Series 2, Issue 2” appeared in their mailboxes. The layout and look of these pages is very similar to previous issues, and many of the same names appear. But one has only to read the note appended to a poem by “Erwin Klopstock” (“Dr. Klopstock practices in Wooton-under-Edge, where he has been working hard at living down his – originally Huguenot – name for the last six decades [sic]”) or the poems allegedly by Edward Lucie-Smith (a member of the Group whom one would never expect to see in the *Intelligencer*) to realize that the issue is a parody. The insider references to Sparty Lea in the issues immediately following the gathering there poke fun at the way, just a year into its existence, the magazine had developed a strong sense of its (and its community’s) identity:

On June 1st a dozen or so poets are going to walk from the village of Sparty Lea in Northumberland to Aklavik in memory of their old comrades. If you want to go, write to Edward Lucie-Smith, 24 Sydney Street, London S.W. 3, who is arranging the event.

And the poems here by “Prynne” and “Riley” are masterful send-ups of these two poets’ interests and styles; the poem attributed to Prynne is “The English Passive Voice” and that attributed to Riley is “The Disappearance of Gravel,” each title nicely capturing the poets’ insistent focuses on language and landscape. In Crozier’s notes on the magazine’s archive, he describes this “spoof issue” as including contributions “by” John Temple, John Hall, Tim Longville, and others and speculates that the parody was the work of Tom Raworth, since the issue’s typeface was identical with that of the poet’s typewriter.

The spoof issue is entertaining. Its wordplay is occasionally ingenious, and some of its jokes are funny. Its importance, though, is not limited to its value as humor. The issue’s poems illustrate by exaggeration some important elements of the aesthetic commitments that held the *Intelligencer*

group together. Just as important, its jokes at the expense of Edward Lucie-Smith (an easy figure for at least some aspects of the mainstream poetry scene) and its promise of poems by John Wain and Kingsley Amis, two figures indelibly associated with the Movement of the 1950s, delineate the boundary between poets holding those commitments and those against whom they defined themselves.

Street Editions, Reality Studio, and Reality Street

In 1972, after the *Intelligencer* folded and as Michael Schmidt was moving Carcanet to Manchester, Wendy Mulford, a thirty-year-old Cambridge University graduate and poet, began Street Editions in Cambridge. A student of J.H. Prynne, Mulford set out to publish work that would come to be known as Cambridge School. The first few books (and it should be noted that Street Editions, like other small presses, published far fewer books per year than presses like Faber, Carcanet, or Bloodaxe) included volumes by Prynne, Mulford's husband, John James, Andrew Crozier, and Douglas Oliver. Oliver's book, the 1974 prose poem *In the Cave of Suicession*, might most easily illustrate the differences between the purpose and audience motivating Street Editions and those assumed by the mainstream publishers. The book's appearance immediately signals to readers that this is not the work of a mainstream press; the volume is thin (eighteen pages), its trim size is that of A4 typing paper, its cover is card stock, and the pages are stapled rather than bound. After a page dedicating the book to Crozier, James, and Prynne (implicitly announcing solidarity with the entire Street Editions list to date), an amateurish line drawing introduces "the inquirer," the figure on whom the poem's narrative focuses. A lyric prologue follows, and the first stanza tells us that we are outside the bounds marked by the typical Faber volume or page:

In what cave in the love of love
does swiftness lie as a
melting wax
a little lava
which the motive motiveless of oracle
infolds in a rock of memory?

(1974: 1)

Oliver's sentence is no more difficult to parse than many in mainstream lyric poems, but its mechanics are certainly different from those we find in the stanzas of Larkin or Heaney or Hughes. Note "love of love" and "motive motiveless," the repetitions at once emphasizing and estranging the words, and the syntax in the last two lines, which forces us to hover for a moment until we figure out that it is the oracle's motiveless motive that does the infolding. The splitting of the third line so as to set apart the two similes for "swiftness," as well as the nonce word itself, is distinctly strange as well. The poem proper begins on the next page, with an italicized paragraph of scene setting ("On a warm July evening, the inquirer, Q, parked his beige Austin car on the moorland verges of the road through Winnat's Pass in Derbyshire's Peak District."), and then the question and answer format of the rest of the long poem begins. The inquirer has descended into a cave (known as the Suicide Cave) to consult an oracle by typing his questions and the answers he hears. "Touch-typing mistakes of apparent oracular provenance," we are told, "have been left in" (1974: 2). The poem's language; its elliptical narrative; its exploitation of typing "accidents"; its format as Q and A prose that lapses, from time to time, into the appearance of free-verse lines; its inclusion of the sketch of the inquirer and a "Portrait of the Scoutmaster found on a piece of card"; its trim size and staples and card-stock cover all conspire to set it apart as new, experimental, marginal, and emphatically *not* Faber. In their own way, the other volumes produced by Street Editions make similar announcements.

Meanwhile, in London, poet Ken Edwards was coediting (with Peter Barry and Robert Hampson) the small magazine, *Alembic*. Inspired by the work of such London-based experimental poets as Bob Cobbing and Allen Fisher (the work these poets did not only as poets but also as publishers), Edwards hoped to publish the work of what he has since called the "parallel tradition" of British poetry. In 1978, he began publishing *Reality Studios*, a monthly newsletter that combined new poems, reviews of small-press books, announcements of upcoming poetry readings, and occasional visual arts pieces (Edwards, 1985: 2–3). The magazine at first was mimeographed and stapled, with thin card-stock covers. Soon, Edwards was able to produce it as a perfect-bound annual journal, which he published along with occasional pamphlets and papers (programmatic statements on contemporary poetics).

Along with the magazine and its associated ephemeral publications, Edwards started publishing volumes by individual poets in the late 1980s. Fisher's *Unpolished Mirrors* was the first of these, and it was followed by books by Andrew Duncan, John Seed, and Wendy Mulford. Like the magazine, the books produced by Reality Studios explored the possibilities of language beyond its use in typical poetic sentences, stanzas, and lines. The magazine and the press were open to concrete poetry, which emphasized the appearance of words or individual letters over their lexical content, and to a wide range of experiments with the non-semantic aspects of language (e.g., with sound as sound or with the associations that might be prompted and followed by words with no grammatical connections among them). What this meant sometimes was the modernist fragmentation and parataxis of Edwards's own *A4 Landscape*, in which the poems offer intense imagist views of contemporary, mostly urban, landscapes intercut with the impressions of culture and experience in time. The former is the mode of "April, 1985: Elephant & Castle, London":

8 September 84

White light at the edge of night hard
Wide circle all around a mesh of resistance
Secret electricity, steel & contaminated meat.

(1988: n.p.)

The latter is the dominant medium of "September 1985: Deserted mills, Oldham, Lancs":

21 March 85

7.55 am: Radio resonates in bone & musculature
Coffee machine hiccoughs, vapour trails
Discharged by skin contact
12 noon: Power station
12.02 pm: "Pound touching \$1.1745, chancellor keeps drop to ½%
& nods in 14% mortgages
11.07 pm: Bach, Sonata in C major for solo violin, BWV 1005
"The cognitive & the affective are reunited."

(1988: n.p.)

Allen Fisher's *Unpolished Mirrors* inhabits the more recondite end of the Reality Studios continuum (though it inhabits the more readable end of

the continuum of Fisher's work, some of which is beautifully illegible in its experiments with printing and concrete techniques). In "Unhinge 1," Fisher defamiliarizes with an intense focus on the seen: "A rabbit and slope of felt lifting to the ceiling/co-fusion of infinity and bees' wax without canvas" (24). Making sense of the senses is part of Fisher's project in the book, but he is also at pains to remind readers how the senses themselves are constructed by cultural vocabularies. This is especially apparent in "ICI Metallichrome":

Live-Oak
 Azure -Blue
 Tartan -Green
 Peacock - Blue
 Shannon - Green
 Haze - Blue
 (1985: 32)

This list of pigments produced by the chemical company and denoted on the labels of artists' paint tubes organizes the range of perceptible hues into a series of named segments of the spectrum, those available for purchase and use, those into which the world "naturally" (or not) divides.

In 1993, Street Editions and Reality Studios merged to form Reality Street Editions (later shortened to Reality Street). First in London and, since 2004, in Hastings, Reality Street continues to publish several books per year, all titles continuing the work of linguistic innovation and exploration in poetry. The press remains the home (or one of the homes) of poets like Denise Riley, Bill Griffiths, Allen Fisher, Maggie O'Sullivan, Maurice Scully, and Edwards and Mulford themselves. The press also continues to publish the work of Canadian and, less often, American avant-garde poets (such as Lisa Robertson and Fanny Howe), as well as a younger generation of experimental poets.

We have here surveyed just some of the salient discourses and institutions that make up the literary landscape and that shape the poetic imaginary. There are many more examples, of course, and the landscape has, in the last decade or so, moved into the digital world, where online reviews and blogs have done some work both to deepen the sense of the mainstream and to explore other possible tributaries through which poetry might flow. Much of the online landscape consists simply of the digital face of the kind of institutions we have described in this chapter; publishers and magazines,

workshops and collectives, arts funding organizations and societies all have their websites in addition to their presences in the brick-and-mortar world. The digital poetry landscape, though, has added some new features, from small magazines able to exist quite cheaply in online-only format to blogs by individuals and groups of all kinds (poets and reviewers and professors but also fans and enthusiastic readers). A young poet starting to write now has, at his or her fingertips, a wider, richer, and more various set of models and articulated possibilities than were available even a generation ago.

4

Histories of Forms

Many of the rewards of reading poetry can be located in its ancient, indeed, archaic nature. Poetry is intimately connected to the origins of collective humanity and of each individual human. Human infants are nursed, comforted, and played with to the rhythmic repetition of sound patterns. We first encounter and acquire language in an intimate relationship to bodily pleasure, satisfaction, and interhuman connection. Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism* asserts that “babble” is one of the concepts that remain at the heart of all poetry and that, when we interpret poetry, we should attend to the various sound patterns (rhythmic repetition, rhyme, consonance, assonance) and note any conventions of sound patterning that are being followed or revised (1957: 275).

The other central aspect of poetry, for Frye, is the “doodle” or riddle: that is to say the use of language to produce two meanings, a surface one and a deeper, hidden meaning (1957: 280). For instance, when the Sphinx in the Oedipus myth encounters travelers, she asks them the most famous riddle in the Western tradition: “Which creature in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?” Oedipus answers correctly: the human creature crawls as a baby, is a biped as an adult, and then uses a walking stick when old. This riddle also makes an implied metaphoric connection between the rise and fall of a human lifespan and the rise and fall of the sun in a single day, and, as with all metaphors, it works through a pattern of similarity and dissimilarity: a human lifespan is much greater than a single day, but the sun’s rising and falling is eternal; a human lifespan is linear, whereas the sun’s journey is cyclical; a

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human's life never repeats, while sunrises and sunsets are always repeated. Both doodle and babble are connected to the archaic belief in the magical, incantatory, and charm-like properties of language – that language mediates between the natural, human, and supernatural realms.

The relationship between babble and doodle can be categorized as the difference between form and content. When critics emphasize the formal aspects of a poem, then we say they are involved in poetics – how a poem is made – and when critics concentrate on the meaning of a poem, then we say they are involved in hermeneutics. The most effective interpretations of poems tend to be those where the critic shows how the formal properties of the poem enact and generate the poem's content. For example, William Wordsworth revises the Sphinx's riddle in his famous poem on childhood:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a Man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is Father to the Man.
(2010: 264)

Wordsworth extends and complicates the Sphinx's metaphor as his verb patterns enact the temporal span of human life: first, the past tense ("so was it when" he was on four feet); second, the present tense ("So is it now I am" on two feet); and, third, the future tense ("so be it" when I will be on three feet). He then combines past, present, and future tenses in the paradoxical (or doodle) claim that "the Child is Father to the Man." The child comes first so in some sense he fathers his adult self, but his father, of course, also precedes the child. In addition, the adult's present self (the man) is made up of all his past and future selves (the child and the father). The poem asserts the unification of the organic, human, and supernatural worlds through the ambiguity of the final phrase, "natural piety," in which the adjective contains both the natural and human realms and the noun combines both human and religious properties. Wordsworth unifies these realms further through the symbolic content of the rainbow because this natural phenomenon carries with it enormous religious freight that generates not only physical and emotional feeling

(his heart literally and figuratively “leaps”) but also thought itself in the forms of memory (the past), contemplation (the present), and hope (the future). Finally, Wordsworth uses his skill at “babble” to reinforce and enact closure in the last line. The important b sounds of the opening lines (behold/rainbow/began/be) return with the initial “bound,” and this helps produce both meaning closure – the whole poem is about the binds between things – and sound closure. (Bound also means “to leap”; an echo reinforced by the sound similarity of leap/each.) Wordsworth strengthens the doodle fusion of “natural piety” by the babble fusion of “piety” that synthesizes the two dominant sounds in the poem: the earlier rhyme of sky/die and its attendant repetitions (I/sky/life/I/I/die/I/piety) and the final rhyme of be/piety and its repeated pattern (behold/began/be/be/piety). In other words, the poem’s effects are produced by the interaction between the poem’s doodle (its meaning) and babble (its formal patterning).

Wordsworth’s poem, like every poem, takes place within a set of conventions that it refocuses in a different way. The conventions poets use are those both of content (the rainbow) and of structure (rhyme), and being aware of these conventions enables stronger interpretations of individual poems. There are hundreds of conventions, but in this chapter, we will explore three different kinds (form, mode, and trope) and will focus on one type from each: the sonnet form, the elegiac mode, and the trope of ekphrasis. Our readings will be exemplary and show how thinking about conventions can start and enrich interpretation. Poetic form describes the poem’s structure and can include some or all the following principles: meter, rhyme scheme, sound patterns, number of lines, stanza form, and syntax. Often over time some forms become associated with certain content traditions, but such content conventions are better called modes. For example, initially an elegy denoted any poem written in the elegiac meter (the meaning it still has in German), but in the English tradition, an elegy has come to mean a poem that mourns a death. Finally, a trope (from the Greek for “swerve”) names a figure of thought or a device that alters (or swerves from) the common meaning of words (such as metaphor). The trope of ekphrasis, for example, uses words to describe a visual work of art and, as such, contains two swerves: first, it moves from the pictorial object to its linguistic description, and, second, it reverses this movement as the linguistic description gestures to a newly envisioned pictorial object. Although an ancient trope, ekphrasis has been revived in postwar poetry partly

because of questions centered on new technologies of representation (photography, film, TV, and so on).

The Sonnet

As T.V.F. Brogan charts, the sonnet form emerges in Italy in the thirteenth century and through its use, primarily by Petrarch, became formalized in Italian as a fourteen-line poem with each line being eleven syllables long (hendecasyllables) that divided in terms of rhyme scheme and content into two unequal parts. The first eight lines rhyme abbaabba and are called the octave, while the final six lines rhyme either cdcdcd or cdecde and are called the sestet. This structural division into two parts lends itself to a similar division of content with the octave tending to set up a statement, a position, or a state of affairs that the sestet comments upon, revises, or reverses. The first word or line of the sestet often marks both a formal and thematic turn in the poem and, as happens with such repeated principles, has acquired a name, the “volta” (turn in Italian). Because of Petrarch’s influence, this form of the sonnet is known as the Petrarchan sonnet (although sometimes critics call it the Italian sonnet). Furthermore, Petrarch and others also provided the sonnet with a distinctive set of modes, tropes, and themes. The sonnet became a lyric of heightened emotion, more often than not, expressing the anguished love of a male speaker whose private relationship with a female beloved was connected through figurative language to the public languages of religion, philosophy, and politics and so on. Furthermore, these sonnets were often arranged in sequences that suggested some form of narrative or intellectual order (1993: 1167–9).

Thomas Wyatt was the first English poet to use the form during the reign of Henry VIII, and Michael Spiller describes how English writers quickly began to experiment with the sonnet’s structure. They changed the meter to the ten-syllable iambic pentameter and began to alter the rhyme scheme. English has far fewer rhyme words than Italian (how many times can you rhyme “love” with “dove” or “glove?”), and the Earl of Surrey became known for his sonnets that added additional rhymes by changing the scheme to abab cdcd efef gg. (This form is usually called the Shakespearean sonnet, but is sometimes called the English sonnet.) This alteration suddenly enabled an enormous expansion of the sonnet’s argument capabilities. Although the sonnet still maintains its Petrarchan eight-line statement of the octave,

followed by the six-line counterstatement of the sestet, the final couplet with its epigrammatic structure encourages an extra “volta” or turn in the sonnet’s argument. Moreover, altering the rhyme scheme also divided the sonnet into three equal quatrains followed by the couplet. Since formally the “volta” is linked to the change in rhyme scheme, each new quatrain now suggests the possibility of additional turns (Spiller: 1992). This in microcosm patterns one way in which literary innovation occurs: writers experience a formal difficulty or impasse (English has few rhymes) that forces them to formal experimentation (how can we keep the form but add more rhymes) that, in turn, unleashes the possibility of more complex content and formal structures.

The English or Shakespearean sonnet acquires a number of additional possible structural principles. It can simply follow the Petrarchan single turn, or it can add a second turn with the epigrammatic nature of the couplet, or, if it follows the logic of the rhyme scheme, it can have three turns at the fifth, ninth, and thirteenth lines. Indeed, William Shakespeare wrote over 150 sonnets that display the full range of argument possibilities offered up by the revised structure. In his sonnet 18, for example, there are two turns: the octave explores the question raised in the first line (“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”), followed by the Petrarchan turn at the opening of the sestet (“But thy eternal summer shall not fade”), and then the couplet ends the sonnet with a final argument turn echoing the rhetoric of logical conclusion (“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”). Sonnet 106, in contrast, has three turns: after the first quatrain tells us “when in the chronicle of wasted time,” the second turns with its opening “then in the blazon of sweet beauty’s best”; this is followed by the “volta” of the third quatrain clearly marked by its opening, “So all their praises are but prophecies,” and finally the couplet concludes with one final turn heralded by its “For we...have eyes to wonder.” In sonnet 66, Shakespeare famously expands the logic of the initial opening statement of the Petrarchan octave by making it extend for thirteen lines by listing all the things he is tired of before finally providing us with the turn in the final line when he gives us the single exception. Again form reinforces content: the final line lists the exception and enacts this by being itself the only exception. Clearly, for Shakespeare and his fellow sonneteers, the English sonnet became an increasingly complex form that lent itself to analyzing emotional states through the structure of logic and argument.

In the next stage in the history of the English sonnet, the poets who immediately follow Shakespeare use the form to investigate the inner turmoil of the religious self and transfer the language of pained sexual love into tortured plaints of divine love: John Donne, for example, urges Christ to “ravish” him. Donne adapts the Shakespearean sonnet by returning to the Petrarchan octave (abbaabba) followed by a sestet made up of the Shakespearean final quatrain and concluding couplet (cdcd ee). This form becomes especially effective when the constricted rhyme of the octave reinforces a sense of spiritual impasse that is released by the sestet and that culminates in an acceptance of God’s will in the couplet. John Milton extends the sonnet into political subject matter, and although he returns to the Petrarchan rhyme form, he works his syntax over and beyond the structural endings suggested by the rhyme and often places the turn in the middle of lines or in lines in the middle of the rhyme scheme. Indeed for the Romantic poets, David Fairer argues, Shakespeare and Milton represent two contrasting thematic positions for the sonnet – poems of intense interiority and poems of public politics. Characteristically, Romantic sonnets often combine these positions by enacting an argument between political engagement and poetic retreat (2005: 301).

As this brief history shows any poet who decides to write a sonnet cannot help but enter this rich and complex tradition, and readers, similarly, need to be aware of and concerned with such formal traditions. However, interpreting a sonnet (or any poem) through its formal choices requires that we go beyond the merely descriptive. It is not enough simply to notice the form, but rather it is important to analyze how the poet’s formal choices enact or reinforce the explicit content of the poem. For example, in the third section of *The Waste Land* entitled “The Fire Sermon,” T.S. Eliot sets up various scenes of sterile, meaningless, or violent sexual encounters in order to provide a contrast between a contemporary world of apparently mechanical sexual intercourse and a past world of sacred sexual reproduction. The section ends with a series of broken sonnets that compare a present sexual assignation with the past love affair of Queen Elizabeth I and Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester. After noting Eliot’s use of the sonnet, an initial interpretation of this formal choice would observe that at the heart of Eliot’s conception of English cultural history lies the idea of a “disassociation of sensibility” (1965: 64). For Eliot, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods prior to the English Civil War, thought and feeling, science and religion, and poetry and philosophy were unified, but afterwards they became separated and what

Eliot regarded as the alienation of humans in modern society could be marked. Returning to the sonnet form that exemplifies Elizabethan poetry but then fragmenting it enables Eliot to make his poem's central thematic contrast in formal terms. However, such a formal analysis can go further (as Michael Thurston suggests in his reading of the poem (2009: 44–45)) when we notice that in the final broken sonnet, Eliot makes his sestet not only from the memory of the Petrarchan sestet but also from the ghost of iambic pentameter:

On Margate Sands.
I can connect
Nothing with nothing.
The broken fingernails of dirty hands.
My people humble people who expect
Nothing.

(Eliot 1991: 70)

Interspersing sentences and sentence fragments (the smaller form and broken form of the grammatical unit recapitulating the larger form and broken form of the sonnet), Eliot here creates a rich interplay between expected form and disrupted form. The first three lines all have a different metrical pattern and hence perform the lack of connection to which they refer. The next two lines (the first a sentence fragment) return to the dominant iambic pentameter of the English sonnet (and English poetry in general since Chaucer) and reveal the emerging Petrarchan rhyme scheme (cde cde). However, the final rhyme once again enacts the thematic of this section of the poem as Eliot produces a rhyme that is in some sense not a rhyme by repeating the same word, nothing/nothing. This strange rhyme-that-is-not-a-rhyme also performs the delicate balance of the sentence's content with not only its negative claim that there is no link between things, between people, and between the past and the present but also its positive claim that they can be linked but that what connects them is "nothing."

In short, then, knowing the form or forms that a poem refers to or revises enables a privileged site from which to access its meaning, and the analysis of a poem's formal properties should always be folded back to make some substantive and interpretive point. Poetics, in other words, should generate hermeneutics. The following readings of a number of postwar sonnets are intended to be exemplary interpretation and

to suggest the rich possibilities that form has offered and continues to offer poets, especially as they seek to navigate between tradition and innovation.

In her recent prize-winning collection *Rapture*, Carol Ann Duffy suggestively bases the majority of her poems on the sonnet form, and the volume as a whole echoes the sonnet sequences of the Elizabethan poets as it charts the story of a love affair. Echoing the homoeroticism of Shakespeare's sonnets but revising it by making the lovers female, Duffy, nevertheless, deliberately avoids gendered pronouns focusing on the repeated patterns made by first and second person pronouns: subjective (I, you, we), objective (me, you, us) possessive (mine, ours, your), and possessive determiner (my, our, your). As such, she highlights the obsessive self-regard and other-regard of a passionate love affair and generates a complex interrelationship between linguistic, emotional, and physical separation and union. In the Shakespearean sonnet that provides the title of the collection, "Rapture," for example, she begins, "Thought of by you all day, I think of you" (2005: 37). The "you" modulates from being the actor of the relative clause to the object of the main clause, but at the same time the initial passive construction lessens the "you"'s movement from acting to being acted upon. Duffy emphasizes the couple's physical separation but emotional union by providing them both with the same action ("thought" and "think") that, nevertheless, signifies their absence from one another. In addition, although the modulation from passive past tense ("thought by you") to active present tense ("I think") provides the sense of time passing, it also asserts that the same situation happens continuously. The poem continues this pattern of stasis and disconnection, of time moving sequentially and yet emptily: the "prayer of rain" does not combine the natural and sacred realm since there is no "paradise" and the sky (in an allusion to Philip Larkin's "High Windows") "goes nowhere" but does so "endlessly." The first half of the poem ends in an impasse, "we stay trapped in time," and Duffy emphasizes this stasis by extending the initial portrayal of the situation into the ninth line (2005: 37).

The poem's turn occurs, then, in the tenth line, and Duffy ends the poem by echoing or repeating words and images from the first nine lines in order to portray their connection to one another or rather their disconnection from one another. Here she provides both literal and metaphoric physical action: the birds no longer "shelter" but "fly" and, by so doing, they "connect" "earth to heaven." Thought now generates the physical

memory of “your kiss” that, in turn, produces the materiality of the poem, of “this chain of words.” Finally, the poem concludes with the removal of the “I” and the “you” not only into the abstraction of their feelings for one another, “desire and passion,” but also into the substance, “the thinking air,” that returns us to the activity of the first line (2005: 37). Duffy, here, as she does throughout the volume, uses the thematic and formal conventions of the sonnet form and the Elizabethan sonnet sequence to write poems that both recapitulate and innovate and, by so doing, mimic the ways in which desire and passion are repeated anew with each successive love affair.

For Duffy the sonnet provides a rich set of conventions to use and revise, and, like many poets, she regards the form as an enabling frame upon which to raise and investigate the conventional themes with which the sonnet has been associated. However, for many postwar poets, the sonnet’s long and complex tradition has meant that it has become the preferred form in which to raise questions concerning history and the way in which history is transmitted. The sonnet’s history as a form in which compressed self-interrogation takes place means that it has often been seen as the ideal form in which questions of the relationship between aesthetic form and historical events can take place. Geoffrey Hill, for example, has consistently used the sonnet form in his poetry, seeing in its compression and conventions an appropriate analogue for the ambiguity and ambivalence he observes in European history itself. Indeed, his poetry has been one long meditation on Walter Benjamin’s claim that “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (2003: 392). Museums are perhaps the easiest way to understand this statement. The British Museum, for example, contains the whole panoply of the extraordinary creations of human civilizations, but each item has been torn from its context. Indeed, the Museum’s very existence marks Britain’s imperial and conquering history.

In the sonnet, “Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings,” from his first collection, *For the Unfallen* (1956), Hill addresses the complex provenance of the sonnet form as a means to address the question of the break or rupture between different cultural moments. The title itself positions the Plantagenet dynasty in the past, and “requiem” already implies the difference between the past the poem represents and the present representation of the poem. A requiem in Plantagenet times was a “mass said or sung for the repose of the soul of a dead person” or persons that would take place in the communal space of the as-yet unreformed

church, whereas this sonnet in contemporary times is a written and printed text to be read in solitary silence (“Requiem”).

The sonnet’s turn occurs conventionally in the ninth line when Hill describes the tombs of the Kings:

At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,
With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs
They lie; they lie.

(1958: 30)

At one level, the syntax follows on and over the usual turn as “they lie” finishes the syntactical thought begun in the seventh line – they rest in their tombs. On another level, the turn occurs through the repetition of “they lie” which implies deception. With this implication, Hill moves from describing the Kings’ splendid, aesthetic, and monumental tombs to the horrific physicality and violence of war with its “gored head.” The poem uses the ambiguity of words to highlight the ambiguity of the Plantagenet legacy. The first line begins, for example, by calling the sea “possessed” which suggests not only the overweening arrogance and ambition of the Plantagenets’ claim of possession of land on both sides of the English Channel but also the notion of the sea becoming destructively possessed by storms. Both the Kings’ ambition and the sea’s destruction cause “both shores” to be “littered” with “ruinous arms.” The poem’s end returns to these images of the “possessed sea” and the unburied and unremembered victims of the Plantagenet wars that litter the shores: “the sea/Across daubed rock evacuates its dead” (1958: 30). Hill contrasts the “daubed rock” of these anonymous corpses with the “well-dressed alabaster” of the Kings: both are painted stones and Hill makes their different representations signify both differently and identically. The evacuated dead have left no trace, whereas the named dead (the Kings) have left monuments. However, Hill links the two and hollows out the monumental significance of the tombs by making them signify the anonymous dead. As with the word “requiem,” Hill creates a complex relationship between the past and the present: the past collectively mourned a representative individual figure (singing requiems and building monuments for a King), whereas the present individually mourns representative collective figures (writing or reading a sonnet showing there are no monuments for the anonymous and unnumbered dead of Kings’ wars).

These two historical moments are then joined by a third marked by the sonnet form itself. The sonnet seems an appropriate form to memorialize the revised Plantagenet legacy because the sonnet enters into the English tradition at the moment when the Tudors (the dynasty who followed the Plantagenets) consolidate their power by destroying the last remnants of the Plantagenet family. Furthermore, it enters England when Henry VIII reforms the church making it an English, rather than a European, one. Hill's sonnet form marks the emergence of a different cultural and historical moment from that which his sonnet's content represents. Similarly, Hill plays with the sonnet's conventions to highlight its historicity, by presenting a number of possible sonnet structures. He uses the Shakespearean rhyme scheme for the first eight lines, before revising the sestet with efefef (although the penultimate line is only a para-rhyme decay/day/sea). This revision of the rhyme pattern of the sestet increases the strength of the final rhyme word "dead" since it echoes two previous words. Hill also works over the sonnet form by typographically separating the first quatrain from the next ten lines by a space. Moreover, these last ten lines are a single sentence with the enjambment working over the quatrain separation. The sonnet could be read in this way as an adaptation of Petrarchan conventions with the octave being shrunk to a quatrain and the sestet increased to ten lines. It also combines the Shakespearean two-quatrain octave, with an adapted Petrarchan sestet. Finally, it follows the Shakespearean three quatrains but then revises the couplet by having the final two lines continue the rhyme scheme of the third quatrain. Hill offers two different historical conceits: the sonnet's structural variety could be read as charting the emergence of the English sonnet from its Italian inheritance (just as the Tudors emerge from the Plantagenets), or it could be seen as revealing the English sonnet's dissolution into a contemporary nonce form (just as public requiems have dissolved into private elegies).

This doubling (and doubling back) of historical perspective stands at the heart of Hill's poetics. His 1968 collection, *King Log*, for example, contains an extended sonnet sequence called "Funeral Music," which seeks to represent not only the Wars of the Roses but also Shakespeare's history plays' representation of the Wars of the Roses. The eight sonnets mediate and meditate upon both what is being represented and the ways in which they have been represented. Hill's poetry oscillates between the fear that returning to old forms might simply create a "vacuous/Ceremony of possession" (1968: 25) and the hope that by interrogating such forms his poetry might provide "contractual ghosts of pity" (1968: 32).

Throughout his long career, Tony Harrison has also worked to effect political meaning through his handling of traditional lyric forms. In his ongoing sequence, *The School for Eloquence*, Harrison exploits the tension between, on one hand, the sonnet's conventional associations with nobility and "universal" themes like love expressed in elevated language and, on the other, a working-class identity and anticapitalist politics expressed in the regional dialect of his native Leeds. Harrison takes the title of his sequence from the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson's landmark study, *The Making of the English Working Class*. When the names of organizations advocating the rights of workers were outlawed at the turn of the nineteenth century, Thompson writes, the organizations used code names, one of which appears to have been "The School for Eloquence." The second of the two sonnets in the sequence titled "Them & [uz]" makes explicit both in its theme and its diction Harrison's intention to fill the form of the sonnet with unfamiliar contents, thereby altering the significance of the form itself: "So right, yer buggers, then! We'll occupy/your lousy leasehold Poetry" (1987: 123). The idea of forcible invasion signaled by "occupy" here is enacted by the entrance of slang ("yer buggers") into the sonnet's typically stately space.

The School for Eloquence sonnets also alter the conventional sonnet's structure. Modeled on George Meredith's 1862 sequence, *Modern Love*, Harrison's are sixteen-line sonnets. Their rhyme schemes vary. Whereas "Them & [uz]" II is set in couplets except for a final, cross-rhymed quatrain, the first of the two sonnets titled "The Rhubarbarians" is set in quatrains, the first three cross-rhymed, and the last broken into couplets. This structure in "The Rhubarbarians" strongly suggests a Shakespearean sonnet that ends with a doubled and elaborated epigrammatic couplet. If one aspect of the Shakespearean sonnet is the exploration of a theme through a slightly different metaphor in each quatrain, one way to read Harrison's poem within the frame of the sonnet is to see how its first three stanzas at once share a theme and develop that theme through different figures of speech.

The title "The Rhubarbarians" suggests a theme (or a set of related themes). Harrison coins a portmanteau word, combining "rhubarb," specifically its sense as a slang term for violent dispute, and "barbarians," a term denoting uncivilized attackers (it derives from the Greek word for non-Greek-speaking peoples, who seemed to say nothing more than "bar bar"). These meanings come together, as Harrison the playwright would know, in the additional definition of "rhubarb" as the term used to denote background chatter in crowd scenes during plays and films.

A connection between struggle and language (especially the language of those deemed outsiders) is thus signaled even before the poem proper begins. This connection takes on additional force from the striking patterns of sound repetition in the first stanza; Harrison crowds his opening lines with “g,” “p,” “b,” and “r” sounds to link language and the violence of a working-class “mob” and also to elevate the mob’s chatter (“rhubarb-rhubarb”) to equality with the speech of the nobility. In addition, this quatrain makes it impossible for readers not to experience language as physical, material; it is a substance that the poet works. What the remainder of the poem will demonstrate is the powerful preservative effect the poet’s work can have on political energies that might otherwise be lost or forgotten.

In the second quatrain, Harrison develops the relationship between class struggle and language by recalling the ruling class’s deployment of its own self-justifying discourse. With strikebreaking “blacklegs” along to take down their speech like Boswell took down that of Samuel Johnson, the wealthy owners of the means of production are written into history (which is said to belong to the victors). As example, Harrison adduces nineteenth-century mill owner William Horsfall, from Ottrivells Mills, who, before he was assassinated by Luddite weavers, was recorded to have said he wished to ride up to his saddle in Luddite blood. The third quatrain offers the counterexample of anonymous workers, whose speech in response to attacks on them (mounted not only by strikebreakers but also by the British Army, which at certain moments during the 1810s deployed more troops against Luddites than against the armies of Napoleon) is, in the historical record, mere “silence” (1987: 113).

“It wasn’t poetry, though,” the poem’s final quatrain (or doubled couplet) begins – which is to say on one level that the workers’ actions (especially their willingness to die for their cause) speak more loudly than their words might have done. The poem’s final line refers to the “tusky-tusky” of the soldier’s pikes, an onomatopoeia, like the earlier “rhubarb-rhubarb,” but this time capturing the sound of weapons harming bodies. Neither schools nor Latin nor the “drills and chanting” by which learning is militarily imposed upon children is necessary, Harrison suggests, to understand how the state and the wealthy have their way. On another level, however, the poem suggests that while the workers did not speak poetry during their uprising or their fall, this sonnet’s own worked language records and renders more powerful than the “exact words recorded” of a mill owner like Horsfalls, the “glottals” and “rebarbative

syllables” of their anonymous collective utterance. In this regard, Harrison is quietly drafting for his own political purposes a rhetoric of poetic preservation interwoven with the sonnet all the way back to its beginnings as an English lyric form and perhaps most famously encapsulated by the couplet of Shakespeare’s sonnet 18: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

While this sort of politicized memory is at stake in some of Seamus Heaney’s sonnets (such as “Requiem for the Croppies”), Heaney has more often used the form as a means for thinking through the question of the poet’s responsibility to his society and his own historical moment, a question central to this poet throughout his career. At the center of his 1979 volume, *Field Work*, for example, is the ten-poem sequence, “Glanmore Sonnets,” in which Heaney meditates on his recent move from Northern Ireland to a countryside home in the Republic of Ireland. On the occasion of his move to the country, Heaney recalls the link (in the word “verse,” which derives, as he has also recalled in his prose, from the Latin for the turn a plow makes at the end of each furrow) between the farmer’s labor and that of the poet. The second of these sonnets focuses, like Harrison’s poem, on language as the material on which the poet works – “Words entering almost the sense of touch” – and in the first two quatrains, Heaney likens the poet’s craft with the stuff of language to the sculptor’s work with stone. Just as stone “connived with the chisel, as if the grain/Remembered what the mallet tapped to know,” words, rather than a preexisting idea or theme, lead the poet to his meanings (1979: 34).

The poem’s rhyme scheme is Shakespearean (dividing the poem into three quatrains and a couplet). The sonnet’s structure, though, more closely resembles the Petrarchan; Heaney establishes an idea about his art in the “octave,” only to effect a shift about it (a re-vers-al) in the “sestet.” In Glanmore, removed from the sectarian strife of Belfast, Heaney hopes to hear and be guided by a new language, to catch from the rural ditches a voice “caught back” from the militant noise of the “slughorn” (the bugle that sounds a call to arms and the root of the word “slogan”) and the “slow chanter” (the bagpipe, long associated with battles). This new speech might, he hopes, manage not to be drawn into conflict and, instead, “continue, hold, dispel, appease,” to cultivate the ground as the plow cultivates a field.

As we have already noticed, Heaney’s diction is important here; his language marks the opposition central to the poem’s elaboration of its theme – between art and farming on the one hand and conflict on the

other. But Heaney's word choice also complicates the opposition. He characterizes his new rural home as the "hedge-school of Glanmore," alluding to the illegal countryside schools established by Irish nationalists in the wake of English establishment of national schools in the early nineteenth century. Where the national schools mandated education in English, the hedge schools aimed to keep the Irish language and the culture of that language alive. Even as he seeks a neutral, uncommitted speech, then, Heaney does so in a site already marked by a kind of side-taking. In a poem explicitly devoted to the idea that language leads the poet to meanings rather than the other way around, Heaney performs the thwarting of his expressed hope, the impossibility of extricating language from historical conflict (and, therefore, the impossibility of escaping his own implication in the divisions that structure his society and his position as a poet).

This set of issues draws Heaney's attention throughout his career, and his explorations of the intersection of poetry and politics often take the form of the sonnet, though typically either as part of a sequence (as in "Glanmore Sonnets" or, later, in the title sequence of his 2007 volume *District and Circle*) or as a stanza in a longer work, as in "Station Island" (1984). The latter is a long poem set during the poet's participation in the penitential pilgrimage to St. Patrick's Purgatory, an island in Northern Ireland's Lough Derg. Heaney uses the sonnet as a stanza in the sixth and ninth sections of this twelve-part meditation on penance, poetry, and politics. In Section VI, the amatory associations of the sonnet are most perceptibly in play. In three sonnet stanzas, Heaney first recalls the dawning of sexual awareness in childhood games, then sets desire in the balance against salvation (with allusions to the erotic Latin poet, Catullus, and to his coreligionists' "somnolent hymn to Mary"), and finally reinterprets sexual desire as a figure for divine love (again through allusion, this time to Dante; Heaney translates the moment of Beatrice's intercession on the poet's behalf) (1984: 75). Sex and love are not at stake in Section IX. Instead, Heaney's sonnet stanzas here address directly his concerns about implication in sectarian violence. The conventional turn in the sonnet is a key resource with which Heaney structures his working-through of this anxiety in the section. The typical Petrarchan sonnet marks a shift in thought at the ninth line (often with a conjunction or adverb that makes the logical connection between the octave and sestet clear). In the third stanza of Section IX in "Station Island," Heaney marks just such a turn; where the octave depicts a "Strange polyp," an image of rot, the sestet introduces (with "Then") the

image of a pistil growing up out of the polyp, standing like “a lighted candle,” an image of illumination that leads the poet from the darkness of his self-disgust (1984: 85). In a similar way, the fourth of the section’s five sonnet stanzas also uses “Then” to introduce a new image; a trumpet arises from the water of Lough Derg, reminding the poet of his power (and duty) to make music. From here on, the sequence, which has been characterized to this point by self-critique, articulates instead a way to balance Heaney’s commitments to his craft and his community.

The sonnet also bears some conventional associations with the elegiac impulse. Throughout his career, Heaney has published numerous elegies and poems in memory of the dead, from “Mid-Term Break” and “The Strand at Lough Beg” to “In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge” and “Casualty.” In “Clearances,” the eight-sonnet sequence on the death of his mother that Heaney published in *The Haw Lantern* (1987), Heaney brings the sonnet and the elegy together, powerfully shaping sound around the silence and absence that are the sequence’s real burden. Early sonnets in the group commemorate his mother’s life and recall moments of intimacy (and tension) between mother and son. Language itself is, as it typically is in sonnets, explicitly at issue in some key passages. It is counterposed to silent intimacy in the third sonnet, as the poet remembers peeling potatoes with his mother while the family were away at Mass, and it is shown to come between the two in the fourth sonnet, when the poet remembers carefully minding around his insecure mother the vocabulary and grammar “which kept us allied and at bay” (1987: 28). The final two sonnets meditate on the gap left by the mother’s death.

The seventh sonnet uses the conventional turn to emphasize the finality and the absolute nature of death; halfway through the eighth line, the octave ends with a full stop (the assembled family have been pleased to hear the father calling his dying wife “good” and “girl”), after which, with a powerfully shifting adverb, Heaney announces and weighs the utter change: “Then she was dead.” The conclusion of the sestet registers the significance of this profound change; the mother’s absence “penetrated/Clearances that suddenly stood open./High cries were felled and a pure change happened” (1987: 31).

There is an echo here of Robert Frost’s “Out, Out—” in which a boy injured while sawing wood dies. As in Frost’s poem, Heaney uses the stopped pulse as a figure for the moment of death. Where the gathered family in Frost’s poem “since they/Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs” (1969: 137), though, the company around the deathbed in

Heaney's sonnet experience this death as one that changes them and the world in which they live. "Clearances," a word whose importance is signaled by its use as the title of the sequence, suggests the historical removal of freeholders from their small farms to create large estates in the eighteenth century; here, the word does not skew the poem into the discourse of history or politics, but instead lends the single, familial death a broader significance as Heaney imagines that death altering the very landscape. In the final sonnet, Heaney elaborates upon the absence "emptied into" the grieving loved ones through a comparison with a chopped-down chestnut tree. The end of this sonnet, the end of the sequence, transforms absence into presence as the "bright nowhere" that the chestnut tree has become is granted agency; it is a "soul ramifying," expanding in complex and patterned ways, keeping the promise of the sonnet's second line, which links absence and plenitude: "utterly empty, utterly a source" (1987: 32).

Author of perhaps more sonnets (whether as stand-alone lyrics, as stanzas in longer works, or as constituents in sequences) than any living poet, Paul Muldoon has also often worked in the form when thinking through the role poetry might or could or should play with respect to the political. While he shares an interest in this form and in these questions with Heaney, though, the younger Northern Irish poet's handling of the combination bears almost no resemblance to that of his former teacher. In "A Trifle," Muldoon's speaker has his lunch interrupted by a bomb alert. Leaving the office building with his coworkers, he is slowed on the stairs by a woman who carries the last of her lunch on a tray. His attention is captured by the "plate of pure-pink trifle...with a dollop of whipped cream on top" balanced there, and this dessert, the bit of play and pleasure carefully salvaged during a threatening moment, might be Muldoon's figure for the poem, and for his poetry, itself (2001: 120).

This is not to say, however, that Muldoon is free from Heaney's concerns about the possibility that poetry might be conscripted into sectarian violence. In "Anseo," a poem whose three stanzas are sonnets of a sort (that modifying phrase is one we might implicitly include any time we speak of Muldoon's sonnets; he is a tireless and tricksterish experimenter with the form), Muldoon recalls a student he knew in primary school. Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward is named for the Irish writer and nationalist revolutionary, Joseph Mary Plunkett. In the first stanza, he is remembered as a student often absent from school, butt of the Master's jokes. In the third, he is recognized as a paramilitary Commandant, "fighting for Ireland" (2001: 83). Where as a child he missed, and was missed during,

the roll call when students answered “Anseo” as their names were called, he has become the caller of the roll, the one to whom volunteers answer when he calls their names. The poem pivots on its middle stanza; sent out by the Master to find a stick with which to be beaten, Ward takes it upon himself to show up at school with a switch in hand. The sestet of the sonnet lovingly describes the “hazel-wand” Ward finally settles on, a switch he has worked on as an artist might (“whittled,” “sanded and polished,” “delicately wrought”). Indeed, Ward takes ownership of the stick as an artist would, by engraving his initials in it. By artistically transforming the instrument of his punishment, Ward has taken some control over his situation, a control he exploits by becoming the Master (“Quartermaster”) in turn. The artistry of his whittling resembles Muldoon’s own verbal artistry and, taken together with the poem’s emphasis on speech, suggests the work of the poet. On the one hand, we might read Muldoon as suggesting that poetry offers the potential for transforming suffering into power. On the other hand, though, the result is just another paramilitary leading his volunteers, perpetuating political violence, “fighting” rather than writing, “for Ireland.”

Whereas Heaney spends a good deal of time on the ethical obligations entailed by his poetic vocation, Muldoon’s poetry-as-serious-play tends neither to agonize over its capacities (or lack thereof) nor to assume much extraliterary efficacy for poetry. Whatever poetry might make happen, it makes happen within the world the poem itself creates. Muldoon’s poems, though, are spaces in which the things people do to one another are seen and felt to matter. It’s just that the poems in which that mattering is recorded and explored do not offer themselves as either solution or salve. Instead, in his handling of the sonnet, Muldoon seeks to register the painful chaos in which he and his readers live. In this, we might hear in some of his sonnets two important literary influences who also turned, from time to time, to the sonnet as a means for exploring the human capacity for disorder and the slim chances of any compensating order in the world: William Butler Yeats and Robert Frost. Yeats, in “Leda and the Swan,” locates the origins of history in the moment when Zeus rapes the maiden, Leda; her progeny will initiate the Trojan War and bring about “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower/And Agamemnon dead,” apt figures for the disorder brought about by the human will to power (1983: 214). At this moment in his poem, Yeats breaks the form of the sonnet, ending the line and the octave two metrical feet early, as if to enact the fragmentation of civilization in war. In “The More a Man Has the More a Man

Wants,” the long poem that concludes his 1983 volume, *Quoof*, Muldoon uses the (roughed-up, as usual) sonnet as a stanza to narrate the adventures of Gallogly, a revolutionary (with a past, perhaps, not unlike that of Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward) on the run from his nemesis, Mangas Jones. Along the way, Muldoon crafts portraits of violence and chaos – broken bodies as well as buildings – and does violence of a sort to the sonnet as well:

Once the local councilor straps
 himself into the safety belt
 of his Citroen
 and skids up the ramp
 from the municipal car park
 he upsets the delicate balance
 of a mercury-tilt
 boobytrap.
 Once they collect his smithereens
 he doesn't quite add up.
 They're shy of a foot, and a calf
 which stems
 from his left shoe like a severely
 pruned-back shrub.

(2001: 138)

Like Yeats, Muldoon conveys as much by what he does to the sonnet as by what he narrates within it. The action here hinges on the mercury switch; the stanza hinges on the one-word line “boobytrap.” The octave and sestet begin similarly (not only with the word “Once” but also with repeated sounds – the “l” and “c” of “local councilor” and “collects,” the “s” of “straps” and “smithereens”). The explosion’s consequences are registered not only by the fragmentation described in the sestet but also by the fragmentation enacted in it; where the octave is a single eight-line sentence, the sestet divides into two, and the line in which the councilor’s remains are “shy of a foot” is itself one metrical foot short of the sonnet’s conventional iambic pentameter.

Robert Frost wondered, in “Design,” whether the universe is governed by order or chance. To do so in a sonnet, as Frost does, is to suggest that the human capacity to make and impose order is our (in his words) “stay against confusion.” Muldoon’s poems, including his sonnets, are as highly and artificially patterned as any, but it is not clear that he thinks the order he imposes will do anyone much good. Indeed, in the title poem of *Quoof*,

he powerfully suggests the mixed nature of whatever blessing poetic language might be. “Quoof” is the word the speaker’s family used for a hot-water bottle; it is associated, then, with comfort and community. But in this sonnet’s octave, the speaker asks how often he has taken the word into “a strange bed” (2001: 112). He recalls taking it into the “lovely heads” of women, suggesting communication, a way, perhaps, to make the strange bed familiar, as the hot-water bottle makes the cold bed warm. He also recalls, though, laying the word between himself and his conquests “like a sword.” For Muldoon, the word, and through the word, language itself, divides even as it unites. The sestet consolidates the denial of comfort or communication hinted at by the end of the octave. In a sentence with no proper predicate, Muldoon sets the scene of a hotel room with “a girl who spoke hardly any English.” Unable to communicate through speech, the speaker recalls a recourse to touch. His hand on her body is rendered in an odd and telling simile: “like the smouldering one-off spoor” of a mythical animal “that has yet to enter the language.” Where the tradition of the sonnet offers reassurances of immortality or divine order, and where Heaney resolves his sonnets, singly or in their sequences, on one or another pole of their structuring oppositions, Muldoon, like Frost, often playfully maintains an irresolvable ambivalence.

For many poets, however, the sonnet exemplifies everything that needs to be rejected and avoided in contemporary poetry. The poet Geraldine Monk, for example, argues that “the development of ideas within the sonnet’s strict template imposes an equality of sameness through identical treatment that can undermine subject matter” and that “this archaic construct” cannot be “reconcil[ed]” as “an ongoing and valid poetic form in the 21st century” (Monk 2010a.). However, although many experimental poets similarly criticize the sonnet, a number of poets such as Tom Raworth, Peter Riley, Tony Lopez, and Drew Milne have seen that by highlighting the strangely arbitrary nature of its patterning, they can draw attention to the socially and linguistically constructed nature of the world. Milne, for example, in his unrhymed sonnet sequence “A Garden of Tears” uses puns and allusions to create a sonnet in which myriad different discourses refract upon one another. Milne shows how these discourses tease us with the possibility of stable, paraphrasable meaning but in fact preclude any such stability. The poem demands that we take note of the various idioms and discourses that it collates; there are, for example, the languages of love, of statecraft, of sailing, of poetry, of law, of myth, of religion and so on. The poem impacts them all into a single fourteen-line

sentence that implies the utopian hopes that drive all human desires and mourns their inevitable failure: this is a garden, after all, but a garden washed with tears (2001: 42–52).

Geraldine Monk, herself, surprisingly provides us with the final example of the ability of an old form to be revitalized. In spite of her antipathy to the sonnet, she has recently published a sonnet sequence of ghost stories, *Ghosts & Other Stories*. For Monk, the formal properties and difficulties of the ghost story seem to be analogous to those of the sonnet: “Ghost narratives present their own unique problem as they are intrinsically restricted by their subject matter: ghosts may be scary spooks from the other side, but they are creatures of teasingly brief appearance, proscribed habitat and gestural repetition. They don’t do narratives they do events.” As such, she goes on to write, “the sonnet form fitted my ghost stories like a glove” since it formally provides “succinctness and immediacy with minimal syntax” (Monk 2010a). Accordingly, each of Monk’s sonnets includes seemingly disconnected sentences, phrases, and images that turn obsessively around a haunting sense of possible and actual violence, more often than not sexual.

The opening sentence of the first sonnet reveals her strategy:

It started with a tryst and twist of
Lupine lovely arms along a rural railroad
Bank.

(2010b: 3)

The poem sets the scene of some form of illicit affair, “a tryst,” and links this phonetically to the “twist” at the center of ghost stories, as a “tryst” perhaps becomes the “twist” of strangulation. The poem also suggests the animal transformations that are often the ghostly subject matter since “Lupine” can mean wolflike as well as referring to a kind of flower, perhaps brought as a gesture of courtship. Each sonnet becomes a place where references and images emerge in the compressed fourteen-line form, somewhat akin to traumatic flashbacks.

That even a poet such as Monk (who dislikes the sonnet) has found its form enabling suggests that poetic forms like the sonnet are neither living nor dead, but rather come to life again for poets when their formal properties seem to react with the content addressed. Our next section on the elegy will address the ways in which postwar poets have responded to a traditional and conventional subject matter: the mode of elegy.

The Elegy

Whereas the sonnet is a poetic form whose conventions over time have at once become rigid and been revised, the elegy is an exemplary poetic mode, a kind of poem defined by its topic and rhetoric rather than by its meter, stanzaic structure, or rhyme scheme. Descending from ancient Greek metrical forms, the elegy in modern European poetry is a lyrical response to death (i.e., the mode's topic) which moves through a series of stages, usually from lament, grief, and anger through the idealization of the dead individual or group and, finally, to a resolution of acceptance and solace (i.e., the mode's rhetoric). These stages are clearly visible in the classic examples of the elegy in English. Milton's "Lycidas," for example, a poem written upon the death of the poet's friend, Henry King, begins with what seems inconsolable sadness at the fact that "Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime" (1957: 115). Milton imagines the whole world grieving "the heavy change, now thou'rt gone"; woods, caves, herbs, and vines mourn, and the loss of Lycidas is as deadly to those who must bear the news as frost to flowers and pests to plants and animals. In the middle of his poem, Milton imagines gods and demigods explaining how the drowning of Lycidas was not their fault. The blame for his death lies with the flawed boat that carried Lycidas to sea. No one, whether human or divine, would have harmed such a perfect and beloved "swain." After this passage of idealization, the poet finally invites the world that has been stricken with sorrow to "weep no more," for Lycidas has not been lost but has instead been transformed into the rising sun and has become eternally present as "the Genius of the shore."

In his important study of the elegiac tradition in English poetry, Peter Sacks maps onto this rhetorical progression the stages of "normal mourning" set out by Sigmund Freud at the turn of the twentieth century (1985). The opening lament, characterized by sorrow and, often, anger, resembles, Sacks argues, the mourner's first reaction of shock and grief at a loved one's death. The mourner reacts in this way because his or her libido (the part of the psyche characterized by desire and connection) has been linked to the loved one and now has no object. In the process of mourning, though, the mourner detaches the libido from the dead person first by what Freud calls "hypercathexis," which is the remembering of aspects of the lost loved one in a mood of heightened pleasure and positive interpretation. This hypercathexis, Sacks writes, is like the moment of idealization in the typical elegy. When every memory and every aspect of the dead has

been worked through in this manner, according to Freud, the mourner is finally able to detach the libido from its absent object and reattach it to another object. The elegiac moment of consolation (“weep no more”) typically involves a similar replacement; in “Lycidas,” the love for the lost shepherd is displaced onto the morning sun, which is guaranteed to return day after day.

Jahan Ramazani in his study of the elegy in the twentieth century argues, however, that the modern elegy is characterized less by this predictable move from sorrow to solace than by poets’ unwillingness to play the game by its established rules. Partly because the twentieth century has offered so much loss to elegize and partly because literary history requires the renovation of conventional patterns, modern poets have tended, according to Ramazani, to write “anti-elegies.” Moreover, the writers of modern elegies “focus their antipathy on the psychological structures and literary devices specific to the elegy” (1994: 3). That is, they not only write poems that fail to deliver the expected consolation, but they write poems that attack the expectation itself. The normative mourning described by Freud is rejected, and in its place many modern elegists depict and act out what Ramazani calls “melancholic” mourning, a mourning “that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent” (1994: 4). In “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,” for example, Dylan Thomas first elaborately and then bluntly dismisses the elegy’s consolatory machinery. He writes “Never” and then expands upon the adverb for almost two stanzas before getting to the long sentence’s main clause, “Shall I . . .” Another two lines intervene before the verb “mourn” and we are in the third stanza before the occasion – “this child’s death” – is named (1971: 112). Thomas then points at elegy itself and likens it to murder and blasphemy, so that to elegize the child would be to put her through a second death and to profane something divine. Poetic speech, it seems, is neither able to say anything useful about this death nor to be worthy of it, though Thomas’s own last stanza lyrically locates the girl in memory and outside time. While the poet claims not to mourn and calls the Thames by which the young girl lies “unmourning,” his language, as if against his will, inclines toward an elegiac resolution. While many, perhaps even most, elegists throughout the tradition have from time to time pressed against the mode’s conventions, twentieth-century elegists like Thomas, Ramazani argues, have more aggressively derided and undermined the conventions, even as their well-wrought poems often become new objects for libidinal attachment.

Where the refusal to mourn is explicit in Thomas's poem, it is often implicit in other modern elegies. For example, in some of the elegies to his wife (gathered and published in his 1985 volume, *Elegies*), Douglas Dunn enacts, rather than describes, melancholic mourning. "The Kaleidoscope," which happens also to be a sonnet, depicts the speaker continually expecting to find his wife still in her bedroom, watching him as he enters carrying a tray. Going up and down the stairs of their house "a dozen times a day," he catches himself waiting at the open door to her room (1986: 238). "Grief wrongs us so," Dunn writes of this repetition compulsion, and the closing couplet's caesurae and rhyme emphasize the pathos of unresolved mourning: "I stand, and wait, and cry/For the absurd forgiveness, not knowing why." Dunn does not, as Thomas does, make a frontal assault on the elegy, but his portrait of repetitive and uncomprehending grief quietly refuses the elegy's typical rhetorical and emotional progression. In "Birch Room," Dunn invokes the spring, which is often the elegist's figure for consolation and promise of new life in the wake of death. Instead of prompting a look forward, though, the arrival of spring after his wife's death makes Dunn remember past summers when he and his wife would sit together in the warm dusk. The poem's concluding quatrain recalls the dying wife telling the poet he should rearrange the furniture if he stays in their shared house once she has gone, urging the poet, that is, to move through his loss. In the final line, however, Dunn writes "I've left them as they were." Dunn represents the mourner holding on rather than moving on.

Like Dunn's, most modern elegies evince a complex relationship with the elegiac tradition; it is useful to note the precise character of that relationship as a way to describe a given poem's balance of adherence to convention and innovation against it. Setting a modern elegy against the horizon of the elegiac tradition also helps us to get a sense of how a poet addresses the specific gravity of loss in his or her historical moment. Although there had been earlier elegies on anonymous individuals and collectives (Thomas Gray's "mute inglorious Milton" in his "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" being the most influential), in the twentieth century they began to dominate poetic elegies' subject matter whether addressing the mass slaughter of the century's wars or the historical victims of other epochs. Many poets, especially in the immediate decades after the Second World War, were concerned with the difficulty of memorializing the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Theodor Adorno famously wrote in 1951 that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" and poems on the subject have tended to embed within them self-critique (1967: 34). Geoffrey Hill has throughout

his career returned to the ethical questions of representing aesthetically the horrors of the Jewish genocide, and from the sonnets entitled “Two Formal Elegies” in his first collection *For the Unfallen* published in 1959 to his recent collection, *Without Title*, Hill has repeatedly used the pastoral elegy tradition to tackle this vexed question, most famously in his broken sonnet, “September Song.”

Traditionally, in the pastoral elegy the poet in the guise of a shepherd mourns the untimely death of another poet also portrayed as a shepherd. It has its origins in the *Idylls* of Theocritus, especially the first *Idyll*, and by the time Milton came to write his version, “Lycidas,” it had acquired a set of fixed conventions. The overarching narrative arc moves from portraying the seemingly inconsolable grief of the surviving poet/shepherd and of the entire natural world to a final consoling conclusion where the dead poet in some sense will be reborn in the future songs of the remaining poet. In Freudian terms, as Sacks observes, they chart a movement from melancholia to mourning with the poem itself functioning both as the process of working through the grief and as the compensatory substitute for the loss. Often when poets explicitly address earlier poets, the poem becomes a site where what Harold Bloom calls the “anxiety of influence” becomes explicit (1975a). In such poems as Auden’s “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” or Heaney’s “Elegy” to Robert Lowell, the living poet measures his own project against his predecessor and, while praising the earlier figure, implicitly or explicitly, argues that their own work will be a compensation and a replacement. Indeed, one of the most productive ways of reading such poems is to gauge the fine distinctions being made between the earlier poetry and the present and to judge how the poem subsumes the past poet within the present. Heaney, for example, compares Lowell’s landscape of “ungovernable” sea with his own “restorative” Glanmore “bay tree” and contrasts Lowell’s egocentric poetics (he “swayed the talk/and rode on the swaying tiller/of yourself”) with his own sympathetic poetics that, by the poem’s end, Lowell himself accepts and enacts, as he “risk[s]” the Heaneyesque, “I’ll pray for you” (1979: 32). The pastoral elegy also closely links the seasonal renewal of the natural world, more often than not in sexual terms, with this process of compensation and consolation.

In “September Song,” Hill creates a pained and self-questioning relationship between the adequacy and inadequacy of the elegiac mode to perform any type of compensatory function. The subtitle “born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42” does not name the deceased, but rather uses the bureaucratic numeration of date of birth and substitutes

“deported” for deceased (1994: 19). As Jon Silkin observes, the poem oscillates between the languages of religious, ethical, and aesthetic import and those of bureaucratic alienation, dehumanization, and extermination. Moreover, in phrases such as “not forgotten,” “passed over,” and “proper time,” Hill combines the two to register the distance between the meanings that the same words can have. Silkin appositely calls this strategy “the irony of conjuncted meanings” and points out that it structures the poem from its beginning where “‘undesirable’ (touching on both sexual desire and racism)” is followed by “‘untouchable’, which exploits a similar ambiguity but reverses the emphases” (1972:146). Hill then turns this coruscating irony upon himself with the pained parenthesis (“I have made an/elegy for myself it/is true”) that, Silkin observes, means both that the events it describes are true (they really happened) and that the poem is self-pitying (it is true that it is really about the poet himself).

The poem ends with a turn to the usual harvest of September songs and pastoral elegies, and, as Christopher Ricks points out, the meter enacts a sense of uplift by slowly moving into iambic pentameters as if remembering the compensatory poetic tradition (1984: 299). Hill does so, however, to dismiss them as either literal or metaphoric compensations: “This is plenty. This is more than enough” (Hill 1994: 19). Once again Hill uses ambiguity to register the difficulty of representing such content: “This is plenty” refers to the length of poem; it refers to trying to write another pastoral elegy; it refers to an abundant harvest; and it also refers to the historical victims. The poem tenses between these conflicting and often mutually exclusive meanings and ends in Freudian terms with the awareness that there can never be adequate mourning for the innumerable anonymous dead. Elegy, for Hill, needs to remain melancholic or it will betray its subject matter.

In the previous section on the sonnet, we have shown how Heaney works through the death of his mother in “Clearances,” acknowledging the completeness of loss but transforming the mother’s absence into a kind of generative presence the poet carries within himself. Many of Heaney’s elegies complicate the conventions of the mode in order to negotiate the difficult terrain of Northern Ireland. “The Strand at Lough Beg,” written in memory of Heaney’s cousin, Colum McCartney, closely follows the elegy’s conventional steps. In the first of three verse paragraphs, Heaney imagines the night and scene of McCartney’s murder and wonders how his cousin met his fate. While there is no line as straightforward as Milton’s “Lycidas is dead,” Heaney’s diction emphasizes absence and emptiness:

“Leaving,” “few,” “lonely,” “bare” (1979: 17). The verse paragraph ends with the landscape of McCartney’s home, the familiar scene to which he will not return; the “soft treeline of yew” alongside the image of a church spire also suggests the churchyard. The middle verse paragraph does not idealize McCartney, but the poet positions his cousin in opposition to violence. Heaney remembers the young man as afraid of gunfire and aligns him instead with the peaceful activities of speech and farming. In the final verse paragraph, Heaney completes the process of detachment by imagining a scene of leave-taking. Standing at the edge of Lough Beg, the scene of McCartney’s childhood, he hears the young man’s steps and turns to find him kneeling there, “With blood and roadside muck” in his eyes. Just as Virgil does for Dante in the lines Heaney quotes from the *Purgatorio* as epigraph for his poem, Heaney washes McCartney’s face with moss and dew. Where Virgil cleans away the dirt of Hell, Heaney clears away the material signifiers of sectarian violence. When this is done, he can imagine new life in the form of “rushes that shoot green again,” and with these he weaves scapulars with which to dress the body. In the Freudian terms used by Sacks and Ramazani, these obsequies allow the poet to let the dead go and at least suggest the capacity to reattach to a new object.

Just as we read Heaney’s word choice in the early lines as emphasizing loss, we should hover momentarily over his diction in the closing lines, for in them we see not only the poet’s representation of completed mourning but also a complication of that mourning that we have to read in political terms. The green rushes woven into green scapulars are, on the one hand, an image of renewal comparable to the morning sun rising in Milton’s “Lycidas.” But the color green in the Irish context is inextricable from nationalist politics. Long associated with the Republican cause, mentioned in the refrain of Yeats’s “Easter 1916” (“whenever green is worn/a terrible beauty is born”), green here is also linked to Catholicism. The green scapular has, since the nineteenth century, been a symbol in the Catholic Church for the reconciliation of the dead with God. Heaney’s elegiac consolation in “The Strand at Lough Beg,” then, is a culturally specific consolation; McCartney is reclaimed not only by nature, figured in the moss and dew, but by Catholic Ireland. While the elegy is explicitly for and about this individual, the manner in which Heaney effects the conventional move to consolation implicitly embraces Catholics killed in the political struggles of Northern Ireland.

The political valence is more clearly, if more ambivalently, articulated in “Casualty,” Heaney’s poem on the death of Louis O’Neill, an acquaintance

killed in a 1972 pub bombing. Three days after that January's "Bloody Sunday," when British paratroopers shot into a crowd of Catholic civil rights marchers in Derry, Northern Ireland, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, a Republican paramilitary group, retaliated with a series of bombings. While the Provisional IRA announced a curfew for Catholics in an effort to avoid killing members of what Heaney, in the poem, calls "our tribe," O'Neill, who "drank like a fish," went out to a pub anyway and was killed when the pub was bombed (1979: 21). "Casualty" loosely follows the conventional progression of the elegy. Heaney registers the awful nature of O'Neill's death ("blown to bits," "Remorse fused with terror/In his still knowable face"), and he describes the dead man in idealizing terms (O'Neill is represented as hardworking and sociable). However, Heaney not only avoids but also implicitly rejects the expected gesture of consolation. Describing the funerals of the "Bloody Sunday" victims, he likens the communal mourning to a "swaddling band," at once infantilizing and constricting, "tightening/Till we were braced and bound/Like brothers in a ring." Just as O'Neill "would not be held/...by his own crowd," Heaney struggles to be free of his community's bonds. He misses O'Neill's funeral and, instead of that formal and collective consolation, comforts himself with the memory of going out fishing with O'Neill.

The specific character of the consoling move in "The Strand at Lough Beg" is political; in "Casualty," it is vocational. Throughout the poem, Heaney compares O'Neill's work of fishing to his own work of poetry. He is embarrassed by his vocation and recalls changing the subject whenever his status as poet came up. In the poem's closing lines, though, Heaney links fishing and poetry. The two kinds of work are joined by the importance of the line, and once he has quietly made this pun, Heaney expands upon the similarity:

I tasted freedom with him.
To get out early, haul
Steadily off the bottom.
Dispraise the catch, and smile
As you find a rhythm....

(1979: 24)

Where the mourners at O'Neill's funeral are subtly figured as fish, Heaney the poet is a fisherman, brought by the rhythms of his work to the place where he belongs, "Somewhere, well out, beyond." Having worked

through not only grief but also vocational anxiety, he ends the poem not with the elegy's conventional substitution of a new object for the lost attachment, but with an invitation for O'Neill to continue troubling him about the value of his work and its value in the context of sectarian violence: "Question me again."

Heaney's elegies for individual victims of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland are, at least implicitly, elegies for the collective of victims as well. Often, contemporary elegists are explicit in this generalizing gesture. In *Cofiant*, for example, Gillian Clarke uses the nineteenth-century Welsh biographical genre (typically composed for clergymen) to commemorate her individual ancestors but also the lost ways of life associated with Wales. Sections named for ancestors, from Clarke's father (who died in the 1950s) back to forebears who lived in the eighteenth century, at once register loss and enact the hypercathexis of mourning. Recalling her father, a naval radio operator, Clarke associates him with writing and communication and grants him through this association a measure of power. At the same time, her father is reduced to the traces of his handwriting in "old letters, diaries, notebooks," to notes "In the margins," and to "washable Quink" whose permanence is suspect (1997: 125). Family members in the more distant past are reduced to fainter traces still. Grandparents' graves cannot be found, familial homes remain only as catalogues of auctioned property, and of one ancestor Clarke writes:

His grave, his stone,
his parts of speech all gone
under the city's monotone.
(1997: 134)

The dead quickly lose their embodied presence in the world but are continually present in memory and, when memory fails, in the linguistic preservatives of documents, biographies, and poems. With even language lost, "there's no telling now," which is to say there is no recounting, no recalling, and no tracing the presence of the dead.

Clarke's elegy for a Welsh family is at the same time an elegy for Welshness, or at least for a Welsh national and cultural identity secure against erosion in the medium of English political, cultural, and linguistic influence. The disappearance of ancestral traces is linked in the poem with the corrosive effect of dominant cultures, so that when Clarke's ancestor, the man of letters

Rowland Jones, dies and “his parts of speech are gone,” the poem figures a total loss. But *Cofiant* includes a version of the elegy’s conventional consolatory move as well. Where the poet’s father, associated with writing, is (like Lycidas) lost at sea, the sea itself emerges (like Milton’s sunrise) as the sign of new life and new meaning, as the return of writing:

It drafts and re-drafts the coast
and is never done
writing at the edge.

(1997: 135)

In his evocation of total cultural loss, David Dabydeen offers no such compensatory gesture. In Ramazani’s scheme, we might read Dabydeen’s *Turner* as a modern elegy typical in its refusal of the mode’s conventional consolation, insistent on the irrecoverable character of loss. Dabydeen’s poem takes place within the consciousness of the drowned slave whose manacled leg, barely visible above the waves, is the only marginal trace of slavery and the Middle Passage in J.M.W. Turner’s famous painting, “Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying.” In the poem the drowned slave receives a companion in the form of a baby (offspring of the slaver and his concubine) thrown overboard. He sets out to instruct this child. He imagines aloud a future in England, among whites all called Turner, that he does not actually live, and, especially important for this discussion, he recalls his own experience of the slave ship and his life in the village from which he was stolen into slavery. The elegiac components of Dabydeen’s poem emphasize the totality of loss entailed not by the slave’s death but by the cultural annihilation perpetrated by the slave trade and the Middle Passage. Just as Clarke eventually finds the trail of her ancestors fading so that no trace or word can be recovered, the slave has lost all memory of names – whether for objects or for people – from his life and culture. He has “given fresh names to...all things living but unknown,/ Dimly recalled, or dead” (1994:1). “Words,” he says at one point, “are all I have left of my eyes” (1994: 14). He does, however, remember the enormous meaning and value of all that he has lost (all that, by extension, has been lost in the transportation and scattering of his civilization’s citizens). He recalls his mother, for example, inviting her children “to eat/Of their father’s labor,” the fruits and foods bearing

so many unfamiliar names that the proper identity of those whose names we do recognize is also subtly undermined:

spices of odalan, nutmeg,
Cinnamon, and berries that multiply on vines,
Yams, jilips, achroes, blue aramantines
Picked lavishly from the soil which my father
Works in communion with other men.

(1994: 30)

Cultural goods are recalled/renamed/reinvented in a similarly idealizing plenitude:

Shall I summon up such a pageant of fruit,
Peopling a country with musicians, dancers,
Poets, and our simple deities of stone....

(1994: 30)

The drowned slave is motivated to wonder whether (and how) to “summon” all that has been lost for his new companion by the memory of his tribe’s shaman, Manu, whose “jouti necklace” of beads arranged in patterns handed down from his ancestors is Dabydeen’s figure for cultural memory. As he instructs the village’s children one day, Manu tears the necklace from his neck so that the beads scatter. Though the children recover the beads, their pattern is lost and random handfuls are held by different children. When they look to him for guidance, Manu, who has prophesied the coming of “Turner” and the enslavement and dispersal of the people, says that

each must learn to make new jouti,
Arrange them by instinct, imagination, study
And arbitrary choice into a pattern
Pleasing to the self and to others
Of the scattered tribe.

(1994: 33)

This refashioned culture, fragments gathered and invented, is to become the new ground of identity, and the transmission of it, the sharing of it with “others/Of the scattered tribe,” is to become the new object for libidinal attachment, the sunrise that consoles once Lycidas has been successfully mourned.

Dabydeen does not dramatize normative mourning, though. Instead, the drowned baby rejects the narrator, rejects his offer of a familial bond, and rejects his cultural fabric of memory and imagination. Where the drowned slave wants to teach the child a “redemptive song” (that echoes reggae musician Bob Marley’s famous “Redemption Song”), the erstwhile companion dismisses the slave by disparaging him as “Nigger” and seeks to escape into death and nothingness. Dabydeen’s poem concludes not with the elegy’s conventional assurance that a new attachment to the world has formed, but with an insistent, even obsessive, catalogue of negation:

No savannah, moon, gods, magicians,
To heal or curse, harvest, ceremonies,
No men to plough, corn to fatten their herds,
No stars, no land, no words, no community,
No mother.

(1994: 40)

In the end, for Dabydeen, there can be no elegiac compensation or consolation for the horrors of the history *Turner* portrays.

The plural or communal elegy, especially when it refuses the progression of “normal” mourning, often carries this sharp political edge. In “The Missing,” Thom Gunn turns from the consolation of elegiac substitution not to politics but to an artistic self-reference that most closely resembles the subversive renovation Ramazani describes. The seven stanzas of Gunn’s poem move through the stages of Ramazani’s anti-elegy. In the first two quatrains, Gunn registers the loss of numerous friends in the word “plague” (Gunn 2000: 483). Unnamed in the poem, AIDS has caused friends to “fall sick, grow thin.” The speaker’s lament addresses not only the change in friends’ bodies but also a change in his own artistic taste: “I do not like the statue’s chill contour.” The “sculpted” is a stark reminder of all the speaker has lost and continues to lose as friends “drop away”: “warmth,” “feeling,” “family.” The terms of his lament determine the shape taken in the idealization phase of Gunn’s complex elegy. Importantly, it is the community as community that Gunn idealizes, as he recalls one friend leading to another, a set of relationships as “supple entwinement through living mass.” Organically connected in erotically pleasurable ways, the community’s constituents exemplify mutual support and enabling love.

At this point, the elegiac formula dictates the naming of a new object of libidinal investment, the shifting of attachment from the lost to the living. Gunn, though, emphatically refuses this gesture. The fifth stanza opens by turning away from the idealized community, but this is not a turn toward a new attachment but is instead a return to the poem's opening, a return to the idea of death, and to the image of sculpture that figures, in the first stanzas, the speaker's lament. Where he had been supported by the web of attachments that made up the gay community, Gunn's speaker now realizes himself as "unsupported," and imagines himself as a partially sculpted figure, trapped at once in the finished figure and in the "raw marble" from which the figure has been partly cut. Where art in the conventional elegy might stand for the new and compensatory object of attachment or might stand for the conventions of the elegy itself, the transformation of pain into beauty, art for Gunn is arrested in the moment of grief. Captured in commemorative form – whether that form is marmoreal sculpture or lyrical structure – Gunn's speaker experiences himself as "Trapped in unwholeness," unable to complete the process of mourning and thereby to "escape/Back" to the world of change and play, attachment and embrace.

Just as some forms like the sonnet survive because of their adaptability to new content, some modes like the elegy similarly provide poets with a means to wrestle recalcitrant content into poetic form. We now turn to focus upon the figurative language that poets use.

Ekphrasis

Alongside form and mode, the use of figurative language also provides a vital way to interpret poetry. Figurative language has traditionally been divided into two types: schemes and tropes. Schemes concern the arrangement of the syntax and grammar of words. Anaphora, for example, describes the technique by which a poet repeats the same word or words at the beginning of lines, sentences, clauses, or phrases as Linton Kwesi Johnson does in "Inglan Is a Bitch." Tropes (from the Greek word to turn, alter, or swerve) name the various ways in which words can be made to turn from their standard or literal meaning or reference. The four most important tropes in contemporary interpretations of poetry are probably simile, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. Simile and metaphors are forms of comparison between two things that are different from one another. In a

simile the comparison is shown by the word “like” or “as.” Ted Hughes, for example, in the “View of a Pig,” observes that the dead animal “was like a sack of wheat” and his simile emphasizes that the pig has become an inanimate food product. In a metaphor there is no such word that indicates a direct comparison: Hughes’ simile would have been a metaphor if had written that the pig was a sack of wheat (2003: 75). In “Pike,” for example, Hughes uses a metaphor to describe the striped colors of the fish as “green tigering the gold” (2003: 84). The metaphoric participle, “tigering,” draws a link between the pike as a solitary predator of the pond and the tiger as the equivalent in the forest.

Many critics, including the influential linguist Roman Jakobson, argue that the simile is in fact a subset of metaphor. For both simile and metaphor, the Cambridge literary critic, I.A. Richards, provides two useful terms to describe their operation: the tenor and the vehicle. The tenor names the literal reference (in the examples earlier the pig and the pike), and the vehicle names the point of comparison (the “sack of wheat” and the “tigering”). Analyzing the relationship between the tenor and vehicle in a poem’s similes and metaphors often opens up the work in wide-reaching ways. In his poem “The Thought-Fox,” for example, Hughes plays on the intrinsic doubling of metaphor and simile by representing not only poetic thought (the tenor) by the fox (the vehicle) but also the fox (now the tenor) by poetic thought (now the vehicle). This doubleness materializes in the pun of “printed page” where print both means the words in ink and the fox’s footprints (2003: 21). Like all tropes then, metaphor and simile function by a process of swerving from one thing to another or of substituting one thing for another.

This process of substitution stands at the heart of the related tropes of metonymy and synecdoche. In a metonymy, the writer replaces the thing being referred to by something closely associated with it. Again in “View of a Pig,” Hughes describes the pig metonymically when he says it is now no more than “a poundage of lard and pork.” Both lard and pork are metonymic because both are closely connected to a pig but only come into existence once the pig has ceased to exist. In a synecdoche, the writer substitutes a part of the object being referred to for the object itself as when Hughes in the same poem indicates the pig by its feet: “Its trotters stuck straight out” (2003: 75). Just as simile is often combined with metaphor, Jakobson and other critics view synecdoche as subset of metonymy. These four tropes are central to interpreting poetry since they provide rewarding means to access how a poem creates its power.

In his “View of a Pig,” Hughes highlights the inanimate, lifeless fact of the dead pig in contrast to his memory of chasing a live piglet. He primarily uses synecdoche and metonymy since they are appropriately enough the tropes that cut something up by substituting parts or associated parts for the whole just as the pig itself is no longer a living whole. Indeed, “lard and pork” are only metonyms for the pig once the butcher cuts it up. Furthermore, the initial grouping of synecdoches (“eyes,” “eyelashes,” “trotters,” “pink bulk”) intensifies with the chilling twin synecdoche of “the gash in its throat.” Throat is of the same order as the other body parts and can refer to either the live or the dead animal, but such a gash can only belong to a dead pig. Consequently, the poem’s descriptive power increases and generates in the next stanza Hughes’ memory of a live piglet.

Revealingly, the poem’s only metaphor occurs in this solitary stanza that concerns the live piglet: “Its squeal was the rending of metal” (2003: 75). Just as the synecdochic gash can only refer to the dead body, so the metonymic “squeal” can only belong to a live pig. The metaphoric claim that the squeal was not like but “was the rending of metal” serves a double purpose. It not only refers back to Hughes’ memory of the sound, but it also refers to the lacerating metal of the blade that caused the “gash in the throat” which ends all “squeals.”

Finally, the poem’s three similes reinforce the poem’s urge to distinguish absolutely between the living, whole animal and the dead, dismembered corpse. The first, “It was like a sack of wheat,” emphasizes the body’s inanimate nature. The second, “Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens,” occurs when Hughes remembers trying “to catch a greased piglet.” It highlights the contrast between life and death since the heat was within the pig like an oven, but now the heat of an oven will contain the pig. This second simile also implies the already doomed nature of the piglet to become meat. The poem ends with a third simile that continues the imagery of heat: “They were going to scald it,/Scald it and scour it like a doorstep” (2003: 75). Hughes further increases the deanimalization of the pig by now making it the grammatical object: it is not simply like a doorstep, but rather like a doorstep to the men because of their actions. In a sense, the poem’s claim lies in the simile made up of its first and last words (“The pig” is “like a doorstep”), and the success or failure of the poem depends on how shockingly true this final comparison seems.

Charting the ways a poem’s tropes swerve from one object to another, substitute one thing for another, reveals many of a poem’s effects. All tropes

have at least a double focus since they necessarily set up a relationship between the standard or literal meaning and a deviation from it. Like forms and modes, tropes also fluctuate in their popularity. For example, the apostrophe dominates British and Irish Romantic lyric poetry but now tends to be used sparingly and, if at all, ironically. Thinking about why this is so would raise questions fundamental to the poetry and beliefs of both periods. In the postwar period the ancient trope of ekphrasis has been extraordinarily prevalent. The term comes from the ancient Greek word for description, but it has come to mean the verbal description of a work of art. John Hollander has usefully made the distinction between actual ekphrasis, when a real object is being described (e.g., Thom Gunn's "In Santa Maria del Popolo" refers to the church and the two Caravaggio paintings inside it), and notional ekphrasis when the object is imaginary (W.S. Graham's "The Found Picture" describes a nonexistent picture from the "Early Italian School") (Hollander 1995: 4). In the Western world, Homer's description of Achilles' shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad* has always been seen as the original ekphrasis, and it is worth noticing that it is a notional one – the shield never existed in the world. There are, however, many other traditional ekphrastic subjects. In the pastoral mode, the two Greek progenitors are Theocritus's description of a bucolic cup and Moschus' portrayal of Europa's plentiful basket, both of which Keats alludes to in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which, in turn, follows onto Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar" and T.S. Eliot's Chinese jar in the fifth part of "Burn Norton." All these in turn lead to Larkin's parents' vase in "Home is so Sad" and Eavan Boland's husband's coffee cup in "Object Lessons." Other ekphrastic traditions include the description of buildings (especially temples, gardens, and estates), tapestries, the picturing of an idyllic spot or *locus amoenus* ("pleasant place"), the writing of an inscription for a statue or painting, and the telling of the story or thoughts of the people portrayed in the artwork.

In Homer's story, Achilles' mother, Thetis, goes to the god, Hephaestus, the blacksmith of the gods, and asks him to make new armor for Achilles. This new armor includes an extraordinary shield that Hephaestus engraves with pictures that seem to represent the world in ideal form. Homer's description begins with the cosmos (earth, sea, sky, sun, moon, stars, and planets) and then portrays two cities: one at peace (centered on a marriage ceremony and judicial murder case) and one at war. Another pairing follows with pictures of plowmen plowing in the field and of laborers tending a king's estate. Three more images of labor come next with a viticulturist in his vineyard, a herdsman with his cattle, and a shepherd

with his sheep. Finally, Homer ends with a festival of dancing and drinking. All these pictures are bordered by a picture of the ocean which forms the shield's outer rim. Clearly, the shield represents the idealized world of Homeric times with its ideological mixture of war and peace, of labor and festival, and of the interconnection between the natural, human, and sacred worlds. It asserts that this is a world of order that needs to be protected from external threats. This ekphrasis contains many of the themes that resonate in later ekphrastic poetry: it emphasizes the connection between poetic labor and other forms of human labor; it concerns stasis and change in the world; it considers the relationship between the permanence and impermanence of humans, their artifacts, and the world; it contrasts the difference between verbal and other art forms; and it raises questions about representation itself, whether verbal, visual, or aural. Indeed, as a trope, ekphrasis necessarily foregrounds representation since its initial conceit concerns the doubleness of it being already a representation of a representation.

W.H. Auden's 1952 poem, "The Shield of Achilles," rewrites Homer in the aftermath of the Second World War. Auden divides his poem between what Thetis hopes to see on the shield (which is Homer's representation) followed by what Hephaestus actually engraves on it. Auden, then, increases the doubling intrinsic to ekphrasis by representing two notional objects – Homer's shield of Achilles and his own version. Similarly, he provides two different stanzaic forms: those concerning what Thetis hopes to see are eight lines long and based upon doubling the three-stress quatrain ballad meter with its alternate rhymes (abcbdefe); those concerning what Hephaestus actually engraves are in the seven-line rime royal stanza (ababbcc) and are in iambic pentameter. Each of the poem's ten stanzas is a single sentence (1972: 294–95).

In Auden's version, Thetis's three stanzas describe in order the pictures on Homer's shield. First, she "looked over his shoulder" for Homer's "marble well-governed cities." Instead, the shield portrays "a plain without a feature" and a world of meaningless violence. Auden emphasizes the innumerable anonymity of the world on his shield: unlike Homer's city, there are no marriages, no legal and judicial systems, and no ordered community. Auden's city has "no sign of neighborhood" and "an unintelligible multitude." Furthermore, the "voice without a face" that gives them "a sign" is not the voice of Homeric prophecy, but the dictatorial voice of radio propaganda. At its order, they "marched away" from this no place to another no place – a "somewhere else" where they come "to grief" and die. Again,

in contrast to the *Iliad*, there are no catalogues of names and no concern with, or possibility of, individual and collective burial rites (1972: 294).

The next time Thetis “looked over his shoulder,” she seeks “ritual pieties” of “libation and sacrifice.” Instead, the rime royal stanzas reveal that she sees an image of a prison, refugee, or concentration camp where “barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot” and “bored officials” and sweating “sentries” watch, and are watched by, a “crowd.” Next “three pale” nameless “figures” are tied to “three posts” and executed. Auden once again contrasts the meaninglessness of contemporary life with the earlier Homeric sacred world. He also alludes to the end of the Christian epoch since the three posts echo the three crosses on Golgotha, but this precisely does not symbolize Christ flanked by the two thieves, one saved, the other damned (1972: 295).

Finally, Thetis looks a third time for the communal ritual festivals of play, marriage and dance. The shield, however, illustrates “no dancing-floor” but rather “a weed-choked field.” This final description of the shield is only a single rime royal stanza and reveals the “axioms” of this world, its horrific generally accepted truths: “girls are raped,” “two boys knife a third,” no “promises” are “kept,” and no one can “weep because another wept” (1972: 295). In contrast, in the *Iliad* Achilles is moved by the Trojan King Priam’s tears for his dead son Hector (whom Achilles has killed), and he allows Priam to take his son’s body for appropriate burial. In Auden’s world there exists no possibility of such empathetic relationships among humans.

Thetis cries “out in dismay” and the poem ends with the replacement of her son’s Homeric epithet (“swift-footed”), by two new epithets (“Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles”) that herald his fate: he “would not live long” (1972: 295). This final doubling of epithets encapsulates the complicated relationship between the two notional ekphrases of the poem. The mimetic and historical priority of the poem could move from Auden’s contemporary world, to its representation on his version of the shield of Achilles, to Thetis’s imagining of what should be on the shield, to Homer’s version of the shield (what Thetis imagines), to Homer’s world. However, this mimetic and historical priority could also be reversed and begin with Homer’s world, move to its representation on his version of the shield of Achilles, then on to Auden’s version, ending with Auden’s world. (We must also not forget that since both shields are notional, the representation precedes the worlds represented.) Because of the inevitable complexity of its figuring of representation and its necessary awareness of the historical nature of our representations, ekphrasis tends to become a

trope of historicity since it foregrounds not so much history itself but rather our own attempts to represent and understand history.

Giving some or all of the people in the artwork represented in a poem a voice has become the most common strategy in contemporary actual ekphrasis. It returns to the trope's etymological origins (from phrasis, "to speak," and ek, "out"; hence, speaking out) and emphasizes the movement from the visual to the verbal, from silence to voice. Accordingly, ekphrasis lends itself to ideological critique and has been used to highlight the representational violence done to oppressed people, groups, and collectives by earlier aesthetic representations. David Dabydeen's "Turner," for example, is an ekphrastic as well as an elegiac poem. Most often ekphrasis has been used to give voice to the depicted female subjects of art. In "Not My Best Side," U.A. Fanthorpe comments on Paolo Uccello's "St. George and the Dragon" by allowing the dragon, the princess, and St. George to speak. The first two show complex feelings, whereas St. George reveals nothing but a will to power. The protagonist of Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude" emphasizes her physicality in contrast to the abstraction of the art of cubist painter, Georges Braque: "he is concerned with volume, space,/I with the next meal" (1985: 46). Poets from Northern Ireland have also explored the power of ekphrasis to open up complex questions of historical possession and dispossession.

Derek Mahon, for example, in "Courtyards in Delft" uses that Dutch realist painting by Pieter de Hooch to frame increasingly dense historical perspectives on the complex history of Calvinist Protestantism, a subject personally relevant to him as a Northern Irish Protestant. Known for their realistic domestic interiors and play with perspective, de Hooch and other Dutch realist painters focused on the everyday life of the emerging bourgeoisie and disdained overtly allegorical and symbolic figures. Mahon's opening stanza perceives from the painting's details the work ethic of the people depicted and their corresponding emphasis on cleanliness and order: the wives are "house-proud"; they have "thrifty lives" and the yards are "scrubbed." The stanza ends by implying that this order also denotes repression since he notices the "trim composure" of the trees (1982: 9).

Mahon makes this implication explicit in the second stanza when he alludes to earlier allegorical and symbolic artistic strategies that emphasized the body and its functions and desires as he lists all the symbolic objects that are no longer present in realists such as de Hooch. There is "no spinet-playing" that signifies "the harmonies and disharmonies of

love”; there are no “lewd fish” or “wide-eyed bird/About to fly its cage while a virgin/Listens to her seducer.” (Realist paintings then are metonymic and synecdochic, whereas allegorical and symbolic paintings are metaphoric and similar.) For Mahon this lack reveals the repression at the heart of the world of de Hooch’s formal perfection: nothing “mars the chaste/Perfection of the thing and the thing made” (1982: 9). Mahon formally marks the difference of the early painting style by crafting this stanza that discusses it with a different rhyme scheme (aabcbdbc) from the other three (abaccbdd) that focus on the de Hooch painting.

The third stanza broadens the temporal scheme to a moment in the future, noting that the wife in the painting will be waiting for her man to return till the end of time when either the painting “disintegrates” or the dykes fall. This, in turn, reinforces the implication of repression and sexual dissatisfaction. The final lines of this penultimate stanza then move to Mahon’s own contemporary moment when he observes that, for him, the “verifiable fact” of the “out-house door” is “vividly mnemonic” (1982: 9).

The perspectives of the last stanza both narrow to the subjectivity of Mahon’s own existential time and broaden out to the larger spatial and temporal frame of European wars of imperial conquest. Mahon tells us that he “lived there as a boy” and distinguishes himself (a “strange child with a taste for verse”) from his “hard-nosed companions” who dreamt “of fire/And sword upon parched veldt and fields of rain-swept gorse” (1982: 10). This final line stands out as the only twelve-syllable line in the poem (an iambic alexandrine, rather than all the other iambic pentameters) and swerves the poem away to the African and Irish colonies of Protestant imperialism. This occurs through the etymology of the words “veldt” and “gorse.” The former is a Dutch word that now refers to the high pastureland of South Africa, whereas the latter, as Mahon noted in an interview with William Scammell, is “the Protestant word for...[the Irish]...‘whins’” (Scammell 1991: 6). This final swerve in perspective through the purely linguistic structure of etymological discovery suggests the superior historical perspective that words provide. As Mahon observes in the same interview, “de Hooch’s contemporaries founded Cape Colony and took the Williamite Wars to Ireland,” and the poem through the larger perspective of the history of words reveals what this ideology of painted domesticity occludes: the natural and human world that it sought to subjugate through the “fire” and “sword” of imperial conquest founded upon Protestant belief (1982: 6).

The artwork described in an ekphrastic poem need not be as readily legible as Achilles’ shield or de Hooch’s painting. In “Lure, 1963,” Denise

Riley represents Gillian Ayres's abstract painting as clearly as Mahon does de Hooch's Delft courtyards. And, as we have seen in other poetic ekphrases, she deploys techniques analogous to the artist's (in this case, rhetorical figures) to displace and replace the work she describes. Riley is often associated by critics with Cambridge experimental poets and with such "New York School" poets as John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Her work has been published by Street Editions, the experimental poetry press founded in Cambridge by Wendy Mulford in the early 1970s, and by Reality Street, the press formed when Street Editions merged with London's Reality Studios in 1993. "Lure, 1963," appears in Riley's 1993 collection, *Mop Mop Georgette*. Her subject, a work by the abstract painter Gillian Ayres, is as nice a fit for her own style and concerns as Pieter de Hooch's seventeenth-century realism is for Derek Mahon's.

Riley's poem begins with the sort of straightforward description one might find in a catalogue entry about the painting, but her language soon slips and turns in ways that depart from description and become, instead, substitution. "Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime-green," the poem begins, and though the lemon and lime in this first line hint at metaphor, they remain, for now, simply descriptive of the specific shade and tone of the painting's yellow and green (2000: 50). Once a first-person speaker enters in the second line, however, the poem's apparently descriptive language takes on a new vividness. It not only evokes more energetically the hues on Ayres's canvas; it also interprets those colors and their combinations. From "acidic yellows," still a typical characterization in artistic description, the poem moves quickly through "scarlet flowing anemones," a phrase that "reads" the painted shape as representing an object in the world, to "barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping," phrases that imbue the pigments with emotional agency and significance. Already, with the rhetorical effect of synesthesia, in which the painting's pink is rendered as affectively loaded sound, the poem offers to take the place of the painting. The next lines go further, replicating in language not only the appearance or elicited emotion of the painting but also the sort of associational logic on which much abstract art depends:

When
will I be loved? Flood, drag to papery long brushes
of deep violet, that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in
his kiss.

(2000: 50)

Now Riley adds allusion as a painter might add a new bit of color or, with a different brush stroke, texture to the surface of her work. The Everly Brothers' "When Will I Be Loved?" gives additional audible emotional shape to the pink's "radiant weeping," and the painting's violet and indigo articulate their emotional meanings through quotations from Betty Everett's "It's In His Kiss."

Words can do some things that paint cannot, and Riley takes advantage of this advantage to turn the poem's attention from the painting to itself. "Obsessive song," she writes, "Ink tongues." The first of these phrases might refer to the snatches of old tunes Riley has parroted in the preceding lines, or it might refer to poetry itself. The latter possibility comes to seem more likely in light of the second phrase; the lines we are reading speak or sing of their obsessions. On the one hand, Riley points here to something painting and poetry share in common: both bring the particular materials of a given medium to bear on obsessions, whether these obsessions have to do with subject matter (like the sort of romance treated in popular songs) or with the medium itself (color and texture and space, sound and rhythm and sense). On the other hand, Riley's poem can talk about itself in ways more immediately comprehensible than are available to the painter. While modern art since the influential writing of Clement Greenberg in the 1940s has often been characterized by implicit self-reference (painting is simply about the effects to be achieved by paint applied to a surface), the poem, by virtue of its composition in language, can actually refer to itself (as, in this case, "song" produced by "Ink tongues").

We might, at this point, think about what the title of the poem (which is also the title of the painting) might have to do with all of this. A lure attracts; it shares root meaning with "alluring," which means powerfully charming or tempting. Lures are not simply attractive, though. The word "lure" has a connotation of duplicity or danger; we are lured into bad situations, as the trout is caught on an artificial lure. As Andrew Duncan points out in his discussion of Riley's poem, in falconry a lure is an object used to train a hawk, a weight to which bird wings are attached and which is swung around for the hawk to chase. Duncan infers from this sense a sort of training undertaken by the poem (2005: 98). More important, perhaps, is the idea, shared by the poem and the painting it describes, of the deceptive character of the beautiful or appealing, of the alluring. For all the lush and lovely language Riley uses to convey the painting's appearance, there is a strong current of negativity throughout the poem as well. We find a good deal of violent diction: "burning," "slashed," "barbaric," "weeping,"

“stinging,” and “burning” again. The pop song lyrics wonder when love will come to the speaker and, later, emphasize both need and pretense. At the heart of the poem are a series of images Riley reads in the painting’s swirls and whorls of paint – cascades, pools, lakes, and pillars. But even as the mind erects these elements of a landscape, the poem recognizes that they are simply impositions and interpretations. While the eye (and the “I” that roams the painting’s space) might wish for the strips of color “to make this floating space a burning place of/whitest shores,” the poem’s speaker recognizes that this is simply a wish.

While typically associated with more clearly wrought works, whether real or mythical, whether mimetic or abstract, the ekphrastic gaze can be trained as well on objects of art whose making is less obvious. In “The Shield of Achilles,” Auden emphasizes Hephaestus’ craftsmanship in the decoration of the shield, and in “Courtyards in Delft,” Mahon names the medium in which Pieter de Hooch has captured the title’s place and its people. Photographs, on the other hand, especially snapshots, can seem almost as though they simply happen, as if they are produced not by the creative will and hand of the artist but by the simple mechanical function of the shutter, by the interaction of light and emulsion. Even the snapshot, though, is susceptible to the conventions of ekphrasis, to the poet’s ambition to create a new artwork through sufficiently detailed and rhetorical description of another.

This rhetorical structure is central to the operation of Charles Tomlinson’s photographic ekphrasis, “Snapshot” (1995). This is not Tomlinson’s first foray into the poetic description of artworks; earlier in his career, Tomlinson published poems on Cezanne and the painter’s depiction of landscapes around Aix-en-Provence. Those poems tended to emphasize what the painter had portrayed (the mountain, e.g., in “Cezanne at Aix,” which is, in the painter’s hands, allowed to remain “a presence/that does not present itself”). In “Snapshot,” however, Tomlinson frames his description of the photograph with a claim for the comprehensive power of the photographer’s camera: the poem opens with the assertion that “Your camera/has caught it all” and concludes by defining that “all” as what the speaker, the photographer, and, presumably, the subject of the photograph might, but for the snapshot, have missed “in that gone moment when/we were living it” (2009: 560). The photographer’s camera has the power to capture and preserve fleeting experience, to hold it outside of time so that it can be returned to once the captured moment has passed.

Within this frame, Tomlinson provides two kinds of evidence that at once illustrate the rhetorical claim and effect the ekphrastic substitution of the poem for the work that is its subject. First, the “all” of the opening lines is specified in a catalogue that includes concrete details of the photograph and the scene it captures. These details persuade through the specificity with which Tomlinson describes them, from the architectural detail of the photographed space to the look of the light as it falls on particular parts of the room. Second, the poem acknowledges flaws in art’s second-order relationship to the ideal. For Tomlinson, even a detail that we might see as an imperfection in the photograph – the face of the girl in the photograph is “not quite in focus” – performs a kind of verisimilitude; in the fallen reality of the photograph and the present, the Edenic past for which the girl stands cannot be clearly shown. The “asymmetries” of the photo’s composition, the way “journal, cushion, cup” relate oddly to each other in the framed space they share, is also part of the “all” both photo and poem capture. The “all” that the camera captures, like that which the poem preserves, includes imperfection, especially imperfection as part of the texture of reality.

It is partly through this explanation of artistic accuracy, and suggestion of its significance, that the poem proffers itself as a superior substitute for the photograph. Where the camera “has caught it all,” the poem has gone beyond capturing to explicate the details, their relationships, and their philosophical and experiential importance. Just as important in this regard, though, is the way Tomlinson builds his own composition on effects of structure and sound. The whole poem consists of frames around the central image of the blurred face, with the opening and closing clauses repeating the idea that the photograph has captured “all,” a catalogue following the first “all” and preceding the last, and, at the center, the “face/not quite in focus.” And just as the photograph assembles its details so that they make up a coherent scene, the poem patterns its own. Its lines are in no regular meter and they do not regularly rhyme, but aural repetition both establishes continuities and emphasizes specific relationships. Six of the poem’s eighteen lines (one-third) end with the combination of a vowel and “t”: “lit,” “light,” “that,” “yet,” “complete,” and “it.” Other, smaller, groups of lines similarly end with repeated sounds; “when” picks up the second syllable of “Eden,” while “flame” and “frame” rhyme perfectly. Moreover, Tomlinson similarly echoes or rhymes sounds in various positions within and among lines; “all,” in the middle of the second line, rhymes with “wall” at the end of the third, and “hair” at the end of the seventh line rhymes

with “there” within the eighth. Carefully composed, the poem at once captures all that the snapshot shows and suggests and comments on the snapshot’s suggestive power. Once again, a formal principle, in this case the trope of ekphrasis, has shown its ability to respond to dramatically new content – the invention of photography – and provide a means not only to mediate between older and newer representational techniques but also to gauge their differences and similarities.

Our aim in this chapter has been to call attention to the ways some of the crucial features of poems (patterns of language, imagery, and sound, figures of speech or tropes) produce layered meanings and to the manner in which these can combine to create forms and modes that bring specific sets of conventional associations and expectations into the poem. In the coming chapters, we will keep these things in mind as we focus on poems that take up particular themes, each of which carries its own burden of questions and conventions. We turn to the first of these – the poetry of place – in Chapter 5.

Poetry of Place

Although, as we have seen in the previous chapter, poets use earlier forms, modes, and tropes, marking them with contemporary preoccupations, the combining of forms and the invention of new ones have been a characteristic of twentieth-century poetry. In seeking to gauge and organize poetry of the extended present, critics often suggest family resemblances between historically contiguous poetry; doing so provides a helpful heuristic that facilitates comparison and connection between poets, poems, and a variety of contexts. In this chapter we want to continue to use this approach by looking at a body of work that Jeremy Hooker has called “a poetry of place” (Hooker 1982). This term not only implies a certain type of content but also suggests a formal principle since it connects this poetry to the long tradition of landscape and cityscape poetry with their varied forms and modes.

The idea of place has been central to the poetry of postwar Britain and Ireland, and it tends to function as a means by which the poet can measure both personal and social transformations. There have been a number of overarching imaginative conceits that postwar poets have used to organize their representations of place. These include the following approaches. A phenomenological approach focuses on the way in which a perceiving consciousness understands and incorporates the outside world, whereas the psychogeographical concentrates on the ways in which the object world becomes animate with human attributes. Geological and archaeological approaches use the idea of past strata and deposits to delineate the historical complexity of the landscape with the former focusing on the physical, the latter on the human. In contrast, a topographical poem tends

to contemplate the present surface structures of a place. Cartographical and etymological poetry contemplates the ways in which humans have mapped the landscape with signs that both hide and reveal its meanings. In recent years there has been an increase in poems that take an explicitly ecological position where the landscape consists of a series of interrelated living organisms. These eight approaches, of course, merge into one another, and many poems of place combine some or all of them. Nevertheless, they are useful approximations and help to understand contemporary poetry of place.

In times of rapid social change, poetry has often turned to “place” as a means to register such change, and place has become one of the exemplary concepts with which postwar poets have investigated the individual and social transformations caused by modernity. The ancient form of pastoral has served as an appropriately updated model for many postwar poets since it always concerns the way that change enters the world. In classical pastoral following on from Theocritus’ *Idylls*, a shepherd sits under a tree while his flock minds itself, and he meditates, sings, and plays on his pipes (often in dialogue with another shepherd), while enjoying a world of leisure. Pastoral begins, then, as a form that celebrates a prelapsarian world in which death and linear time have not yet entered. Nevertheless, as Empson reveals in his *Some Versions of Pastoral*, pastoral can only celebrate such a scene in the context of its loss. In other words, the poem’s very existence reveals the intrinsic conceit of its content: if the pastoral paradise still existed, the poem would not be written. Poems of place, especially after Blake, Wordsworth, and the other Romantics, often rework the pastoral idyll by embedding it within the individual life of the speaker, where a remembered childhood becomes figured as an Edenic world of plenitude and joy.

Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill,” for example, sets up the idea of just such a golden age. The poem’s six stanzas divide into two parts: the first four stanzas enact the blissful world of prelapsarian unity, whereas the last two stanzas reveal the speaker’s entry into a divided world. This division is primarily figured both by time and by the awareness that the bliss portrayed previously now belongs to the past. The poem charts a movement from a mythic world of eternal regeneration, organic sexuality, and cyclical diurnal productivity into a dying world of linear history, linguistic entrapment, and melancholic remembrance.

Prepositions and prepositional phrases are central to reading poems of place because these seemingly small and insignificant words situate us

temporally and spatially in language and in the world. Place itself contains both notions of time and of space, and these are foundational concepts through which, and by which, we situate ourselves in the world. Often working out the prepositional patterns provides a skeleton to flesh out the interpretation of a poem. In the case of “Fern Hill,” the prepositions of the first stanza emphasize how the boy is enwombed by the natural world: he is “*under* the Apple boughs” and “*about* the liltng house,” and while “tonight” rises “*above*” him, he is sheltered both “*in* the heydays of [Time’s] eyes” and “*among* wagons.” Thomas ends the opening stanza by revising the usual opening of fairytales as the boy exists “once *below* a time,” emphasizing time’s protective embrace.

Thomas seeks to represent a unified and unalienated world where there are no divisions and where everything remains intimately interwoven in an ecological vision of mutually supporting, living organisms. Syntactically, he performs this through a sentence structure in which agency shifts from noun to noun; in the single sentence of the second stanza, for example, the speaker, the yard, the farm, the sun, the calves, the foxes, the Sabbath, and the pebbles are all given actions or active states. This ceaseless, moving activity also creates both a world of unbounded fertility and a sense of the fullness of time and space. Fittingly, transferred epithets and synesthesia are the dominant tropes of the poem, both of which produce unusual comparisons and linkages: phrases such as “liltng house,” “windfall light,” “happy yards,” “the tunes from the chimneys” that are “lovely and watery,” and “whinnying green stable” project human and animal activities and feelings onto the inanimate objects of the world, ensuring that the environment surrounding the speaker becomes equally alive and organic. The first simile of the poem, in turn, links the boy to the intrinsic property of grass: he is “happy as the grass was green” (1971: 225).

The world of the first four stanzas becomes one of perpetual, interconnected movement: the “night” rises; the boy “climb[s]”; the “trees and leaves/Trail.../Down the rivers”; everything is “running” and “playing”; the farm is borne “away” and “come[s] back”; the sun is “spinning” across the “gather[ing]” sky; and the “horses [are] walking” (1971: 225). All this movement, in turn, generates continuous reverberating sounds: in the first four stanzas, we are told that the “house” was “liltng,” he was “hail[ing]” and “singing,” “the calves/sang to [his] horn,” “the foxes... barked,” “the Sabbath rang,” “the chimneys” were “playing” “tunes,” he heard “the night-jars,” “the horses,” and the “whinnying...stable.” All

this repeats the idyllic tradition of portraying a golden age, but Thomas follows in the wake of Romantic poets like Blake and Wordsworth by internalizing the idyll and situating it within individual childhood. The landscape, then, becomes a means through which Thomas can generate interwoven subjective and objective Edenic states. Indeed, he seeks to portray a world in which the subjective and the objective have not yet been sundered: all is one in ceaseless reproductive energy.

Furthermore, the farmhouse and agricultural labor frame this world since they anchor the poem's first four stanzas: the "house," "wagons," "apple towns," and "barley" of the first stanza; the "barns," "yard," "farm," "huntsman and herdsman" of the second; the "hay/fields," "house," "chimneys," "farm," and "ricks" of the third; and the "farm," "horses," and "stable" of the fourth. By linking the farmhouse and agricultural labor, Thomas also revises two other landscape traditions: the georgic and the country house. Named after Virgil's *Georgics*, the former celebrates human labor often in didactic detail and emphasizes the work of the small landowner; in contrast, the country-house tradition (the most famous English example of which is probably Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst") uses the aristocratic estate as a model of an ideal civil society. For both forms, landscape enables the poet to make larger representational claims about the social world or nation as a whole. The georgic tradition focuses on individual work, while the country-house tradition focuses on the ordering of a social hierarchy. In "Fern Hill," Thomas combines them since Fern Hill is clearly a working farm, but the boy is "prince of the apple towns," and he "lordly" controls "trees and leaves" as the entire natural world responds to his "singing" and "playing." Both traditions become internalized by Thomas so that they stand for the imaginative freedom of the boy, and the landscape functions phenomenologically to describe the speaker's consciousness of the world.

In fact, the poem portrays two consciousnesses when its final two stanzas reveal that this idyllic world has gone and it can only be remembered in a present world of loss. This change becomes highlighted by the shift from the "carefree" in the second stanza to the "nothing I cared" in the fifth. This negation implies two temporal moments: the moment of not caring and the moment of caring. The auditory pun of morning/mourning in the fifth stanza's "morning song" reinforces this ominous sense of change which is then confirmed when Time no longer "let[s]" him do things, but rather leads the "children" "out of grace" and "take[s]" him away to "wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land" (1971: 226). The poem ends with a return to Time's embrace, but the child is no longer

enwombed “below” time, but rather entrapped by it: it “held me,” the speaker says, “in my chains” (1971: 226). Thomas’s poem exemplifies the ways poets can revise the traditions of landscape poetry by internalizing them to produce poems of place in which the perceptions of the natural world chart the speaker’s movement from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience. For Thomas, the poem itself becomes a form of play; it carves out a noninstrumental space in which the materiality of its sounds, meanings, and patterns is always in excess of instrumental denotation. Through this play, Thomas seeks to recall and reproduce the plentitude of his prelapsarian world.

The poem’s complicated sound and stanza patternings generate such excess. There are six nine-line stanzas whose basic syllable count is 14. 14. 9. 6. 9. 14. 14. 7. 9. The feet modulate between iambs and anapests and there is the suggestion of sprung rhythm with its regular stress count but irregular syllabic count. The abcdabcd rhyme scheme is assonantal (boughs/towns, green/leaves, starry/barley, climb/eyes/light), and there is an immense amount of internal sound patterning. This auditory density provides a full soundscape that suggests the richness of his remembered Fern Hill. Moreover, such phonemic repetitions intensify the materiality of the words’ sounds and suggest that they too are mutually interconnected. In short, Thomas uses the formal possibilities of phoneme, word choice, grammar, and syntax all to reinforce his message of union as the denotative, connotative, and auditory abundance of the signifiers’ gestures toward the ubiquitous fullness of a sacred realm. Through this noninstrumental use of words, “Fern Hill” represents a lost human and natural world prior to use value.

“Fern Hill” universalizes this loss as the difference between the innocence of childhood and the experience of adulthood. Many other poems of place, however, prefer to historicize such transformations and make the landscape represent some form of collective loss. In fact, Thomas’s own poem hints at this since its complex auditory patterns trace the extraordinarily complicated system of alliteration and internal rhyme of the Welsh poetic traditions of *cynghanedd* and, accordingly, gestures etymologically toward the lost language and world of Cymric, of Wales, and of Welsh, before they were named Wales and Welsh by the conquering English. In Dylan Thomas such historical, political, and linguistic claims are usually only implicit in this way, but during the postwar period they become increasingly placed at the heart of poems of place, especially when poets seek to investigate the history of oppressed or subaltern groups.

In his poems about Wales, R.S. Thomas makes explicit the relationship between landscape, history, and collective and individual identities. The title “Reservoirs,” for example, refers to the reservoirs that have drowned valleys in Wales to provide water for English cities like Liverpool, Birmingham, and Manchester. The word also comes to represent the historical and collective “subconscious/Of a people” and Thomas’s own individual subconscious. Both are “troubled far down/With gravestones, chapels, villages,” and the “poem’s harsher conditions” seek to bring to light the traumas that are hidden by the “covering...tide” of the English and the English language (1993: 194). As often in such poems, a number of geological and archaeological landscapes are layered upon one another; the poem represents the visible and present landscape of contemporary Wales and the hidden and lost landscape of a past Wales. These times are brought together through the poet’s subjectivity which represents these pasts in the present. Moreover, the poet’s subjectivity is figured through language itself since the poem links the destructive “roughness” of contemporary English not only with the absent Cymric that it “elbow[s]” “into the grave” but also the poem’s own use of English that becomes a symptom of this “decay” rather than its cure. Indeed, Thomas’s geological and archaeological imagination emphasizes the absence of clearly defined strata and artifacts; they have all been submerged in water. Once again we also have the phenomenological comparison between different consciousness (in this case, the poet, the English, the contemporary Welsh, and the past Welsh) as they respond to the different landscapes (here, the past Welsh, the present Welsh, and the lost or hidden Welsh) and to one another. It is through this interplay between the representation of consciousnesses and landscapes that the poetry of place gains its distinctive power.

The trope of encounter has also been crucial to the poetry of place, especially as it has descended from Wordsworth’s extended poetic meditations like “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” “The Ruined Cottage,” and “Tintern Abbey.” Repeatedly in such poems the speaker encounters another – often a human, sometimes an animal, occasionally an inanimate object – that seems to emerge, almost chthonically, from the landscape and that teaches the poet something. This structure enables a figurative encounter between an earlier social moment and a later one, since the poet or speaker brings the modern world with them. At the most basic level, the poet/speaker generally comes

from an elsewhere that differs radically from the place where the encounter occurs. Often the poem ends by suggesting that an alliance, and perhaps even a union, between the two worlds, the two spaces, the two times, and the two figures can be brought about by the experience of the poem itself. In many of Heaney's poems (such as "Digging," "The Diviner," and "the Pitchfork"), an older form of craft or labor becomes metaphorically analogous to the craft of poetry itself. "Between my finger and my thumb/The squat pen rests. /I'll dig with it" famously concludes "Digging" by claiming an identity between his father's and grandfather's labor with their spades and his own labor with his pen.

In his first book of poetry, *The Stones of the Field*, published in 1946, R.S. Thomas introduces a character, Iago Prytherch, a Welsh Hill farmer, who continues to appear throughout Thomas's career. Iago first enters in the poem "A Peasant," when he is introduced as "just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills" (1993: 16). The preposition "of" shows that Iago belongs to the place, almost as if he is made from the earth, and the adjective "bald" deliberately interfuses the landscape with human properties. Thomas emphasizes the hardness of the landscape, of Iago, and of Iago's labor, but his word choice also suggests artistic labor since Iago "pens" his "sheep" and "chip[s]" the "mangels." Repeatedly Thomas uses verbs, nouns, and adjectives that interfuse the human and the natural: the hills are "bald," the "mangels" have "skin" and "bones," the "sun cracks... cheeks," and the sky is "gaunt." Thomas deploys his word choice to suggest humans, animals, and the earth are all connected by deprivation and backbreaking, repetitive labor.

The poem emphasizes Iago's lack of consciousness and of thought: "there is something frightening in his vacancy of mind." Thomas stresses the physical, brute nature of the farmer: "His clothes, sour with years of sweat,/And animal contact, shock the refined /...sense with their stark naturalness." This move to the "refined...sense" leads to the poet addressing the reader as he declares bluntly that "this is your prototype." The use of "this" highlights both the object-like nature of Iago and the shocking claim that he is paradigmatic. The poem concludes with the declaration that Iago is "an impregnable fortress" and with the command "Remember him, then, for he, too, is a winner of wars,/Enduring like a tree under the curious stars."

These last two lines echo and revise two earlier poems about countrymen: Wordsworth's "Simon Lee" and Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge."

In “Simon Lee,” Wordsworth encounters the last remnant of an aristocratic household, the former huntsman Simon Lee, who now lives in Cardiganshire in Wales. Simon is close to death and makes a meager living from his small field. Despite his best attempts, Simon is too old and decrepit to cut a tree root, and Wordsworth takes his “tool” and chops the root easily. Wordsworth’s poem deliberately implies a guilt-ridden psychological and historical castration as the poet – the representative of the modern – symbolically castrates and destroys the representative of the premodern. The poem ends by suggesting that Simon Lee survives only within the poem’s story of the poet’s encounter. In “Drummer Hodge,” Hardy describes an emblematic English country boy who fights and dies in the Boer War in South Africa. Hodge lies in an unmarked mass grave, and above him shine the stars of the Southern Hemisphere rather than the Northern ones: “His homely Northern breast and brain/Grow to some Southern tree, /And strange-eyed constellation reign/His stars eternally.” Thomas uses these allusions to carve a distinctly Welsh space from the English poetic tradition. Unlike the Welshman Simon Lee in the Englishman’s poem, Iago Prytherch, “enduring,” “preserves his stock” and receives no aid from the poet, and unlike the English countryman Drummer Hodge, Iago remains alive in his own country, is a “winner of wars,” and lives “like a tree under the curious stars.”

The idea of place, then, has been crucial to poets who wish to investigate national or regional identities. Eavan Boland’s “That the Science of Cartography Is Limited,” for example, explores the inability of cartography to map accurately the Irish landscape and argues that map making displaces historical, empirical, physical, and emotional reality. The title’s formal proposition suggests that the poem will be a logical proof. The first stanza sets up the “simpl[e]” “fact” that the colors on the map that signify “forest” cannot represent sensory impressions such as the “fragrance of balsam” and the “gloom of cypresses.” In the second stanza the poet remembers visiting Connacht with her lover and entering into the “wood” depicted on the map. She recounts how her lover pointed out a “famine road” whose stones have now been covered by “ivy” and “scutch grass.” He goes on to tell her how such roads were built during the famine for relief and that “where” the Irish “died, there the road ended// and ends there still” (1994: 7). The poem ends by returning to the continuous present telling us of her thoughts “when I take down/the map of this island.” Once again the poem of place layers on different temporal moments (1847, the making of map, the couple’s journey, the

poet's repeated looking at the map) that are contained within the poem, the poet's consciousness, and the represented landscape. She looks at the map not to prove it is "masterful" (with all that word's connotations of imperial conquest),

but to tell myself again

the line which says woodland and cries hunger
and gives out among sweet pine and cypress,
and finds no horizon

will not be there.

(1994: 8)

The pun on "line" asserts that this poem, in contrast, can represent what is not there on the map: the absent "woodland" and "hunger" – the violently occluded history. Indeed, the poem's proof of its title's proposition implicitly provides another proposition: rather than "That the Science of Cartography is Limited," the poem intimates "That the Art of Poetry is Unlimited." In the lines of this art, the "woodland," the "hunger," the "giv[ing] out," and the "horizon" "will" "be there."

Like Boland, Seamus Heaney emphasizes the importance of the relationship between place and the often contested names for those places. In his 1972 volume, *Wintering Out*, he writes two place-name poems, "Anahorish" and "Broagh," that tightly bind land and language in the simultaneous enumeration and enactment of their links. Behind these poems, according to Heaney himself, lies an ancient Irish poetic genre, the *dinnseanchas*, which he describes as "a form of mythological etymology" (1980: 131). In modern Irish, the word simply means "topography" (from "dinn," meaning notable place, and "seanchas," meaning "old tales" or "tradition"), but the term also denotes the "lore of places" found in Middle Irish poetry. Where the canonical *dinnseanchas* tends to account for a place-name by reference to legendary heroes associated with the place or events said to have occurred in the place, Heaney explains the names of places by reference to the nature of the places. At the same time, though, he suggests that a place's nature derives from its name.

"Anahorish" is where Heaney grew up; he attended the Anahorish Primary School. The poem alerts readers to this significance of the place by calling it "the first hill in the world." But the significance that

dominates the poem is not this biographical importance for the poet; instead, Heaney emphasizes the relationship between the name and the place. “Anahorish” anglicizes the Irish phrase *anach fhor uisce*, which Heaney, in the poem’s first line, translates as “place of clear water.” One thing the place-name does is to transform land to landscape by nominating salient features. What is important in this place is the water rising in springs to wash into fields and darken stones. At the same time, Heaney makes the name into a place itself, a “soft gradient/of consonant,” a “vowel-meadow” (1990: 29). Agency and meaning making here run in both directions, language framing and organizing land as land itself figures the combination of phonemes. Bringing the two together in this way, the place-name illuminates the history of habitation. Heaney sees the farm workers of his neighborhood in terms of the Neolithic “mound-dwellers” who first settled the spot. A name can get at the nature of a place not only by highlighting its defining characteristics but also by hinting at the way in which the place has been inhabited.

“Broagh” similarly brings land and language together, here by recovering the original Irish sound and sense buried by the English cognate “brook.” The poem begins with a quatrain-long sentence (not *quite* a sentence, really, since it has no proper predicate) establishing the riverbank setting. More than the setting is established here, however, for Heaney introduces in the first two lines diction drawn from Scots rather than the English in which the poem is mostly written: “rigs” at the end of line one is Scots for “furrows” and Heaney ends the second line with the Scots plural “docken” rather than the expected English “docks” (1990: 33). These word choices are not determined by the requirements of rhyme; with them, Heaney announces a hybrid vocabulary consonant with an English (or mostly English) meditation on an Irish word, and he recovers, just as the title word does, a Celtic substrate in the landscape.

The rest of the poem (three quatrains) consists of a single complex sentence in which Heaney insistently links land, language, and history. On one hand, the three quatrains present three distinct figures. Heaney moves from the image of a “heelmark” in wet mold as “the black *O* // in *Broagh*” to the sound of the word figured as a “tattoo” in the local vegetation to a comment on the final consonant, which “strangers found/difficult to manage.” The first metaphor finds the sound of the Irish word written into the soil, and it suggests that the soil itself is a sort of skin (“easily bruised”), quietly invoking the trope that imagines land as body. The second hears the word as a “tattoo.” Contemporary

readers will probably imagine inked skin here, but Heaney also means the word's primary, military definition: the evening signal given, by drumbeat or bugle call, to order soldiers back to their quarters. The sound of *broagh*, like the breeze through the "boortrees" (Scots for alders), sounds the withdrawal of forces, whether those of colonizers or of the local resistance, from the field and into their camps. Finally, the poem's closing quatrain makes explicit what has been implicit throughout the poem by way of its diction and its attention to this unfamiliar word. "Strangers" to the land have difficulty managing the pronunciation of the local words for features of the land. Linguistic alienation equals a political alienation, just as the phrase "difficult to manage" suggests not only trouble with pronunciation but also, especially in light of the previous stanza's "tattoo," trouble with those for whom the pronunciation comes naturally.

Emphasizing the distinct movements of the sentence through the quatrains like this, we see the poem constructing an opposition. If, however, we emphasize the continuity of the sentence across the stanzas, we can see how Heaney erodes the ground from beneath the opposition. The phrases and clauses of this long sentence join seamlessly; instead of semicolons, which would communicate the independence of clauses, Heaney links the parts of the sentence with commas, and instead of offering conjunctions that clearly relate the phrases to each other, Heaney simply moves from one idea, one image, one figure, to the next (the closest we get to grammatical coordination is the "its" in the third stanza, which makes clear that the tattoo belongs to, renames, *Broagh*). Grammar matters here because it enacts a key feature of the riverbank with which the poem begins and along which the poem seems to be set: its liminality or changeable in-betweenness. *Broagh* is Irish, "difficult to manage" for the "strangers" who colonized the island, while "brook" is English, including a sound (the "k" consonant) that does not appear in the Irish language (though it appears in the poem's important first word). The poem hovers between, thinking in an English hybridized with Scots vocabulary about how an Irish signifier relates to its Irish signified.

This connection of land and landscape, though, does not depend upon rural topography, with its salient natural features. Just as Heaney develops a quiet political significance in the countryside of Northern Ireland, Ciaran Carson draws political meaning from the linguistic features that map the troubled city of Belfast. In "Belfast Confetti," Carson shows how the eponymous urban landscape is structured like a language or at

least how the embattled streets of Belfast have their meanings organized, just as any sentence does, by punctuation:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map (1987: 23).

The “confetti” that typically fills the air in moments of celebration is replaced here by scrap metal thrown in disorganized resistance to the forceful movement of the state. The projectiles ready-to-hand among Catholics in Belfast’s Falls Road – the everyday detritus of nails and car keys – not only rain down on the military or the police (or the militarized police) as they move in on the neighborhood, but they also punctuate the “utterance” of resistance. While exclamation points convey the affect here, the “type” is broken; the utterance is inarticulate. More than this, the “explosion” around which the violence is organized is “an asterisk” – a typical typographical marker for the inexpressible (and, often, the obscene). Throughout the poem, Carson figures the conflict, the resulting destruction, and the streetscape itself in terms of punctuation. Machine gun fire creates a pause, but a pause that links discrete units of meaning – acting as a hyphen – while alleys are “blocked with stops and colons”: the ends of phrases, clauses, and sentences. They block the speaker’s way even though these local streets are familiar to this Belfast native for “Every move is punctuated.”

While “Belfast confetti” is likened to broken type or to inconvenient diacriticals, “Belfast Confetti” includes features of the map that introduce more meaningful content as well. When the speaker is trapped in the city’s labyrinth by colons and periods, he notes the names of the streets he wanders: “Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa,” and, later, “Crimea Street.” Street names are, of course, key features in the topography of cities: they orient us and organize our movements through urban space. They also often suggest persons, places, or events citizens (or planners) wish to commemorate. Here, the street names recall the Crimean War (1853–1856), during which an alliance including the British and French Empires fought the Russian Empire for control of territories once held by the Ottoman Empire. Balaclava, Inkerman, Odessa, and Crimea denote important battles or theaters of engagement in the conflict, while Raglan was the General who commanded British forces during the Siege of Sebastopol and the disastrous Inkerman and Balaclava battles. What these

Belfast street names remember, then, is a past conflict in which the forces of the British Empire suffered and were defeated in the attempt to win and control potential colonial territories. Just as they were at Inkerman and Balaclava, the British Army is fired upon here on “Inkerman” and “Balaclava.” Carson thus suggests a parallel between the doomed efforts on the Crimean Peninsula and those aimed at pacifying Irish nationalism in Belfast. Proper nouns beyond the street names suggest similar parallels. The British Saracen tank is named for the Moorish forces against which European armies fought for control of present-day Spain and southern France and against whom European monarchs later launched failed Crusades, and the “Kremlin-2 mesh,” anti-rocket protection fixed to the tanks, evokes the Cold War. (“Balaclava” is also an item of clothing that hides a person’s face, obscuring everything except eyes and mouth.) Futile military campaigns are to be read all over Belfast even as one plays out in the city’s shipyards and neighborhoods.

Geoffrey Hill similarly has been preoccupied with the relationship between the landscape, representations of the landscape, and national and regional identities. His sonnet sequence, “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England,” published in his 1978 volume *Tenebrae* investigates England and Englishness – its “injured stone” and “complex fortunes” – in relation to the landscape. Its thirteen sonnets explore and document the complicated civilized and barbaric ambiguities not only of what Hill calls, in an interview with John Haffenden, “the sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth-century country house landscape” (1981: 93) that, as the sonnets point out, “grasps” the “tenantry” it depends upon and occludes (1994: 146) but also of the imperial ideals of the “life of empire” being “attuned/to the clear theme of justice and order” (1994: 145) that, nevertheless, “with indifferent aim/unleash[ed]” “the cannon” and “kill[ed]/‘under the sanction of the English name” (1994: 143). The sequence also ponders the powerfully patriotic, regenerative, and reactionary Victorian critique of its period’s industrialization and utilitarianism. The sequence considers the ways in which the landscape was transformed both by the processes of industrialization and by the aesthetic reaction to this industrialization. This reaction was drawn to fantasies of an idealized Medieval world of an organic, premodern community bound together by pre-Reformation Christianity. Such fantasies gave birth, as Hill’s sonnets point out, to the various Victorian revivals of Christian ritual, tradition, and architecture in the heart of the new industrial cities.

Hill's English landscape is, as he entitles his seventh sonnet, one of "loss and gain," one of fortunes and bankruptcies, and one of possession and dispossession. The sonnets also meditate on inheriting a poetic tradition that after Wordsworth endows any English landscape with a mental topography not only of powerful loss but also of searching claims for, what "Tintern Abbey" calls, "abundant recompense" (2010: 51). Furthermore, since this particular sonnet "takes its title," as Peter Robinson notes, "from Cardinal Newman's novel of Catholic conversion" (1985: 211), the poem also considers how individual moments of religious decision map onto a collective history of religion:

Pitched high above the shallows of the sea
 Lone bells in gritty belfries do not ring
 But coil a far and inward echoing
 Out of the air that thrums.

(Hill 1994: 146)

At the surface level, the opening quatrain describes solitary, rural, and deserted churches on the headlands of England that are menaced with nonexistence: their "bells...do not ring." These bells in turn are "lone" and a single bell was the sounding pitch of threatened invasion. "Pitched" also suggests a precipitate, and perhaps collapsing, slope and implies the subsidence of cliffs and the submerging of previously prosperous towns such as Dunwich in Suffolk. This external landscape, however, then "coil[s]" to hint at a spiritual interiority with its "far and inward echoing." The landscape becomes an inscape of scholastic and spiritual contemplation, a *via negativa*, for which a numinous music represented by negation stands as the form. At this moment of attention – the still center of spiritual conversion – the poem turns and the dialectical other of Coleridge's "spiritual, Platonic old England" appears from the "gritty belfries." These belfries stand revealed as also indicating pithead workings: the gantries and wheels that move the cage lifts up and down the mine shafts that "coil" and "ech[o]" "inward" with the working shifts. The poem's final historical turn occurs when we realize that the mines themselves are menaced by the same threat of ruin and disuse that menaces the churches. In the present of the poem, the churches, the mines, and their landscape are themselves subsiding as the contemporary English landscape becomes a post-religious and postindustrial one.

The echoing ring of "enduringly" and its position at the end of both line and quatrain hints that something of these human relics will survive, but

syntactically the adverb modifies the action of the landscape: “Enduringly, // fuschia-hedges fend between cliff and sky.” The verb, “fend,” uncovers a similar situation of threat, and the rest of the sentence reveals that, like the landscape Wordsworth encounters “once again” in “Tintern Abbey,” the landscape endures when it contains human artifacts, when it is marked by what Wordsworth calls “the still, sad music of humanity” (2010: 51):

Brown stumps of headstones tamp into the ling
The ruined and the ruinously strong.

(Hill 1994: 146)

Hill continues to graft on the religious, the industrial, and the natural, but now he begins to set up an ethical register. The headstones are naturalized – they are “brown stumps” – but this naturalization in turn suggests human labor and the destruction of the natural since brown stumps are trees that have been cut down, perhaps to build the church or to fire industrial furnaces. Furthermore, “tamp into the ling” refers not simply to pressing down into the heather but also to the technical term for the filling of a borehole by ramming in after the explosive charges have been laid (“tamp”). What is tamped down, of course, is the collective dead: both the oppressors and the oppressed.

The final two sentences consider these relationships between the ruined and the ruinously strong, between religion and industry, between external realities and internal imaginings, between the beauty of the country-house estate and the oppression that such beauty is built upon, between the attraction of aesthetic visions and their dangers:

Platonic England grasps its tenantry

Where wild-eyed poppies raddle tawny farms
And wild-swans root in lily-clouded lakes.
Vulnerable to each other the twin forms

Of sleep and waking touch the man who wakes
To sudden light, who thinks that this becalms
Even the phantoms of untold mistakes.

(1994: 146)

Alluding to Coleridge, Hill calls the nineteenth-century vision of an organic, feudal, and ordered premodern society “Platonic England” and argues that it understands its obligations and traditions: it “grasps its

tenantry.” “Grasps,” however, also means taking violent control of actual tenants, and in a further irony, the tenantry of the poem is not one of a putative Medieval period, but rather an agricultural or industrial labor force, perhaps a mining proletariat rather than a churchgoing peasantry.

The estate itself appears insolvent for the farms are tawny (rather than Wordsworth’s farms of “one green hue” in “Tintern Abbey” (2010: 49)) and “raddled” – woven and reddened – by poppies. Poppies cannot help but connote the poppy fields of the mass graves of the First World War, where in a matter of hours, entire estates, entire villages, entire communities were “tamped into the ling.” Similarly, Hill concludes the ideals of such an estate are equally unsustainable for unlike Yeats’s swans in “Wild Swans of Coole,” these do not wheel, circle, and fly, but rather “root” and, hence, exemplify not what Yeats in “Sailing to Byzantium” called the “artifice of eternity,” but rather the artifice of history.

The poem ends by returning to the moment of conversion, the “sudden light” that led Newman and others to enter the Catholic Church. In addition, as Robinson observes, by echoing Keats’s last lines in “Ode to a Nightingale,” Hill contrasts the “sudden light” of conversion with its poetic equivalent, the “sudden light” of inspiration (2010: 212). Whereas in this poem spiritual conversion leads to an end of questions and a false belief in the “becalm[ing] of ‘untold mistakes,’” the poetic inspiration’s sudden light leads onto the uncertainties and ambiguities attendant upon such visions: Keats asks “was it a vision or a waking dream?/Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?,” and Hill’s use of “thinks” reveals that such mistakes will return. “Untold” returns us to the tolling bell of the poem’s first lines and reveals history’s multiplicities and its silences, its gains and losses, embedded in a landscape where nature and human artifacts entwine.

As Heaney, Carson, and Hill show, history is written into both rural and urban landscapes. Moreover, that history often has to do with national conquest, colonialism, and the resistance against these. We will return to the ways poets limn such specific national or regional histories in their local topographies, but it is worthwhile to spend some time first on poems that uncover other histories in the landscapes they map. Roy Fisher’s work in *City* (1961) and *A Furnace* (1986) powerfully reveals the traces of industrial capitalism and its cultural apparatus in the cityscape of a Birmingham translated to and transformed by the imagination. In *The Remains of Elmet*, Ted Hughes reads a similar history of the rise and fall of human industry in the rural landscape of Yorkshire’s Calder valley. These two volumes explore in all its rich complication the interaction of human and natural worlds.

For Fisher, place, whether the city of Birmingham that is the subject of *City* or the cities of the world to which he branches out in *A Furnace* or the suburban or rural spaces around and between cities, is “a way of exploring inner space.” He is less interested in reporting on or describing the urban landscape than in using that landscape, as he has said, “to think with.” In this regard, Fisher is not all that dissimilar to Dylan Thomas for, as we have seen, “Fern Hill” is a deployment of landscape in the service of themes of time, change, and mortality. In *City*, Fisher at once convincingly sketches scenes of urban construction, decay, and renewal, and he plays upon those scenes the action of the mind. The sequence comprises titled poems (their right-hand margins irregular, their lines broken into strophes) and untitled prose sections. In the lyrics, Fisher arranges and figures elements of a scene – a polluted pond, a hill on the edge of the city, the garden where his aunt and her children were killed in an air raid during the Second World War – in ways typical of lyric treatments of landscape; the spatial relations among pictured elements and the figurative language in which they are imagined imbue them with a significance that arises from the perceiving and arranging mind. In “The Sun Hacks,” for example, Fisher grants sentience and agency to the sun, the river, and a hill, while he depicts humans as increasingly passive and, ultimately, absent. While the sun “hacks at the slaughterhouse campanile” and the river “shudders” and the dawn “drums,” the faces of butchers are produced only as the workers’ masks “wake” and the night workers on a bus simply sleep or stare. In the final tercet of this lyric, the hill “assumes” the city. On one level this is an apt, if odd, description; the hill takes up the city like a garment that it wears, like a priest assumes the cassock or a judge assumes the robe. On another level, the hill has the power to imagine, to posit, to think the city, and under that image Fisher first personifies the buildings of the city and then emphasizes the absence of actual human beings:

The whale-back hill assumes its concrete city:
The white-flanked towers, the stillborn monuments;
The thousand gold offices, untenanted.

(1969: 29)

The hill has a back like a whale, the towers have flanks like a horse or a person, the monuments, intended to elicit memory, are “stillborn.” Where there is an image that suggests wealth, in the “gold offices,” we find, at the same time, absence; they are unoccupied and therefore unproductive. This

is the city suffering late capitalism, its workers dehumanized, its shiny new offices, suggestive of a new economic stage, empty.

Lyrics like this are juxtaposed with prose sections, most of which were not originally written for the sequence but were instead drawn from journals Fisher had written. In these, Fisher emphasizes the palimpsest nature of the city as its aging Victorian architecture and city plan are partially erased and new roads, new buildings, and new neighborhoods are written over them. “In the century that has passed since this city has become great,” he writes, “it has twice laid itself out in the shape of a wheel. The ghost of the older one still lies among the spokes of the new.” The city is haunted in these sections, but where the rural landscape of Anahorish is haunted, for Heaney, by the Irish language and the generations of farmers who remain present in the similar work performed by their descendants, postindustrial Birmingham is haunted, for Fisher, by architecture and humanity that have, it seems, outlived their purposes:

These streets are not worth lighting. The houses have not been turned into shops – they are not villas either that might have become offices, but simply tall dwellings, opening straight off the street, with cavernous entries leading into back courts

(1969: 24–5).

But as buildings and blocks like these are demolished, and Fisher shows that they *are* demolished as the city is “renewed,” something important is lost. Fisher is often at pains at once to record that loss (to make this sequence more effective than the city’s own “stillborn monuments”) and to seek some recompense for it:

Brick-dust in sunlight. That is what I see now in the city, a dry epic flavour, whose air is human breath. A place of walls made straight with plumblines and trowel, to dessicate and crumble in the sun and smoke. Blistered paint on cisterns and girders, cracking to show the priming. Old men spit on the paving slabs, little boys urinate; and the sun dries it as it dries out patches of damp on plaster facings to leave misshapen stains. I look for things here that make old men and dead men seem young. Things which have escaped, the landscapes of many childhoods.

(1969: 27)

The key trope in the prose sections of *City* is metonymy; Fisher focuses on a discrete detail (here, the brick dust) and from it works out to the broader

topography of which it is a part and the broader social and historical narrative toward which it gestures. The overriding impression of the urban landscape of the present is decay. The decay of the space seems to generate a degradation in the human habitation of the space, evidence of which – the dried stains of spit and urine – then become part of the landscape themselves. Against these accumulating ruins, both architectural and human, Fisher seeks traces of past human relations in traces of past civic structures and spaces.

Published twenty-five years after *City*, the poems of *A Furnace* also aim at this simultaneous representation of the urban landscape and the moment-by-moment construction of the subject who moves through it. Riding a tram through the city in the volume's "Introit" (the title suggests the hymn that transforms the mundane space of a chapel into a holy space fit for the Word), Fisher captures this interaction in which self and city effectively call each other into being:

Whatever
approaches my passive taking-in,
then surrounds me and goes by
will have itself understood only
phase upon phase
by separate involuntary
strokes of my mind.

(1986: 2)

The emphasis on the industrial character of the Birmingham cityscape is perhaps gestured at a couple of lines later by the analogy that links the movements of the mind to the swings of a fan blade, but what is striking in comparison to *City* is the way the specificity of the landscape has been subordinated to the representation of the subject's perception and organization of it. Where, in *City*, the poems and prose sections staged the perceiving subject's confrontation with the urban landscape, his reading of that landscape as a text of historic change, in *A Furnace* Fisher works to show how the city itself arises from the attention the poet pays it. Out of "timeless flux," he writes in "The Return," reality materializes "to the guesswork of the senses" just as "ice-crystals, guessed at, come densely/falling from where they were not." As his old neighborhood's streets are caught up in the tides of urban renewal, Fisher sees through the cracks "Something always/coming out, back against the flow" (1986: 14). This "something" cannot quite be

articulated; it is not simply Thomas's Time or Heaney's history. Instead, for Fisher, the mind at work on the city's flux finds

the sense of another world
not past, but primordial,
everything in it
simultaneous, and moving
every way but forward.

(1986: 14)

When he attends to the city now, Fisher can read through it not only the palimpsest-like presence of its past iterations but also the continuing presence of more profound forces.

Confronting evidence of historical change in the rural landscape of the Calder valley, Ted Hughes, in *The Remains of Elmet* (1979), finds similar presences. At the time Hughes wrote these poems, the landscape he examines in them was broadly considered a wasteland, abandoned by both agriculture and industry, unfit for habitation. Hughes's title suggests that the evidence of past civilizations that might still be found here includes traces of the Celtic kingdom, Elmet, that preceded, and was conquered by, the Anglo-Saxon settlements with which English history is often seen to begin. Not only pre-Anglo-Saxon, Elmet is also pre-Christian; in the traces the kingdom left on the landscape, a force older and more powerful than Christianity might be indicated. Just as Fisher reads the urban palimpsest of Birmingham, Hughes reads the rural text of a glacial valley in Yorkshire, and just as Fisher finds, beneath the layers of past city planning, a primordial force, Hughes finds not only evidence of long-past civilizations but also, and more importantly, a wild world not bound by human need or design but useful for the renewal of the human spirit that might not only perceive but also receive it. He does so not through the generic conventions of the georgic or pastoral and not through the figures (apostrophe, personification, the "I") or structure of what M. H. Abrams terms the Greater Romantic Lyric, but through an explicitly exegetical mode. As an archaeologist or cartographer might, Hughes establishes the salient features of a scene or artifact and then interprets it.

The structure and gestures of "Stanbury Moor" are typical of the volume. In this poem, Hughes directs our attention by turning to grass, stones, water, and wind, each of these elements standing at once as a metonym for the moor and a symbol for one of the four primary

elements (fire is figuratively present in the “grasses of light”). He then performs a series of negative readings, statements about what these natural features are not. In the components of this specific place (the specificity emphasized in the deictics “These” and “This”), Hughes finds *not* the human community of family or neighbors and not (as Heaney does) the human trace of language (“words in any phrase”) and not even the wildlife he exemplifies with “wolf-beings.” Instead, the grass, stones, water, and wind are

The armour of bric-à-brac
To which your soul's caddis
Clings with all its courage.
(2003: 458)

The metaphor here is complex and worth lingering over. The features of the landscape are armor, worn to protect the warrior. The protective nature of this armor seems to be understood by the soul, whose “caddis,” a binding fashioned of coarse wool or cotton cloth, clings (the verb suggests desperation) to it. In “courage,” Hughes connotes the warrior’s signature virtue, but also, etymologically, the heart; we might legitimately read the last line, then, as “Clings with all its heart,” and the change again helps us to hear the soul’s desperation beneath its (perhaps illusory) bravery. So far, so good; the landscape is a protective gear the soul intently holds on to, and we are comfortably in the neighborhood of Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” where “Nature never did betray/The heart that loved her.” But what kind of armor is this? “Bric-à-brac” (with the accent) is not simply the English phrase for a gathering of small objects whose value is mostly ornamental or sentimental (though this meaning is clearly present) but is also the French phrase from which the English one is derived, a phrase that suggests confusion. Whatever protective value as armor this landscape might have, then, is accidental; as “armour of bric-à-brac,” this is a fragmentary, confused, and probably ineffective suit of plate or mail. A glance back up the page helps us to see why this is so. Each feature of the landscape (and because these are synecdoches, they speak for the landscape as a whole) is self-absorbed; the grasses, for example, “think they are alone,” while the stones “have a world to themselves.” Nature is not there for humans to find themselves or meaning in; it simply is in its bare existence. It cannot protect the soul, though in its aloof self-sufficiency, it might offer a truth useful to the reader who can comprehend it.

The “truth” that no specific meaning inheres in a landscape is to be seen in tension with the “truth,” just as powerfully on offer in some landscape poems, that very important meanings can be gleaned from (or, in some cases, elaborated upon) the landscape. In “Fern Hill,” we saw Thomas obliquely and implicitly writing the Welshness of the title’s farm into the sound patterns of his lines and stanzas. In Boland’s, Heaney’s, Carson’s, and Hill’s poems, we saw the inescapably political issues of history and habitation upon the land explored through the linkage of land and language. A question that lingers beneath a look at the land from almost any perspective, whether generic or discursive, is “whose land?” That question and its answers take on a peculiarly political tone when posed in places further from the metropole than Birmingham or Yorkshire, places whose history of conquering, colonization, and cultural distinctiveness is perhaps more pressingly felt and where nationalist movements continue to have political purchase.

Much of the career of Iain Crichton Smith, in stories and novels as well as in poems, in Scots Gaelic as well as in English, was devoted to a political reading of history’s traces on the Scottish landscape. Raised in a Gaelic-speaking community on the island of Lewis, in the Hebrides, and descended from Highlanders, Lewis was keenly attentive to the intersection of language and landscape. In “Shall Gaelic Die?” he writes that “He who loses his language loses his world. The/Highlander who loses his language loses his world” and likens the replacement of Gaelic words with English in his own mouth to the colonization of the British Isles by the Roman Empire (2011: 114). Smith’s early poem, “Clearances,” evokes the eighteenth-century English eviction of Scottish smallholders in the Highlands (the “Highland Clearances”) and bases a determination to “remember” this history (and to hope while acknowledging that “hate is evil” that the English “courtier’s heels in hell // are burning” like the thatch cottages of evicted crofters were burned) on the image of the thistle climbing the thatch (2011: 57). This key image links two historically important and culturally specific figures for the Highland landscape, the thistle, long a symbol of Scotland and Scottish nationalist culture, and the thatch atop crofters’ cottages (as opposed to the wood or slate roofs on English landlords’ houses).

Smith’s 1969 *The White Air of March*, a long poem in sixteen sections first published in *Scottish International*, structures a complicated and often critical examination of Scottish culture and the residues of Scottish history through meditation on the landscape. “This is the land God

gave to Andy Stewart,” the poem begins, “we have our inheritance.” That inheritance turns out, on the one hand, to be a degraded culture, a combination of “indifference” and elements of Scottishness lingering in a sort of radioactive half-life: “We shall be intrepid hunters of golf balls,” “Mrs Macdonald has given an hour-long lecture on Islay” (2011: 181). Amidst this, at the end of the first section, Smith writes that the Cuillins, a rocky mountain range on the island of Skye, off the west coast of Scotland, “stand and forever stand.” The mountains, though, seem outraged by what has become of the land for which they “stand” as metonym: “Their streams scream in the moonlight.”

The poem’s second section provides in miniature the critical perspective on the culturally read landscape that recurs throughout *The White Air of March*. Again, “The Cuillins tower” and “Gaelic bluebells” bloom in that mountain range’s crevices; the landscape is read in culturally, even linguistically, specific terms (2011: 182). Between refrain-like repetitions of the opening line about the Cuillins, though, Smith places parenthetically set-off stanzas in which he dismissively holds up cliché figures for Scottish culture. Of Culloden, the site of the 1745 battle that ended a Jacobite rebellion, he writes, “Let it be forgotten!” The rebellious Highlanders are reduced now to a “little Highland dancer,” whose dance to avoid swords is negatively judged: “To avoid the sword/is death,” and to avoid the sword is sonically linked to “walk the ward” in which “old men watch the wall.” These bits of tourist Scottish kitsch are cultural dead ends. Whatever renewal might be possible for Scottish culture (and Smith is not sanguine about such possibilities) will be found in the landscape itself, not in the inscription of an easily domesticated national culture upon it. When the “The Cuillins tower” again, both in this section and later in Section 15, they do so without “Gaelic bluebells.” Instead, the mountains are “tall and white” in the springtime month of March, a time connotative of renewal. When “the mist dissipates,” Smith writes in the fifteenth section, “Gold grows at our feet” and, as the poem concludes, “In the white air of March/A new mind” (2011: 193).

Smith’s critical position is taken up by some more recent Scottish poets, as well. Kathleen Jamie, for example, writes in the anthologized poem “Skeins o Geese” that while geese seem to “write a word/across the sky,” a word “struck” before the speaker’s birth, it is in fact “A word niver spoken or read” (2002: 158). While the poem focuses on salient and potentially significant features of the landscape – stone walls, fields, wire fences – and while the poem’s language echoes Scots vocabulary and pronunciation,

these features are emptied of the cultural specificity we might, from the tradition of landscape poems we have traced so far, be led to expect. The fields are “ploo’d [plowed] but not sown,” and speaker and fields alike are “empty as stane,” “blin as stane.” Wire on a gate is “lik archaic script,” but whatever it signs is “illegible.” When the geese “turn hame,” the wind makes a “dumb moan.” The adjective here points to speechlessness; while there is sound there is not a word. The sound of the wind is “bereft,” the poem’s last word. On the one hand, this suggests a human emotion – grief – in the natural sound, but on the other hand, and this seems more likely in light of all that precedes this word, it suggests precisely the lack of meaning to be unearthed in the supposed “signs” that can be found “strewn aroun” the landscape.

Given the once global reach of the British Empire and the global appearance of the empire’s institutions – including schools and the literary culture they disseminate – it is no surprise to find poets from far-flung former British colonies similarly drawing from their explorations of their own landscapes confirmation or complication of what we have been describing as nationalist desires. The Caribbean island of Saint Lucia (a former British colony that, since 1979, has been an independent state of the Commonwealth of Nations) is a far cry from London, Oxford, or Cambridge (from Belfast, Edinburgh, or Cardiff, for that matter). It is also, as the title of Derek Walcott’s important early (1962) poem has it, “A Far Cry from Africa.” The slave trade that brought West Africans to the Caribbean from the seventeenth century on, though, makes the African landscape relevant for Walcott’s working through of his own political and literary identities. The lamination of British, African, and Saint Lucian histories in his experience of European (and American), African, and Caribbean landscapes has been at the center of Walcott’s project throughout his career, whether in lyric poems like “A Far Cry from Africa” or the long poems epitomized by *Omeros*, Walcott’s 1990 reimagining of the *Odyssey*.

The early poem figures Africa as an animal beset by flies: “A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt/Of Africa” (1986: 17). The flies are Kikuyu, members of Kenya’s largest ethnic group and key figures in the Mau Mau Rebellion against British colonial rule in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Naming the Kikuyu, Walcott calls up this specific example of anticolonial resistance as an inescapable horizon against which to read the poem; the “blood-streams” upon which Walcott has the flies “batten” are those of the colonial system, while the corpses he shows “scattered through a paradise” are the victims of the uprising and of the vicious British military response to

it. The “tawny pelt” of the continent is specifically the grasslands also known as the “veldt,” and by using this particular name for the landscape, Walcott invokes a broader history of colonial violence than just the struggle in Kenya. “Veldt,” as we saw in Mahon’s “Courtyards in Delft,” is from the Dutch for “field.” It refers not to Kenya but to the southern African lands colonized by the Dutch, some of which (South Africa) remained under the harsh rule of an Afrikaner minority. The ten-line stanza comprises a quatrain (rhyming abab) and a sestet. Establishing both the scene and its figurative significance in the quatrain, Walcott draws a complex moral in the sestet. While the importance of the landscape is clear in the quatrain, it has to be teased out of the sestet, but it is no less important there for being harder to see. “Statistics justify and scholars seize/The salients of colonial policy,” Walcott writes. On one level, the sentence simply means that each side’s partisans use figures and interpretations to support important features (“salients”) at stake in the conflict. On another, these points of policy are figured in terms of an embattled landscape; “salients” are military positions that extend into enemy territory. The intellectual and political battle is fought over the same terrain as the actually physical battle.

In the second stanza, Walcott again begins with a feature of the landscape; from the rushes along a “parched river,” ibises rise in such profusion that they seem like “a white dust.” The description here continues the doubling of significance we saw in the first stanza, for the continent seems at once exhausted (parched, dusty) and still richly abundant (the plain is “beast-teeming”). The “dust of ibises” is “Threshed out by beaters,” the image here conflating agriculture (in which harvested grain is threshed) and hunting (in which hiding places are beaten to startle or flush the prey). Such activities have gone on here “since civilization’s dawn.” But Walcott establishes an opposition between the violence of nature (“beast on beast”) and that of humankind; where the former is sanctioned as “natural law,” the latter is a perversion in which divinity (the superiority of “upright man” compared to the beasts) is sought “by inflicting pain.” While colonial policies (and resistance against them) might often be justified in terms that call upon natural law, the conflicts undertaken by “upright man” are really driven by cultural difference and “native dread.”

Much in the poem works to implicate both Africa and its colonizers in ongoing and horrific violence (just as the violence affects both Africans and colonists). Image after image can be read as referring in both directions; the “native dread” with which the second stanza ends, for example, is at once the dread of death shared by all who are born, the “white peace

contracted by the dead” (“contracted,” too, has a double meaning), and, at the same time, the dread, among African natives, of the peace favorable to white colonists, contracted (agreed to, but also caught, as an illness) by their ancestors. The putative agent of perpetual conflict, we discover in the third stanza, is “brutish necessity,” the abstract force to which each side appeals. The conflicts that have turned the African landscape into a dead animal are just others in a series, like the fairly recent Spanish Civil War, in which both sides claimed justice and neither side could be held innocent. Here, the “gorilla,” a figure for the native African (as constructed by his European antagonist) and also a homonym for “guerilla,” fights the hyper-civilized and powerful Nietzschean “superman.” But here, too, all of the doubled significance has its own significance explained, for the poem’s speaker, Walcott himself, becomes the terrain on which the opposition is fought out. “Poisoned with the blood of both,” the speaker cannot choose between his African and British heritages. As horrified as he is by the slaughter conducted by (and also against) the Kikuyu, he cannot reject Africa, and as aware as he is of how the English language is used to “seize the salients” in the discursive conflict, he cannot reject this tongue he loves. The poem offers no solution or resolution, only the series of questions, each of which includes both poles in the binary opposition, with which it concludes.

It is in the landscape of St. Lucia itself that Walcott finds and offers a powerful and potentially healing sense of colonial identity. This is most readily apparent in a key episode in *Omeros*. We will have more to say about this substantial and complex poem in Chapter Seven; here, we focus on one episode to illustrate Walcott’s version of the writing (through language) of history onto the land for purposes at once poetic and political that we have seen in the work of Heaney and others. Throughout this poem, Walcott recurs to the landscape of his native island: the poem’s narrator walks the quai with the ghost of his father, who points out women laborers carrying their loads along the hills; he looks back to the island from a boat, where, with a shape-shifting figure combining Homer and the local shaman, he sings the island’s praises; and he descends into the island’s volcano, Soufriere, in an episode that echoes Dante’s *Inferno*. One of the poem’s plot strands involves Philoctete, who, like his Greek namesake, bears an incurable wound on his leg. The wound stands, in the poem’s figurative logic, for the wounds wrought by colonial history on the subjects of colonial power. In this plot’s resolution, the healing of Philoctete is brought about by the local obeah woman, or priestess, Ma Kilman, who

must find, as the key ingredient in the healing potion, a plant whose seed was supposed to have been carried to St. Lucia from Africa in the stomach of a sea swift.

As she begins her search for this plant, Ma Kilman is dressed for the Catholic Mass she has just left. She wears not only a church dress and a hat but also a wig. In this outfit, she is unable to recognize the language in which ants signal to her about the plant's location, unable to speak the names of the African gods who "swarmed in the thicket // of the grove, waiting to be known by name" (1990: 242). She removes the accouterments of the colonizer, when she takes off her hat, with its artificial berries, and lets loose her hair:

Carefully, she set both aside
on the coiled green follicles of moss in the dark
wood. Her hair sprung free as the moss. Ants scurried
through the wiry curls, barring, then passing each other
the same message with scribbling fingers and forehead
touching forehead. Ma Kilman bent hers forward,
and as her lips moved with the ants, her mossed skull heard
the ants talking the language of her great-grandmother,
the gossip of a distant market, and she understood....

(1990: 242)

Note Walcott's figurative language here; the moss and human hair are figured in terms of each other throughout the passage (beginning with "follicles of moss"), but there is a progression from simile ("free as the moss") to metaphor ("mossed skull") in Ma Kilman's relation to this metonym for the island's earth. Only when she becomes the island in this way and lets the ants crawl on her scalp just as they do in the moss can she hear in their communication the language of her ancestors and, through that language, learn the location of the flower whose bloom reeks of history's wound. And when she finds the flower, she even more emphatically links herself bodily with St. Lucia, unbuttoning her dress and rubbing dirt in her hair, scraping the soil with her nails to dig down into the island and to reap its history as a cure for Philoctete.

Amidst all this political and cultural affirmation of the land, whether England or another part of the British archipelago or a far-flung spot on the old imperial map, we would be remiss if we did not also acknowledge the poetry that explores more skeptical attitudes about the links between land, language, self, and history. We will allow Welsh poet

Gwyneth Lewis's "The Flaggy Shore" to stand for this contrapuntal strain. Titled for a stretch of coast in County Clare, where the limestone landscape of the Burren meets the Atlantic, Lewis's poem at first seems to assume but then goes on to destabilize the possibilities for inherent meaning in landscape. The poem opens in a familiar mood of nostalgia: "Even before I've left, I long/for this place" (2005: 140). Lewis sketches the local in telling details – hay stooks and cormorants diving into the tide – that at the same time suggest a made character of the place, a "scaped" quality of the land. The stooks are "like stanzas," while the cormorants "dive like hooks" to fasten the tide's "bodice," which itself "unravels in gardens of carraigin." The homesickness named in the opening lines is not only for a place the speaker has not left but is for a place she has, in some ways, created. This emphasis on artifice is important, for in the last half of the poem Lewis links the landscape with the sky: the clouds become "pewter promontories" the space between them "long bays" with "silent coasts." The speaker now finds herself "homesick for where I've not been." A final quatrain closes the poem with a sunset in which the artificial figures of the earlier lines – stanzas, hooks, bodice, and fabric – are replaced by simple, elemental figures: "quicksilver headlands" steel and vermilion dulled to lead by "distance and the dying of day." The poem charts a progression from the clichés of landscape poetry to the evacuation of those clichés and a refreshed view of the scene, one that shows, to quote Wallace Stevens's "Snow Man" (where Lewis paraphrases "Sunday Morning"), nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

We conclude this chapter with Wendy Mulford's *The East Anglia Sequence*, which explores the interaction of the sort of sedimenting and layering, both geographical and linguistic, which we have seen in the work of several poets in this chapter, and the erosion and erasure that some, almost fearfully it seems, glance toward. In doing so, she avails herself of almost all of the approaches to the poetry of place that we described at the beginning of this chapter. Mulford writes in the book's preface that the two sequences that make up the larger, inclusive one arose out of two different locations in East Anglia (the first in Norfolk, the second in Suffolk) and out of two different moments and modes of inhabiting the region (the first as a visitor, the second as a resident). The first sequence, focused on Salthouse, Norfolk, was, she writes, "an encounter with other, experienced as/located in the meteorology, archaeology, geology, ecology, ornithology, prehistory of the recorded history

of place” (1998: n.p.). Upon returning to the region, now to live rather than simply to visit, Mulford explored, in the second sequence, Dunwich, almost obliterated by “the deprivations [sic] of the North Sea upon [sic] the East Anglian coastline” (1998: n.p.). Sometimes, as in “Coriolis Effect,” Mulford emphasizes the role she as the perceiving speaker plays in the organization of land into landscape. She does this in part by explicitly describing her role – “I on the stubble-hill breast/front the glittering points of the sea/to compose this view” (1998: 5) – and in part by self-consciously alluding to myth in an effort to clarify the scene’s significance. “Pareto Optimality 1099, 1953,” though, draws on the psychogeographical method as it imputes an almost sentient agency to endangered elements of the littoral zone, plants threatened by the encroaching sea. Several poems in the sequences read the historical strata of the landscape in order to chart its geological development and its archaeological layering of human presence, while a couple of others topographically focus on the surface structures as the site is presently configured. Contemplating the disappearing town of Dunwich, Mulford draws on cartographical and etymological approaches, both within the text of a poem such as “Inheritance,” which works through the layers of significance in the town’s name (“Dommoc is sign/Dunwyc emblem/Dunwich England’s spent/heritance” [1998: 11]) and in the interleaving of photocopied excerpts from other historical and cartographical texts.

Place, the sequence as a whole suggests, is the product of a complex interaction of conventional interpretive schemes, the natural and human-made features of a specific site, the dynamics of human intensive transformations of the natural world, and the vagaries of memory and language. One thing these various poetic approaches to landscape makes clear is that the world around poet and reader is the locus of enormous and important meaning (or, better, the relationship of poet or reader to that world, as it is exemplified by a given place, is a richly significant one). As a consequence, the loss of a place entails the loss of all that these many approaches and interactions invest that place with. As Mulford writes of Dunwich,

in the loss of the. and
certainty.
print blunts the imagination
I too.

(1998: 16)

Losing even the article that gives definition to a noun and the conjunction that connects without causality, Mulford points out the inadequacy and lack at the center of writing. The ambiguous syntax provides two meanings: the word mark “I” distorts representation as does the person represented by that word mark. This preoccupation with the loss of certainty attendant upon representing place ensures that poems of place, as we have seen, often address questions of history and historical representation. In the next chapter we turn to poems that explicitly tackle the process of historical representation.

History and Historiography

To talk of “history” in poetry is to talk, potentially, of many things. It is useful to be clear about which aspects of history are at stake in a given poem or reading of a poem. Often, by “history” we simply mean that the poem refers to historical persons or events. Elsewhere in this book, we discuss many poems having something to do with history (on the surface, at least), discussed many such poems, from Tony Harrison’s “Rhubarbarians” to Morrison’s “Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper.” Sometimes the history is public, matters of war or government; sometimes the history is private (the genealogy of Gillian Clarke’s family in *Cofiant*, for instance), though the personal history in such poems is typically measured against, and often invites contemplation of, more public histories. “History” in another of its guises is often present in poems that (again, on the surface) seem to have nothing to do with history (in the sense of well-known events in the national past). A poem like “Tractor,” from Ted Hughes’s *Moortown*, does not comment on any particular event, but Hughes’s choice of subject and manner of treatment indicate the broad forces of economic and cultural change in England’s countryside, while the diction in such poems as Seamus Heaney’s “Anahorish” and Kathleen Jamie’s “Skeins o geese” opens onto the great movements of colonial occupation and decolonization.

In this chapter, we want to focus on poems that do not simply represent historical events or circumstances and that do not simply gesture toward the abstract forces that drive social and political change. We want, here, to draw attention to poems in which the writing of history itself (historiography) is represented, enacted, considered, and rendered visible as a problem. History

and poetry are often regarded as opposites. The former seems preoccupied with dates, facts, and events, the latter with fictions, images, and representations. However, historians have to interpret and narrate their historical evidence, and they therefore have to consider representational questions. These questions bring historians and poets together under the term historiography, which is the study of historical methodology. In other words, it is the analysis of how we construct our stories and models of the past. History writing has consistently emphasized so-called great people and their life stories, frequently with an added moral spin. The past is often written, read, and judged based upon ethical evaluations. There are historical stories told of development and progress culminating in some significant event such as the formation of a nation or the passing of a significant law. There are stories based upon larger historical forces such as economics, classes, geography, which can provide an explanatory model for historical change. Usually in historical narratives, such questions are implicit; in poetry, however, they tend to be explicit and to be made part of the themes and form of the poem. Indeed, poetry that takes history as its explicit subject matter usually locates historiography at the center of its concerns. More specifically, such poetry concerns itself with the experience of history and with its textual transmission.

Fredric Jameson terms this focus on the experience of history “existential historicism” (1988: 157). He argues that this term “designates something like a transhistorical event: the experience, rather, by which historicity as such is manifested by means of the contact between the historian’s mind in the present and a given synchronic cultural complex from the past” (1988: 157). An existential history will attempt to represent not so much the past as the subject’s experience of encountering and representing the past. James Longenbach summarizes the idea when he writes: “history is not produced from a collection of facts but is manifested by the historicity of the very experience of investigating the past” (1987: 14). Such a method measures the difference between the past and the present, and historicity emerges in encountering the experience of this difference. Since texts are the primary way we encounter the past, such a method necessarily highlights the written nature of history’s archive.

Ruth Padel explores these questions in her 2009 verse biography, *Darwin: A Life in Poems*. Padel tells the life of Charles Darwin through a series of poems that are divided into chapters. The first chapter, “Boy (1809–1831),” traces Darwin’s childhood to leaving university; the second, “Journey (1831–1836),” tells of his crucial voyage on *The Beagle*

where he saw the evidence that led him to the theory of evolution by natural selection; the third, “City (1837–1838),” shows him on his return to London full of doubt as he writes up his notes; the fourth, “Emma (1838–1851),” details his marriage to Emma, the continuing development of his ideas, and ends with the tragic death of his favorite daughter, Annie; the fifth and final chapter, “the Coat of Fur (1851–1882),” concerns not only the publication of his *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) but also his wife’s sadness at his loss of religious faith.

Unlike a prose biography, however, this verse biography explicitly reveals the machinery behind historical representation. Each poem exists not only as part of the larger narrative of the volume but also as a stand-alone individual lyric. Each implies a moment of life-changing intensity and entails a link in a developmental sequence. Moreover, each poem consists of direct quotations from historical documents such as Darwin’s letters, diaries, journals, notebooks, and published works, as well as writings by other people who knew him. These quotations are woven in with Padel’s own words to create a rich mosaic of voices as the following example from “The Devil as Baboon” reveals:

Two lamps lit. He’s finishing Malthus. Shadows dance
in the room like a scritch of black rain
‘All forms compete against others for means of their life.
Nature’s forms do *not* demonstrate benevolence, divine
or otherwise! The principle of population is strife.

Disease and pain in the world – and they talk of perfection?
We are alone with our biology. ‘New life is born
from famine, extinction, death.’ Covington draws a curtain
against crepe smog. Granite sparks
in the pavement outside. Applewood spits on the heart.

(2009: 56)

Characteristically, these two stanzas contain direct quotations from Darwin, enabling us to experience his language and written voice. There are also the voices of what seems an omniscient, third person narrator (“Covington draws a curtain/against crepe smog”) and of free indirect discourse (“Two lamps lit”). Often, as here, these two voices coexist in the same sentence, making it unclear whether we are observing through an omniscient narrator or through a representation of Darwin’s or another character’s thoughts. It also seems likely that Padel has altered and arranged Darwin’s own words to make them conform to rhythm or rhyme.

In addition, Padel provides a series of factual glosses in the margins alongside the poems that provide scholarly information and references. The gloss for these two stanzas reads:

Darwin began reading Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* on 28 September 1838. In it he found 'a theory by which to work', which led him to the concept of natural selection.

(2009: 56)

These glosses, and language like it in the poems themselves, highlight the representational language of fact and historical biographies. Rather than having priority, they become simply another part of the interpretive and representational web that constitutes the poem, especially since they are so reminiscent of the glosses that Samuel Coleridge placed alongside the stanzas of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" – another poem with a sea voyage at its heart.

Alongside this complex interweaving of voices, Padel also writes in a wide range of poetic forms and refers to an enormous array of fauna and flora. By so doing, Padel generates a sense of the richness of the world that Darwin lived in and encountered both contemporaneously and in his imagination. The historical Darwin, the poem's character "Darwin," the poem, Padel, and the reader range across a vast array of historical periods and records. What links them together, for Padel, becomes the human mind's ability to create order out of chaos, form out of content. As she draws science and history into her poetic web, she reveals how scientific discovery and historical representation are essentially creative and linguistic in nature. These become, for Padel, analogous to the poetic imagination itself. Indeed, her claim goes further to imply that they are both subsets of the poetic imagination since, for her, metaphor with its connective principle undergirds all forms of human creation. The final image of the poem becomes the garden that Emma and Charles Darwin made – something that combines human making with the natural world: "This garden they made together. Its life beyond the glass" (2009: 141).

This interplay between seeking to create the experience of encountering the past and exploring the textual transmission of that past has become a crucial means by which poets have sought to investigate hidden histories, especially in relation to particular geographical regions. In the rest of the chapter, we will examine Geoffrey Hill's Mercia in *Mercian Hymns*, John Montague's Ireland in *The Rough Field*, and Derek Walcott's Caribbean in

Omeros. Particularly relevant to these poems, we believe, is Benjamin's declaration that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (2003: 392). (We quoted this earlier in Chapter 3 where we used the idea of the British Museum to explain it.) In his "On the Concept of History" from which this claim comes, Benjamin distinguishes between the history of the oppressor and of the oppressed, of the conquerors and of the conquered, of the victorious and of the defeated. For Benjamin, conquering history always tells the story of an ordered, continuous, and developmental succession, whereas conquered history confronts disarray, discontinuities, and arrested fragmentation. The former is publicly remembered in monuments and official writings, the latter is publicly forgotten but is remembered perhaps in oral accounts and family mementos. It can also be perceived in the absences and gaps of the official records. In much of the postwar poetry we are calling historiographical, poets situate themselves between these two forms of history. More often than not they seek to recollect the histories of the oppressed and vanquished, but they also reflect upon doing so in the language of poetry which, however much they adapt or change it, remains linked to the language of power. Consequently, such poems tend to brood over the idea of poetic vocation and the role of the poet.

Geoffrey Hill, for example, in his 1971 *Mercian Hymns*, traces the history of "Mercia" (the West Midlands of England) and the growth of his own poetic imagination. The poem has the double focus that seems intrinsic to this type of existential historicism, moving between the Anglo-Saxon King Offa, who ruled Mercia from 757 to 796 AD, and Hill's childhood in the same area. In terms of their suggested titles, the sequence of thirty prose poems charts Offa's life from his naming to his crowning, to his ruling practices, and finally to his death and funeral, but they also trace Hill's own childhood and family background. Hill himself has suggested the complex relationship between the tyrannical egocentrism of such a King and that of an imaginative child: "The murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal seems again an objective correlative for the ambiguities of English history in general, as a means of trying to encompass and accommodate the early humiliations and fears of one's own childhood and also one's discovery of the tyrannical streak in oneself as a child" (1994: 94).

In Hymn X, for example, there is an explicit "exchange with the Muse of History," for the poem describes Offa not only as a child learning Latin and as a ruler using that language to make laws and deliver authoritative commands but also as the mid-twentieth-century grammar schoolboy

doing his Latin homework: “He wept, attempting to mas-/ter *ancilla* and *servus*” (1994: 102). This final line exemplifies how Hill’s poetic practice displays the transmission of culture and barbarism, learning and violence. The “he” refers to Offa and Hill, creating identity, but the difference between the two remains equally stark. Offa was a master, an owner of people, and so *ancilla* and *servus* have a contemporary social referent for him. For the twentieth-century child, such personal ownership is unknown, and therefore, the mastery becomes only an educational one. However, the reason for the belief that mastery of Latin was necessary remains identical: it provides access to a history of power, to a tradition of imperial rule, and to the heritage of a dominant and masterful culture. The poem then speaks both of the continuous history of the victors, with their narrative of ordered development, and of the discontinuous history of the defeated, with their instants of catastrophic destruction. The sequence highlights the rulers of the land but also brings to light what both Michael North and C.D. Blanton have called the anonymous laborers who worked on and in the land. In Hymn XXV, for example, Hill remembers his grandmother who was disfigured by “the searing wire” of an industrial machine (1994: 117) and links her to all the unnamed workers who built the great cultural monuments of the state – the “Opus Anglicanum,” the cathedrals, castles, and palaces (1994: 115) – and to all the unknown “swathed bodies in the long ditch” who suffered the “anger” of kings (1994: 103).

The larger historical structure of the sequence’s investigation of Englishness is both genealogical and teleological. Chronologically, it begins with what it figures as the emergence of England as England out of the separate regions and kingdoms of the island. As Hill’s notes explain, Offa was the first Anglo-Saxon King to inscribe *Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae* on his coins, and the complex provenance of the title *Mercian Hymns* brings together Hebraic, Greek, Latin, and Anglo-Saxon (1994: 105). Indeed, one of the sequence’s conceits is that these poems perform the moment when England and the English language are about to coalesce and form themselves out of all their attendant cultures and traditions. The sequence ends chronologically, with England’s dissolution into its various regional and devolutionary constituencies of which Mercia or rather the West Midlands is simply one of many. It could be said that *Mercian Hymns* begins as marginal interlinear glosses of Latin Christian passages, foretelling the emergence of England as a Christian nation, and ends as marginal footnotes of that English Christian tradition, telling of the emergence of a post-Christian devolved federation. Consequently, the

sequence suggests the mutually exclusive propositions that the meaning of all its myriad histories (personal, social, aesthetic, legal, numismatic, religious, archaeological, architectural, horticultural, geological, and so on) can be located in the origins of Offa's Mercia and that, simultaneously, this meaning can be found in the representational culmination of the present of the sequence itself. As such, the sequence not only examines historiography but also enacts it.

In 1972, after ten years of work on it, the Irish poet John Montague published *The Rough Field*, a book-length poem sequence that similarly at once examines and enacts historiography. The sequence consists of ten cantos (most of which are themselves made up of individual shorter lyrics with their own titles or numbers) and an epilogue. Its loose narrative describes Montague's return to Garvaghey, the rural area of Northern Ireland where he grew up (Garvaghey is an Anglicized version of the Irish phrase *garbh achaidh* which translates as "a rough field"). Montague had been away from Garvaghey for some time to pursue first his studies (at University College Dublin and at Yale) and then his literary career (he taught for a year at the University of Iowa, spent a year at the University of California at Berkeley, then lived in Dublin and Paris). Upon his return to Garvaghey, the poet (Montague's persona) realizes that he is alienated from his own culture. "One explores an inheritance," Montague writes in the volume's preface, "to free oneself and others" (1972: 7). The sequence explores that alienation, its causes and consequences, and the possibility of a solution in poetry itself. In doing so, it engages the self-conscious writing of history; in the same preface, Montague writes that the poem originated in a vision of Tyrone's unhappy "historical destiny," a destiny common to "all such remote areas where the presence of the past was compounded with a bleak economic future" (1972: 7). The sequence conducts its historiographical engagement in three ways that we might think of as operating at three different but interacting levels. On the first level, the poem is often simply and straightforwardly *about* the composition of historical narratives, whether the official narratives of national histories or the vernacular folk histories of localities and families. Included in this thematic treatment of historiography is the occasional explicit comparison of modes of history writing. On a second level, *The Rough Field* *enacts* historiography; the poems themselves write history in the ways compared and contested at the thematic level. Finally, on the third level, with its complex page layouts, typography, and illustrations, Montague's

sequence *embodies* historiography; its glosses and epigraphs at once produce on the physical space of the page the historian's materials and make visible the problem of how history is written.

We can see how Montague's sequence performs its complex historiographical work by sketching these three levels as they are developed in the first canto, "Home Again." The canto consists of five numbered poems, the first and third combining lyrical stanzas and prose glosses. The first poem narrates the poet's return, from the moment he catches a bus at Belfast's Victoria Station to his arrival at his family's "gaunt farmhouse." The narrative begins by setting the British and Protestant architecture (the royally named Victoria Station) and politics (the halls of the Orange Order, which commemorates and celebrates British rule over Northern Ireland) against the poet's bus-mate "Yarning politics" and telling "Tales of the Ancient Order, Ulster's Volunteers," an anti-British counterpart to the Orangemen. The terrain Montague and his poem traverse is one shaped by competing historical narratives and the competing contemporary cultures underwritten by them (the Protestant "dour, despoiled inheritance," a "culture where constraint is all," against the "friendly face" and "Ulster monotone" of the bus-mate). After the brief lyrical interlude of the second poem, the remaining sections of this canto offer modes of memory: a photograph in the third poem, an uncle's playing the fiddle in the fourth, and, in the fifth (a lyric Montague originally wrote and published in the early 1960s: "Like dolmens round my childhood, the old people"), a collection of elderly locals.

With historiography in mind, we might read these last three lyrics as thematically working through the various means by which the past is remembered and made present. The photograph of Montague's grandfather (also named John Montague) recalls the family's formerly prosperous and relatively powerful position in the community. The elder Montague was a lawyer and, as a "Hedge schoolmaster," stands for a further connection to the Catholic past (hedge schools were illegal local schools in which students were taught, and taught in, the Irish language, as opposed to the system of national schools imposed by the British, where the medium of instruction was English). But the poem juxtaposes the photograph with the present situation ("Sixty years/Later"), after the lawyer's sons have emigrated and the family has fallen on harder times. The horse-drawn sidecar in which the old man had proudly ridden to his ancestral homelands now rots as it plugs a hole in the hedge. While the photograph might recall a past, the poem suggests, it fails to render it present or continuously

powerful. The musicianship of Montague's uncle might offer a more lively connection to both the familial and the national past since the music of the past continues to play in the present. But here, too, Montague finds failure. While he once played music that brought the Earls of Tyrone into the contemporary community (in the form of *O'Neill's Lament*), the uncle eventually "left his fiddle in the rafters" and now his "rural art" has been "silenced in the discord of Brooklyn" (1972: 15). The facts of emigration and dispersal have broken the continuity with the heroic past as effectively here as they have in the case of the photograph.

Only when Montague discovers his own "craft," his poetic vocation, does he find a possibly viable alternative to his uncle's fiddle playing or his grandfather's photograph. In poetry, the "burly godfather" might be remembered and his inheritance might be revived. The fifth lyric of this canto attempts this feat. Montague begins by comparing the old people he knew in his childhood to "dolmens," prehistoric structures consisting of large flat stones resting atop several standing stones. The purposes of these structures remain open to speculation; they might have served as altars for ritual activities. With the simile, Montague suggests that in the memories of the elderly lies a potential connection to the deeper past. "Maggie Owens," for example, was – as a gossip – a "Fanged chronicler of a whole countryside," while "Wild Billy Eagleson," a Protestant who married a "Catholic servant girl," embodied the sectarian conflict with which Ulster has long been riven. Recalling each of these figures in a lightly rhymed seven-line stanza, Montague offers his own poetic voice as a historic preservative superior to both photograph and fiddle. The poem's (and the canto's) closing stanza heightens sound repetition to echo ancient bardic practices (the alliterative verse of Anglo-Saxon, the *cynghanedd* of Old Welsh poetry), as if to clinch the poem's implicit argument:

Ancient Ireland, indeed! I was reared by her bedside,
The rune and the chant, evil eye and averted head,
Fomorian fierceness of family and local feud.
Gaunt figures of fear and of friendliness,
For years they trespassed on my dreams,
Until once, in a standing circle of stones,
I felt their shadows pass
Into that dark permanence of ancient forms.

(1972: 17)

In the lapidary language of lyric poetry, Montague offers a writing of history that might hold the past in the present more effectively than the photograph (which simply shows what is no longer the case) or the fiddle (which falls silent as time brings change).

We have called attention to Montague's diction and sound patterning in this important moment, but of course these resources are importantly deployed throughout the canto and throughout the sequence, for it is in his handling of poetic form that Montague enacts the ideas he develops at the thematic level. If we return to the first lyric in "Home Again," we might notice that the stanzas are sonnets of a sort. Each is fourteen lines long, and each includes just enough rhyme to remind us that the ghost of the form is present (the first, e.g., concludes with a Shakespearean couplet: "'God is Love,' chalked on a grimy wall/Mocks a culture where constraint is all"). We might think that the stanza is chosen at random from among the standard ones available, but with historiography in mind and with the prose glosses that alternate with the stanzas before us, we can test a more interesting proposition. The first gloss reads:

Vast changes have taken place, and rulers have passed away, dynasties fallen,
since that glorious autumn day when Lord Mountjoy, accompanied by his
land steward, arrived by coach in Omagh....

(Ellipses in original)

The juxtaposition of this brief text with the opening sonnet stanza ("Catching a bus at Victoria Station") points up some contrasts. Most obviously, where "Lord Mountjoy," the English baron most responsible for the defeat of Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, in the first years of the seventeenth century, arrives with the accoutrements of power, Montague travels to Tyrone both in lower-class conveyance and through an architectural figure for the British imperial rule consolidated by Mountjoy. We also have here two forms of textual memory: the prose account Montague draws from the *Ulster Herald* and the lyrical account he composes. The prose narrates a triumphal British arrival and settlement in a thoroughly defeated Tyrone; Mountjoy "could ride easily" because O'Neill and his resistance had been eliminated. Against this account, Montague sets his own less comfortable return and emphasizes the cultural, rather than the military, "defeat" of Ulster by the "dour, despoiled inheritance" of the British. And he does so in the form that had, at the time of Mountjoy's arrival by

coach, risen to greater prominence than any other form in the history of English lyric poetry, the form inextricably associated with the Elizabethan age of which both Mountjoy and the defeat of O'Neill were parts. What is the significance of this formal choice for the poem's meditation on how history is written? On the one hand, Montague, an Irish Catholic poet of Northern Ireland, casts his politicized and culturally critical response in the sonnet form bequeathed by the empire whose cultural presence he finds so deadening. He writes in the voice of the long-ago victors. On the other hand, Montague occupies the lyrical space of Britishness and conducts there his own interpretation of the victory the prose glosses trumpet. He enacts the power of poetry that he will suggest later in the canto.

The relationship and relative power of marginal glosses, prose passages, and lyrics are fairly straightforward in "Home Again." In "The Bread God," the sequence's third canto, these are much more difficult to determine, but this confusion yields a deeper and more powerful embodiment of historiographical conflict. "The Bread God" includes three subtitled poems: "Christmas Morning," "Penal Rock: Altamuskin," and "An Ulster Prophecy." These three are preceded by three other texts. The canto opens with a four-line, rhymed stanza set in italics and centered at the top of the page; a first-person speaker (the poet?) describes the scene at a church, where "men with caps in hand kneel stiffly" before a shrine (1972: 26). This is followed by a prose extract from a letter sent by the Belfast County Lodge of the Independent Loyal Orange Institution (a Protestant and Loyalist fraternal organization) to the British Prime Minister to protest Britain's possible entry into the European Common Market. The Orangemen protest this contemplated entry into Europe because it would subordinate the British monarch to an assembly "the membership of which is composed of people not of the Reformed Faith." Like the glosses in "Home Again," this passage is set flush to the left margin of the page, and it is in Roman type, though smaller than the Roman type in which the sequence's poems are set. Finally, Montague includes a seventy-five-word quotation from William Carleton's description of the midnight celebration of Christmas by Catholic peasants in nineteenth-century Tyrone. Like the opening lyric, the passage from Carleton is italicized; it is, though, like the Orangemen's letter, set in smaller type. These framing texts offer three points of view on local piety. More than this, they exemplify three modes of documenting that piety. The stage is set for the poems that

make up the canto, two of which also juxtapose different texts and voices. But Montague is up to more here than establishing a sense of what is to come, thematically and formally. “Home Again” made clear that short prose extracts flush to the left were “history” and that longer lyrical passages in the center of the page were “poetic” commentary from the point of view of the poet. No such clarity about figure and ground, center and margin, is available in “The Bread God.” In addition to establishing the canto’s topic and way of proceeding, Montague also establishes here the complication of which voice has priority or a claim to centrality.

This instability is important because we could, without it, read the canto’s longest poem – “Christmas Morning” – as making a simple, if implicit, claim for the superior authority of the poet’s first-person observation (Garvaghey’s Catholics taking Communion on Christmas morning) against the polemical screed of a Protestant pamphlet (in which this very act of Communion is condemned as idolatry). Certainly, most readers will find the depiction of humble “crowds for communion” gathered prayerfully for “the advent of the flesh-graced Word” more sympathetic than the typographically shrill rant:

ROME MEANS ABSORPTION
UNIFORMITY MEANS TYRANNY
APISTS = PAPISTS.

(1972: 28)

But the juxtaposition of Montague’s lyric stanzas and the pamphlet also, and more importantly, compares two ways of conceiving history. The communicants at Mass participate in a long and continuous tradition whose rituals bring the past (the Incarnation, but also all the Masses celebrated at this Tyrone church over the centuries) into the present (with its cigarettes, politicians, and football matches). In a typical backward look, their gathering is likened to “shepherd and angel/On that first morning,” and the sameness of this Christmas is emphasized. Against this, the pamphlet takes an eschatological perspective, looking not to the Nativity but to the end of days, identifying the Catholic Church with the “whore of Babylon” from the Book of Revelation. Moreover, the pamphlet marshals historical “facts” into a narrative justifying the virulent anti-Catholicism of its Loyalist authors:

LOYALTISTS REMEMBER!
MILLIONS *have been* MURDERED *for refusing to* GROVEL
Before Rome's Mass-Idol: THE HOST!
King Charles I and his Frog Queen Henrietta GLOAT *in their letters*
that they have almost EXTERMINATED THE PROTESTANTS
OF IRELAND
The PRIESTS *in every* PARISH *were told to record* HOW MANY KILLED!
Under ROGER MOORE *and* SIR PHELM O'NEIL
Instruments of ROME
40,000 loyal protestants were MASSACRED *like game-fowl*
IN ONE NIGHT
Cromwell went to Ireland
TO STOP
The Catholics murdering Protestants!

As he did in “Home Again,” Montague sets the “British” culture of the Loyalists against the local culture of the Northern Catholics, but here he translates the difference into not only competing narratives but also competing ways of narrating.

But both narratives, and by implication perhaps also both ways of narrating, are undercut by the prose excerpt from a letter sent by Montague’s uncle (a Jesuit priest, to whom the canto is dedicated). “*Yes, I remember Carleton’s description of Christmas in Tyrone,*” the passage begins, but the correspondent emphasizes all that had changed between the time of Carleton’s observations and that of his own experience, when “*Religion was at a pretty low ebb*” (italics in original). The apparently simple contrast between lyric and document, between observation and polemic, between traditional continuity and historical rupture is complicated. On the one hand, the piety on display in the lyric stanzas might be overstated, while on the other hand, the savagery in the pamphlet excerpts might be under-justified. To arrive at even this conclusion, though, is to privilege the uncle’s letter – one memory, one way of remembering – over the others, and as we saw in the selection and arrangement of texts that precede “Christmas Morning,” we cannot really justify such a reading.

The key to Montague’s staging of these multiple points of view lies in the canto’s subtitle: “A Collage of Religious Misunderstandings.” No one, it seems, has unquestionable access to historical truth. The formal principle that undergirds this canto – collage – enacts the historiographical insight Montague develops thematically. In collage,

the artist assembles gathered, preexisting material, sometimes also adding elements composed for the work. A typical collage might include textual and pictorial fragments taken from a variety of sources; these are juxtaposed or even layered so that some parts are obscured by others. Collaged elements are also often altered not only by being fragmented and recontextualized but also with the addition of paint. As a collage, “The Bread God” assembles a welter of material, but does so in a way that makes difficult the delineation of figure from ground, of central from marginal, of text from commentary or gloss. In this way, the canto performs the destabilization suggested by Montague’s uncle in his letter from Melbourne; just as this memory of religion’s declining importance subverts the piety of the Catholic faithful gathered on Christmas morning and the polemic of the Protestant pamphleteers, the unstable relationships among the textual bits and pieces that make up the canto subvert any sense in which one or another narrative is authorized. More than the narratives themselves, what the collage undercuts is our secure sense of which *kind* of historical narrative – the pamphlet’s apocalyptic marshaling of historical “facts,” the lyric stanzas’ meditations on images of tradition, the personal memoir’s generalization from individual experience – has the force of the poem behind it.

To point all this out is not to suggest that Montague takes no position on any of these issues. *The Rough Field* is an attempt, among other things, to articulate a historical narrative (or several of them) and to justify the position of the poet as one who remembers in a culture of forgetting and who offers a sustaining vision to a culture of superficial satisfactions. Much of this work comes together in the fourth canto, “A Severed Head,” whose key image condenses the history of imperial violence and the mythic power of poetic speech. As he does elsewhere in the sequence, Montague weaves the history of the English subjugation of Tyrone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with his own experience in the region’s landscape both in the narrative present of the 1960s and in the time of his childhood thirty years earlier. These two strands start off separate – the historical contained in marginal epigraphs and glosses and, the contemporary in centered stanzas – but over the course of the canto, they are brought together. The synthesis is at once most important and most effective when the poet sets out to read the traces of the past in the local landscape. “All around,” Montague writes, “shards of a lost tradition” (1972: 34). As “shards” suggests, the traces are, at least at first, illegible:

The whole landscape a manuscript
We had lost the skill to read.
A part of our past disinherited.
(1972: 34–5)

The trope of a legible landscape, of an inextricable interweaving of land and language, is one we touched on in our earlier discussion of Seamus Heaney's place-name poems. For Montague, as for Heaney, poetry offers the possibility of at least partially recovering the lost tradition, and both poets begin with language itself (a proper beginning for an artist whose material is language). Montague works back into Irish history first by working back from Anglicized names to their Irish roots: "Tyrone" becomes "*Tir Eoghain*: Land of Owen." Where Heaney, in "Anahorish" and "Broagh," focuses on language as it names the land, though, Montague recalls instead the specific historical events whose traces he sees on the Tyrone countryside. Though "the war-cry is swallowed/In swirls of black rain and fog," he recites the names and dates, the marches and betrayals, the attacks and defenses, the victories and defeats in a way that reverses the loss of "skill to read," the loss of the events and their significances.

The intertwined recoveries of language, history, heritage, and identity are enabled by poetry, and Montague most powerfully establishes the relationship between his art and the history that at once necessitates and enables it through the image of the severed head. Thomas Redshaw Dillon has written of the importance of this image for Montague, both in *The Rough Field* and elsewhere in his work; he argues that the sequence's key themes, especially "the loss of language, the political dissolution of a culture," are "distilled in the symbol of '*a severed head/With a grafted tongue*'" (2003: 183–4; italics in original). The image is an especially effective one for Montague's purposes because it draws together the historical specificity of the English conquest of Ireland and mythic stories of oracular and poetic speech in multiple cultures. The specific resonance is made clear in the canto's epigraph and its title illustration, both of which Montague takes from John Derricke's 1581 volume, *The Image of Irelande, with A Discoverie of Woodkarne*. According to Montague's preface, Derricke "seems to have been an English artist who came to Ireland as a retainer of Sir Henry Sidney," who conducted military campaigns against the O'Neills of Ulster in the 1570s. The woodcuts in Derricke's book, which provide the illustrations for each canto in *The Rough Field*,

were, again according to Montague, “thought to be based on sketches made by Derricke during Sidney’s campaigns, and may well be the only eye-witness accounts of the Ulster wars” (1972: 9). The illustration for “A Severed Head” depicts three armored English soldiers, each carrying a sword and a severed head. The canto’s first epigraph, a quotation from Derricke, suggests the provenance of those heads:

To see a souldiour toze a Karne, O Lord it is a wonder!
And eke what care he tak’th to part the head from neck asunder.

The soldiers seem to be carrying the heads of “woodkarnes,” Irish fighters whose tactics would earn them, in contemporary idiom, the label “guerillas.” These are being paraded triumphantly, two on the points of the soldiers’ swords. The figure of the severed head, then, stands in for the history of Irish subjugation to English military power.

But the history of poetry is full of severed heads, and these, too, speak in the “grafted tongue” Montague claims for the symbol. Perhaps most famous among these is the head of Orpheus, the paragon of the supremely gifted lyric poet. After his failure to redeem Eurydice, Orpheus refuses to play or sing; enraged by his refusal, a group of nymphs and celebrants tear the poet apart. The head of Orpheus is thrown into the sea, where it continues to sing and prophesy. Poetry’s capacity to continue after violence, to sing truths (Orpheus’s head becomes an oracle), comes to Montague’s severed head through this legendary inheritance. But the inheritance also has an Irish accent. Dillon quotes scholar Anne Ross on the Celtic tradition of venerating the head “as a symbol of divinity and the powers of the otherworld” and writes that stories of “the head’s ability to sing or speak with art and intelligence after have been cut from the body” are to be found in Irish poems like “The Dirge of Fothod Canainne” and “The Battle of Allen” as well as in the myth of Orpheus (2003: 176).

The severed head that continues to speak serves, for Montague, as a figure for himself as poet and for poetry in general. Over the course not only of the canto but also of the sequence, the symbol recovers various intersecting losses and ruptures: Montague’s childhood stammer, the imposition of English on Irish speakers, the histories lost when place-names and family names were Anglicized, the cultural losses entailed by the “dour” inheritance of Victorian Belfast and Protestant Ulster, the loss of population to emigration (including that of Montague’s own father, whose life as a Brooklyn subway worker is, in “The Fault,” also compre-

hended in the severed head image), and, finally, the loss of Ireland itself to the imperial conquest of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In terms of the poem's implicit historiographical argument, the symbol of the severed head captures the simultaneity of rupture and continuity, of loss and recovery, and of fact and myth. Rather than resolve the positions set against each other and effectively troubled throughout the sequence – thematically and also bibliographically – Montague holds them in a tension whose productivity is manifest in the tenth and final canto (it is followed by a brief epilogue), “The Wild Dog Rose.” Going to take his leave of an old woman who had seemed, during his childhood, to be a frightening hag, Montague learns her story (of terrible abuse and suffering) and comes, through that knowledge, to see her as “no longer harsh, [but] a human being/merely, hurt by event” (1972: 78). Legend is corrected (but not canceled) by truth. The past is kept present by the poet's acts of attention conducted in and through language. Most of all, the poet's diction balances departure, forgetting, and denial against location, memory, and acceptance.

What is implicit (if powerfully present) in Montague's *The Rough Field* is explicit in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990). The competition among historical narratives told from the points of view of military and imperial victors and vanquished; the inextricability of “history” from myth, legend, religion, literature, and rhetoric; and the claims for moral or veridical superiority advanced by and through different modes of historical narration are the very fabric of Walcott's long poem. Even the poem's title contests and complicates questions of historical and narrative origins. *Omeros* is the Greek name for Homer, so the title suggests Walcott's debt to, and his poem's citation of, the European classical tradition. At the same time, Walcott glosses the title within the poem in a way that grounds it in the polyglot and colonized Caribbean:

O was the conch shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes
and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.

(1990: 14)

Critics have addressed many of the complex and intersecting questions that arise from Walcott's long and rich poem, and elsewhere in this book, we look to the poem for its handling of other issues. Here, we want to

focus on how Walcott stages questions of historiography in clear (though not simple) ways.

In the case of Walcott, we are fortunate to have the poet's explicit thoughts about history and the writing of history in his important 1974 essay, "The Muse of History." Where Montague is at pains to recover the history of the vanquished that would otherwise disappear under the narrative of the victors, Walcott is suspicious of such motivations and is skeptical about whether this attitude can produce anything other than "a literature of recrimination and despair" (1998: 37). In the attempt to make literature serve historical truth, he writes, writers in the Caribbean have tended to make "a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters." Instead of either the history written by the victors or that composed by the vanquished, Walcott finds, in poetry, the opportunity to construct a synthetic narrative. We should make clear that by that adjective – "synthetic" – we mean both an artificial narrative, made rather than found, and a narrative that puts together ("synthesizes") elements that might be opposed ("antithetical") to each other. The historical givens of slavery and colonialism must be transformed, the stories not repeated but revised (seen anew) in their retelling. To base literary truth on shame or revenge, for Walcott, is to court "morbidity," to produce something as dead on the page as its subjects are dead in time. Instead, he proposes a sensibility "not marinated in the past" but new. While traces of melancholy will remain as "chemical survivals in the blood," the new and healthy sensibility will survive both "the malaria of nostalgia and the delirium of revenge" (1998: 54). This sensibility is the product of mixed and mingled literary voices and traditions, none imposed (as if by a powerful colonizer) but instead mastered (by the powerful poet). In *Omeros*, Walcott works to effect just such a synthesis, and along the way he plays out the theses and antitheses that he finds wanting and, perhaps, morbid.

Omeros is one long poem, but it is also a poem made up of parts. It consists of seven books. It is also subdivided into chapters (there are sixty-four of them). Many chapters are further divided into numbered sections. And the poem is made up of more than 2700 three-line stanzas. Working within and cutting across the division into books and chapters are several identifiable plots, and it is through the development and interrelation of these that Walcott works through the poem's historiographic questions. At the center of the poem is a love triangle: a St. Lucian fisherman, Achille, loves a woman named Helen, but he has lost her, at the beginning of the

poem, to his friend Hector. The names of the principal characters in this plot draw our attention to the *Odyssey* as a key reference point, as does the name of Philoctete, who, like his Greek namesake, suffers from a wound that refuses to heal. At the same time, though, the stories of both Achille and Philoctete involve confrontations with more recent and pressing history in the form of the Middle Passage, slavery, and colonialism. Confrontations with the past also inform two other important plots in the poem. In one of these, an expatriate couple – Dennis Plunkett, a British veteran of the Second World War, and his Irish wife, Maud – are driven by their love for the island to “write” its history, Maud by stitching a quilt representing St. Lucia’s birds and Plunkett by composing the history of Helen, who has worked for the couple as a domestic (and whose name was once that given to the island itself). Plunkett’s foray into this local history follows upon his genealogical research into his own family, which serves as an image for British colonial history. Finally, the poem’s narrator (who closely resembles Walcott himself) returns to the island (his birthplace) where he meets the past – his own and the island’s – in various forms.

Like Montague, Walcott is interested less in granting any historical narrative priority than in showing how the multiple narratives complicate each other. Where Montague establishes this instability of authority through the techniques of collage, Walcott performs with historical narratives an effect of oscillation like the one we found his poem’s title performing. The various histories recounted in the poem, and the various narrative tropes that inform them, all find their way, ultimately, to the island and the facts of slavery and colonialism. In the case of Plunkett’s genealogical research, for example, the fate of his namesake, a midshipman in the eighteenth century, is determined by his involvement in a battle for control of the island that will come to be called St. Lucia; he is killed when his ship, the *Marlborough*, is fired upon by the French *Ville de Paris* (1990: 86). On the one hand, this founding narrative has consequences for Plunkett in the present; the lost ancestor is linked to an absent heir (the Plunketts are childless), and the way both are grounded in St. Lucia leads Plunkett to Helen’s history as a kind of compensation. On the other hand, an offhand mention in the story of Midshipman Plunkett of the slave, Afolabe, introduces the ancestor whom Achille will meet in his own fever-dream confrontation with the past. After an act of bravery in battle, Afolabe is rechristened Achilles by an admiral. “To keep things simple,” Afolabe allows himself to be called by this foreign name, but in doing so he initiates the process of cultural forgetting that his spirit will condemn in a later

scene. When we meet him briefly in Book Two, Afolabe is a slave in the Caribbean who was himself stolen from Africa; when he and his fellows, who have hauled a cannon to the island's heights, watch the surf "chaining the black rocks," some think "of home," of their own captivity and enforced migration. While the main document of Plunkett's research is produced in and through English institutions like the War Office, the content of the narrative is drawn as if against its will to the fundamental fact of the Middle Passage.

This foundation is clearest in the crucial episode of Book Three, in which Achille, suffering sunstroke, experiences a return to Africa. Bidden by the voice of God, he follows a sea swift across the ocean floor and discovers his ancestral people. There he meets his "father," Afolabe, a leader of the people before their enslavement. Walcott writes the conversation between these two in the form of a theatrical dialog, as if to set it apart and underscore its thematic importance. At the heart of their colloquy is the dynamic of memory and forgetting that is one key element of Walcott's historiographical thinking in *Omeros*. For Achille, the correspondence between objects' and persons' names and some traditional meaning has been lost: "In the world I come from/we accept the sounds we were given" (1990: 138). For Afolabe, before he initiates precisely the acceptance of ascribed identities Achille describes, knowledge of names' meanings, their organic relationship to the things they name in this specific culture, is existence itself, and to forget is to cease to be:

if you're content with not knowing what our names mean,

then I am not Afolabe, your father, and you look through
my body as the light looks through a leaf. I am not here
or a shadow. And you, nameless son, are only the ghost

of a name.

(1990: 138–39)

And so, in his dream vision, Achille recovers the language, the lore, and the whole array of cultural practices of his people. Throughout his sojourn in Africa, though, Achille is troubled by another memory he cannot repress, by the knowledge of the fate awaiting his people. And when that fate befalls them, he is helpless to prevent it; is, indeed, caught up in it; and endures, with his people, the passage in slave ships from Africa to the Caribbean.

In Walcott's narration (Chapter XXVIII), the Middle Passage is an epic of forgetting. Cut off from their land, from their occupations, from the

families, clans, and tribes, the Africans lose their identities until “each carried/the nameless freight of himself into the other world” (1990: 150). Along on this journey, though, Achille remembers (though, paradoxically, part of what he remembers is precisely this forgetting, this cultural obliteration). Once back in his own life on St. Lucia and recovered from fever, once back in his own occupation as a fisherman and in his own fraught relationship with Helen, Achille is able to integrate the experience of his vision into his existence in the present. Having been immersed, not only, and perhaps not even actually, in the lost culture of his ancestors but also in the history that wiped out that culture, Achille recovers aspects of himself that were, before, invisible and unavailable.

Immersion is also key to Philoctete’s recovery, and, as for Achille, it is immersion in the painful particularities of colonial history that is required. As Michael Thurston has written in a longer discussion of *Omeros*, the dominant narrative structure to which Walcott recurs in his historiographical thinking is the descent (especially the hero’s descent into the Underworld). Philoctete suffers from a sore on his leg; the wound refuses to heal. Just as the angry Achille in conflict with Hector recalls Homer’s *Iliad*, the wounded and unhealed Philoctete recalls the Trojan War (the story of Philoctetes is treated most fully by the tragedian Sophocles). We discuss in Chapter 5 the difficulties that must be surmounted by Ma Kilman, the “obeah woman” who sets out to cure Philoctete, so we will not dwell on them here. What she must find, though, to bring about the cure is a plant grown from the seed a sea swift carried to St. Lucia from Africa; the key ingredient symbolizes the same African culture and history into which Achille immerses himself during his vision. More than this, though, the potion Ma Kilman brews from this plant and other ingredients is mixed and simmered in a cauldron once used in the processing of sugar. The cure of Philoctete’s unhealing wound, then, lies in his immersion not only in Africa but also, and just as importantly, in the intertwined histories of slavery and colonial exploitation, in the history of black labor in the Caribbean to produce the sugar marketed by white European planters and merchants.

For both Achille and Philoctete, a past stained with shame must be discovered, composed, and fully engaged. The historical narratives at stake here are those written from the vantage point of the vanquished, recovered in fragments, and regrown from abandoned seeds. They are narratives of cultural conquest and enforced servitude, but they provide resources for present and future transcendence of such conditions. In the cases of Achille

and Philoctete, the forgetting at once willed by the colonizer and undertaken by the colonized must be overcome; when it is, the narratives produced are more powerful and sustaining than the institutionally composed ones exemplified by Plunkett's genealogy.

The history that is crucial for the poem's narrator is also grounded in St. Lucia, though just as for Achille and Philoctete that grounding embeds the specific history in a broader set of narratives. A world traveler and highly regarded writer (like Walcott himself), the narrator has returned to the island of his birth after long sojourns in Europe and America, long engagement with the monuments of those cultures (his travels are recounted in Book Five). He is called to St. Lucia by the figure Omeros, who, like the title of Walcott's poem, syncretically combines European and Afro-Caribbean cultures, and this call comes to him through the witnessing of the massacre of Sioux at Wounded Knee in North Dakota. That massacre is described in terms that strongly echo the raid on Afolabe's people during Achille's visionary visit to the African past. The resemblance between these stories works together with other resemblances between Achille's narrative and that of the narrator to suggest that these stories are really versions of the same underlying narrative: dispossession and destruction perpetrated by European colonists upon native peoples – in Africa, North America, and the Caribbean – initiates cultural forgetting that must be partially remedied through sustained confrontation with the painful past.

We have noted the similarity between the narrator and Achille, but the differences are important as well for a full understanding of Walcott's historiographical explorations in *Omeros*. In his vision, Achille encounters his "father," Afolabe. In *his* visionary wandering along the waterfront of Castries once he has returned to St. Lucia, the narrator encounters the shade of his father who, like Walcott's father, is named Warwick. Afolabe bears an African name that, having been forgotten and subsumed by a European name, must be remembered and restored to its place. Warwick bears an English name that, for the narrator, a poet informed by the English tradition, must be engaged and accepted. These differences between Achille's story and the narrator's help us to see the latter as concerned with the writing of a specific kind of history: literary history. And Walcott meditates upon literary historiography by at once inhabiting and revising very old and familiar stories of encounters with the past. In addition to familial and colonial histories (and these are both powerfully present and important in the narrator's "plot"), the narrator confronts literary

history and its writing in scenes of encounter that are vocational, that have, that is, the nature of the poet's work as their primary concern.

Indeed, *Omeros* is framed by the episodes in which the narrator meets the past. In the concluding chapters of Book One (Chapters XII and XIII), the narrator visits his childhood home and meets there the shade of his father. The two walk through the sunny streets of Castries talking of Shakespeare, of Warwick's literary ambition, and of the English tradition the narrator has inherited ("It's that Will you inherit"). The "bastard" product of an interracial and colonial background, the narrator's father was excluded from what he calls "the foreign machinery known as Literature" (1990: 68). His example, though, and the tradition figured by Shakespeare, inspired and enabled the narrator's own literary career. Such a story is the commonly told one of artistic vocation. For Walcott, though, the episode's burden is to complicate the literary historical narrative that traces the Shakespearean tradition through the centuries and even into the hands of a St. Lucian poet. Warwick does not let the conversation rest at books. Instead, he has the narrator walk with him to the wharf, where he recalls women carrying coal from the hills onto an ocean liner in the harbor. If the liner is fame, Warwick says, then the task of the poet is to link his work with that of the women who load the ship with coal. Warwick's interweaving of literary and labor history is worth quoting at length because it is an apt summation both of the narrator's task in *Omeros* and Walcott's over the course of his career:

Kneel to your load, then balance staggering feet
and walk up that coal ladder as they do in time,
one bare foot after the next in ancestral rhyme.

Because Rhyme remains the parentheses of palms
shielding a candle's tongue, it is the language's
desire to enclose the loved world in its arms;

or heft a coal-basket; only by its stages
like those groaning women will you achieve that height
whose wooden planks in couplets lift your pages

higher than those hills of infernal anthracite.

(1990: 75)

Notice the way Walcott links poetry and the women's work: "feet" indicates at once the metrical feet that make up the poem's lines and the women's feet "staggering" under their loads of coal; rhyme is language's means for holding, whether the "loved world" or the "coal-basket"; like

the planks that lead the women to the liner's hull, the stanzas build a structure for the poet to ascend. Only through enacting in his work the history of their work can the poet rise. "Your own work," Warwick concludes, "owes them // because the couplet of those multiplying feet/ made your first rhymes" (1990: 75).

The completion of the frame comes near the end of Book Twelve (and near the end of the poem) in Chapter LVIII. Here, the narrator is led by the shape-shifting Homer figure (at once the local poet, Seven Seas, the Greek Omeros, and all poets in between) on a descent into the island's volcano, Soufriere, where he witnesses the torments endured by all who have betrayed the island. This narrative outline might sound familiar; it is the story of Dante's *Inferno* and, before that, of the descent of Aeneas in the Avernus. The narrator's encounter with his father, and Achille's with his, also recalls this ancient and oft-repeated episode (Aeneas goes to the Underworld in order to consult the shade of his father, Anchises), but where the emphasis in those moments of *Omeros* was on the father-son engagement, Walcott emphasizes, in the Soufriere descent, the hellish qualities of the Underworld. He does so in order to implicate the narrator himself, for at the climactic passage the narrator first sees the poets in their pit – "Selfish phantoms" who "smiled at their similes" (1990: 293) – and then, when rescued by Omeros from slipping into the pit with them, is grabbed and accosted by a shade, unnamed but in all likelihood that of Warwick, who judges the narrator against the charge his father delivered in Book One and finds him to have failed. "You tried to render/their lives," the "ice-matted head" tells the narrator, but he goes on to say the narrator has been distracted by the other traditions emblemized by the "sightless stone," the animated bust of the blind Homer that has, as one among several shapes taken by the guide, accompanied the narrator.

Of interest to us as we think about the poem's thinking about historiography are both the content and the structure of this episode. The *what* of the passage – the portrait of poets as self-absorbed and vain, the charge that the narrator has seen the working women on whose labor he was to model his own work only through the "sightless eyes" of European literary traditions – continues the connection between Caribbean history, a history of colonial exploitation, and literature. The *how* of the passage, though, emphasizes (by enacting) the shaping force *literary* history exerts on the writing of any history. Walcott casts this moment of poetic self-reference and self-critique in the terza rima stanza drawn from the very tradition he criticizes himself (in the guise of his narrator) for distracting

himself with. The history writing Walcott undertakes, therefore, is self-aware and self-critical, content neither with the received and settled narratives produced by the powerful and their institutions nor with the aggrieved and unsettling narratives set against these from “below.” The history that heals and enables the characters in *Omeros* is a history like *Omeros* himself, like *Omeros* itself: shifting, multivocal, unstable, unequivocal about pain and injustice, unwilling to rest comfortably with simple blame, cognizant of resemblances across space and time, cautious about generalizing from those resemblances to make “universal” claims.

In this chapter, we have concentrated on longer poems or sequences because in these we can see the complexities of historiography more easily than when these are compressed in shorter lyrics (and we would recommend to readers such additional long poems and sequences as Randolph Healy’s *Arbor Vitae* and Peter Riley’s *Excavations*). Many poets, though, have undertaken questions of historiography in shorter poems. Elsewhere in this book, for example, we look at how history intersects with contemplation of the landscape in lyric poems by Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland and how ideas of history and its narration inform sonnets by Paul Muldoon and Tony Harrison. Readers interested in historiographical explorations in lyric poems might examine the work of Eiléan Ni Chuilleanáin, whose short poem “Seamus Murphy, Died October 2nd 1975” reads through the material text of a tombstone to problems of historical knowing, or that of Jon Silkin, whose 1974 “Astringencies” reads the weather of contemporary York for traces of the medieval city’s massacre of Jews in 1190, or Tom Pickard’s 1994 “A History Lesson from My Son on Hadrian’s Wall,” whose very title suggests multiple layers of historical significance and interpretation and whose text attends to the interaction among these layers. Any list of historiographical lyrics in postwar British and Irish poetry will be at once enormous and incomplete, but the distinction we would maintain is that between poems that name or narrate a historical event and those that self-consciously stage what Jameson describes, in a phrase we quoted earlier, as “the contact between the historian’s mind in the present and a given synchronic cultural complex from the past” (1988: 157). As we have seen with our examples in this chapter, such staging often seems to generate longer poetic forms, and in the next chapter we address the question of the long poem explicitly.

Varieties of the Long Poem

The long poem is a staple of the literary tradition. While the lyric seems the dominant mode (and the page the dominant length) of poetry from the English adaptation of the sonnet in the sixteenth century to the present, poets throughout these centuries have also been drawn to the long poem, especially as a means of demonstrating their seriousness and their worthiness to be considered part of the tradition they have inherited. While the anthologies of English poetry are predominantly filled with lyrics, they also include selections from the long poems by which many poets measured their own success, from *The Canterbury Tales* to *Paradise Lost*, from *The Faerie Queen* to *The Prelude*.

The question whether the long poem can *survive* has exercised English poets ever since Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Poetic theory has often considered the epic poem as the crucial proof of a poet's power and importance, but the post-Miltonic history of the British and Irish epic poem has been littered with fragments, incompletions, and failures. In the eighteenth century Alexander Pope's attempts to write a "British" epic devolved into the mock-epics of *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* and his translations into heroic couplets of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; in the nineteenth century William Wordsworth's philosophical poem *The Recluse* (the poem for which *The Prelude* was intended as a prelude) was left unfinished, as were John Keats' two *Hyperions*; in the first half of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot successfully completed *The Waste Land*'s but Pound's failure to complete *The Cantos* looks more typical. Moreover, as poetry since the Romantics has become ever more synonymous with

the lyric, it is not simply the “epic” that has been under threat, but the very idea of the long poem itself.

A history of poetry since the eighteenth century has to acknowledge all the new representational forms that have confronted poets and against which they have had to justify, either implicitly or explicitly, their practice. Indeed, the list of these forms functions as shorthand for the massive sociohistorical transformations of the past two centuries: the novel, the mass newspaper, film, radio, television, video, computer, and so on. Since the nineteenth century, the novel has provided the most important challenge in relation to the long poem for Romantic and post-Romantic poets because it appears to be able to perform a number of tasks more effectively. First, it seems to depict character better, particularly characters who are embedded in the new social world of modern, industrial society. Second, it can describe more accurately the reality of the newly emergent middle-class world of commodities. Third, it can construct more complicated, believable, and understandable plots that seem to mirror the complexity of a world of increasing class stratification. Fourth, it can more easily incorporate the enormous and increasing multiplicity of specialized discourses that modernity generates (as George Eliot realized in *Middlemarch*, if a novelist wants to talk about medicine, she just has to include a doctor in her cast of characters). Fifth, the novel seems to be able to represent the modern city more accurately and easily. Sixth, the novel can represent historical change more convincingly. Seventh, the novel has a much bigger audience. Eighth and finally, novelists can make money.

It often appears to Romantic and post-Romantic poets that the only thing that poetry can perform better is the portrayal of subjective intensity and by the end of the nineteenth century, the subjective lyric becomes virtually synonymous with poetry. As a consequence, one important strand of the history of twentieth-century poetry, especially postwar poetry, has been the attempts by poets to break from the constraints of the subjective or emotive lyric. In this chapter, we consider five varieties of the postwar long poem. (Although we do discuss some long poems elsewhere in this book, those discussions focus on some other aspect of the work; here we treat the length and substance of the poem itself as the salient feature.) The roots of the long poem reach back to the narratives, whether of universal or emblematic figures (like Chaucer’s) or of the poet as an individual whose experience takes on greater significance through the meditation on that experience in the poem (like Wordsworth’s). We begin, then, with an example of a contemporary long poem in this vein, which we are calling

the *phenomenological long poem*: W.S. Graham's *The Nightfishing*. Most modernists who took up the long poem as the way to test their mettle and to demonstrate the validity of their poetic experiments looked back beyond these narratives to the tradition of the epic. Against the coherence and unity of the traditional epics, however, they placed the fragmentation and juxtaposition that captured the brokenness of their own postwar (post-First World War) world, though often retaining narrative or thematic continuities. The ambition to construct such *fragmented epics* has continued since the 1950s, in the work of Basil Bunting, for example (whose *Briggflatts* is a text to which many contemporary poets refer). Our exhibit of such a poem is Peter Reading's *Ukulele Music*. The long poem, though, is available not only to poets with philosophical ambitions like Graham's or modernist proclivities like Reading's; the form has also attracted a number of poets because the resources of narrative have been seen as offering energy and renewal to a lyric tradition whose typical modes and moves have grown enervated. The 1980s and 1990s saw the publication of several *long narrative poems* (some book length), and we discuss a handful – by Blake Morrison, James Fenton, Andrew Motion, and Jackie Kay. Many poets have steered a course between the discontinuities of the fragmented epic and the gestures toward the wholeness of these narrative poems by constructing *lyric sequences* in which each constituent poem reaches its own provisional closure but in which those moments are complicated by the fact that each poem is a part of a whole. Finally, we consider the possibly paradigmatic publication form of the postwar decades, the *slim volume* of verse, as a kind of long poem, one in which individual poems might be read at once as autonomous wholes and as contributions to an overarching and significant (nonnarrative) structure.

The Phenomenological Long Poem

Phenomenology originates in the twentieth century with the writings of Edmund Husserl and is continued most influentially by Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As Shaun Gallagher observes, it investigates “the ways things appear in conscious experience” and seeks to describe how phenomena are experienced by, in, and to consciousness (2012: 8). Accordingly, it emphasizes what David Woodruff Smith calls “the first-person point of view” and “the structures of consciousness” (quoted by Gallagher 2012: 7). In poetic terms, phenomenological poems investigate

how the self comes into being in the world, how it recognizes itself as coming into being, and how it experiences the world. William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* remains the central model for the phenomenological long poem as he revised traditional epic formulas by internalizing them and writing a poem that concerns, in the subtitle's words, "the growth of a poet's mind." Wordsworth's also adapts the long narrative of the quest-romance in which the questor, usually a knight, travels through a wasted and barren land in order to fulfill a quest that will heal the world. Sometimes he quests to rescue an abducted woman, sometimes to destroy an evil creature (the dragon), and sometimes to recover or discover a significant object (the grail). The power of this narrative structure continues into the twentieth century, preeminently in *The Waste Land*, where the quest fails and ends in the exhaustion not only of the questing voice but also of the world that surrounds it. In the Christian tradition these quests have often been allegorical of the larger Christian eschatology of the second coming and of the redeemed Christian pilgrim. In his essay "The Internalization of Quest-Romance," Harold Bloom argues that in the Romantic period, preeminently in Wordsworth, this Christian, predominantly Protestant, quest-romance becomes internalized and, although the narrative structure remains the same, the Christian content becomes evacuated to be replaced by a journey of the self's quest for unity. In the internalized quest-romance, the usual story arc moves from a moment of prelapsarian unification between the self and the outside natural world followed by a fall into self-division and the social world. The story proceeds by highlighting significant and formative moments in the self's development; this leads to some form of greater symbolic unification between the self and the social world. This unification usually occurs at the moment when the self becomes capable of writing the poem that we are reading and that now comes to its end (1970: 3–23).

At the heart of Wordsworth's poem lies a series of epiphanic lyric moments. Wordsworth called these moments "spots of time" and he believed that they combine spatial and temporal registers and function like touchstones in the psyche. There are usually either traumatic or ecstatic moments that, sometimes involuntarily and sometimes voluntarily, return and that guarantee the self's sense of election as a poet. Crucially they involve the sense of the multiple temporal and spatial registers of the self:

A tranquillizing spirit presses now
 On my corporeal frame: so wide appears
 The vacancy between me and those days,

Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
 That, sometimes, when I think of them, I seem
 Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
 And of some other Being.

(2010: 319)

Here Wordsworth articulates the fundamental structure of the phenomenological long poem. First, it investigates the relationship between the past selves and the present self, sometimes seeing an absolute difference between the two, sometimes charting the development from one to the other, and sometimes urging their union. Second, it examines the spatial and temporal relationships between the body and the mind and between the self and the outside world, especially as these relationships manifest themselves as gaps and disjunctions. Third, it tends to use figures of “vacancy” and blankness to describe these spatial and temporal gaps. Fourth, it employs figures of writing to fill the gaps and join the disjunctions. And, more often than not, the completion of the poem represents unification by concluding with lines that are self-referential in nature.

Longer poem after longer poem since Wordsworth has followed this pattern and can be seen as correlating with the centrality of the idea of the self in modern society. Indeed, such poems provide rich and revealing ways of considering how “self-identity” is constructed and formed in contemporary society. In his *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens has argued that there are a number of significant “elements” in modern self-identity. These include the following: “the self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible”; “the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future”; “the reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive”; “self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative”; “the reflexivity of the self extends to the body”; “the life course is seen as a series of ‘passages’”; and “the line of the development is internally referential” (1991: 80). These elements provide a helpful heuristic to map the ways in which phenomenological long poems develop. Furthermore, since Giddens’ elements are primarily formal, the readings they generate will change depending upon the content of the poem. A long poem of a female self, for example, will be different from that of a male self, one of a black self will differ from a white one, a working-class self from a middle-class one, and so on. W.S. Graham’s *The Nightfishing* is one of the first postwar attempts to reimagine this poetic form, and we read it here as a model of how to use Giddens’ terms. We also

hope it can function as a model of how to apply larger theoretical models from another discipline to the particularity of texts.

1. “The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible.”

Graham’s *The Nightfishing* narrates the self’s journey to self-discovery and actualization by using as its conceit the night voyage of a deep-sea trawling fisherman. The first section of the poem begins with the “quay night bell” being “struck” and the speaking “I” leaving his bed to walk to the dock and his ship. The section emphasizes the self’s emergence from nothingness:

Now within the dead
Of night and the dead
Of my life I hear
My name called from far out.
(2004: 105)

Positioned between these two deaths, the self surfaces into consciousness with the awareness that the form of his “name” awaits. Tony Lopez points out the importance of the passive voice at the start here (2004: 66–7), which changes to active when the “I” begins to move and make itself in this world:

I bent to the lamp. I cupped
My hand to the glass chimney.
Yet it was a stranger’s breath
From out of my mouth that
Shed the light.
(2004: 106)

The self’s journey begins with its temporal division into two (“my mouth,” “stranger’s breath”) and a corresponding creation of a reflexive consciousness. The moment signifies the entry of the self into the world of its own making since, in terms suggested by French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, the self generates both lack (I am now not one and complete, but rather two and incomplete) and desire (I want to become one and complete, but this desire forces me to create more selves). Accordingly, the section ends by shifting from the initial opening of the speaker’s “name” to the opening of the “present” when he will make what that name means: “The present opens its arms.”

2. “The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future.”

With the creation of this temporal and multiple self, the focus turns to looking at ways in which this multiplicity can be combined and unified. Accordingly, the idea of “development” comes to the fore as the present self seeks to represent itself as organically connected to the past. In the second section of *The Nightfishing*, when the self begins to explore and make its own surroundings, Graham imagines the context of the speaker’s birth and embeds him in a family history:

When I fell down into this place
 My father drew his whole day’s pay,
 My mother lay in a set-in bed,
 The mid-wife threw my bundle away.
 (2004: 107)

The poem then reveals the speaker dressing himself in “the jersey knitted close as nerves” and “mov(ing) off in this changing grace.” The speaker’s turn to the past has revealed that a present place always immediately turns into a past one and provides no fixed place from which to measure past or present selves. The past can be understood only through an anticipated and imagined future, and accordingly, the self’s element becomes “time” that Graham figures as the ocean upon which the nightfisherman trawls.

3. “The reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive.”

Once such poems have structured themselves around the phenomenology of the self, it becomes virtually impossible for them to move out from this structure. As a result, such poems endlessly move from setting up epiphanic moments to experiencing these epiphanic moments, to talking about these epiphanic moments. These moments seem necessarily to become self-referential, and consequently, alongside the continuous mapping the self’s reflexivity, there tends to be an all-pervasive reference to language itself:

In those words through which I move, leaving a cry
 Formed in exact degree and set dead at
 The mingling flood, I am put forward on to

Live water, clad in oil, burnt by salt
To life.

(2004: 109)

This is a complex passage. Continuing the narrative of nightfishing, it portrays a sailor following the commands of the captain (moving to his words) and then repeating them (“a cry/formed in exact degree”) as confirmation; he wears an oilskin, is stung by saltwater, and his actions cause the ship to travel forward faster and to become positioned to sail where the schools of herring are (“the mingling flood” of fish and ocean and the “live water” where the fish can be caught). The passage also places the self within language which Graham sees as being not only necessarily temporal but also a metaphor for the trajectory of the self. Each present word can only be understood in relation to past words and in anticipation of future words. In short, the speaker inhabits a world of language that mediates and structures his consciousness of the outside world.

4. “Self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative.”

Since the self in *The Nightfishing* inhabits a world of language necessarily temporal in nature, the portrayed self emerges from the structure of the sentence itself and, hence, becomes narrative in nature. In phenomenological long poems much of their energy and structure concerns finding an overarching metaphor or allegory for the poem’s narrative of self-creation. In *The Nightfishing*, the story of the fishing voyage generates a series of analogies to the journey of the speaker. This journey, in turn, becomes narrated in two distinct ways. The first discusses the self traveling through time to new experiences: it begins with birth; it leaves home to travel on the ocean of time; it returns home to die; and then the whole cycle begins again. The second charts the journey into the psyche of the self with corresponding images of depth. In this narrative, the speaker travels, perhaps in a dream, into the ocean of his unconscious and brings to light the sources of his creative power (the herrings). Typically, then, such long poems generate a number of different allegorical narratives concerning the self’s development.

5. "The reflexivity of the self extends to the body."

Since the phenomenological long poem concerns the ways in which the speaker perceives the world, the body plays an important part in structuring the poem's description of the self. Often beginning with the idea of the senses and sense impressions, these poems usually move through the various senses – touch, hearing, sight, taste, smell – to construct a body that is in turn seen developmentally and reflexively. In the opening section, for example, Graham moves his speaker from hearing (the "bell") to seeing ("this look"), to touch ("cupped/my hand"), to taste and smell ("salt"). As section three of the poem reaches its central epiphanic moment (the hauling in of the herrings), Graham emphasizes physical activity and, by so doing, links the sense of coherence of self and world with the workings of the body in the world:

I haul slowly
 Inboard the drowning flood as into memory
 Braced at the breathside in my net of nerves.
 (2004: 112)

In phenomenological long poems the central moments occur when the subjective and objective worlds seem to unite. This unification happens, more often than not, through the idea of shared activity. The self works in, on, and through the world which simultaneously shapes the self. Often the poetic language of these moments becomes highly compressed, perhaps through synesthesia, in order to produce an idea of plenitude. Here Graham combines the language of fishing ("haul," "inboard," "net") not only with the language of consciousness ("memory," "nerves") but also with the language of the body ("breathside," "nerves") that emphasizes physical difficulty ("hauled slowly," "braced"). The poem then highlights that this moment of union emerges from the moment of death: the fish are "breathside" and hence gulping air and they are a "drowning flood" as they are pulled into the ship. Consequently, this moment of unity comes into being through the awareness that the self depends upon being finite.

6. "The life course is seen as a series of 'passages.'"

Long poems of this sort are organized around a series of such instants, and each of them usually becomes allegorized as a "passage" that the self encounters and moves through. They always lead from and to somewhere and yet

the poem's self compulsively goes back to them and repeats them. There is, then, a paradox at the heart of these moments (and such long poems) since they emphasize a developmental narrative but are most memorable for these more static moments of unification. For Graham in *The Nightfishing*, these occasions become epitaphic in retrospect because they occur when the self moves out from the social world of the everyday into a world of dense, personal significations. Such occurrences, in turn, not only discredit the everyday world by hollowing it of meaning and intensity, but they also provide justification for the poet's continued inhabiting of this world since they emerge from it. For Graham, writing is both the place within which these moments happen and the process by which they are written into the past. As he writes when the poem draws to its end:

At this place
The eye reads forward as the memory reads back.
At this last word all words change.
All words change in acknowledgment of the last.
Here is their mingling element.
This myself (who but ill resembles me).

(2004: 117)

The poem finishes self-referentially, with Graham writing down the journey.

7. "The line of the development is internally referential."

The structure of the phenomenological long poem ensures that what guarantees the self's development becomes the writing of the poem itself. This produces a strange contradiction: on the one hand, the poems urge the reality and the success of the poetic self; on the other, the mark of its success becomes its fixity into printed words. In addition, the self so produced and marked has to be released into the world of the reader and to stand self-sufficiently away from the poet's self. Graham concludes *The Nightfishing* by exploring this paradox:

So I spoke and died.
So within the dead
Of night and the dead
Of all my life those
Words died and awoke.

(2004: 120)

The poem finally claims that its words and self are reawoken every time a reader enters into the poem's self-enclosed and self-referential loop.

The Fragmented "Epic"

The crucial and formal invention for the development of the fragmented epic occurred by emphasizing brevity and intensity. In a dialectical moment Imagist poetry and poetics revealed that intensity itself can provide a representational solution for the long poem, as exemplified by Pound's famous poem of 1913:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

(1990: 111)

Immediately we notice that Pound has removed both the lyric "I" and a main verb from the poem. Conventional causal relations are also discarded. To make sense of the poem, the reader has to consider the relationship between these three lines. For example, the title concerns the mechanical word; the first line refers to the human; and the second line represents the natural. The poem implies both their connection and their disconnection since the lines could imply metaphoric connections, but they display metonymic disconnections. Do the solitary adjectives qualifying "bough" in the last line highlight the attenuated and ghostly human and mechanical world of the city? Or do they show that even in this metropolitan world of unknown commuters, epiphanic moments can still occur? How does the poem relate to the famous line of epic similes from Homer to Virgil, to Dante, and to Milton that compare the dead in the Underworld to fallen leaves? Should it be considered as a continuation (yet another revision) or as a dismantling (the only Underworld is the man-made mechanical)? The poem seeks to generate an active reader whose role becomes primarily that of a connection maker.

In longer poems made up of such moments, the rapidity of movement from line to line and the loss of any discursive or causal links ensure, as Davie argues, that the basic unit here has become the poetic line itself, rather than the stanza, verse paragraph, couplet, or sentence (1964: 43). This movement to the single unit of the line, the escape from the lyric "I," and the corresponding discovery of even greater intensity suddenly provide

the solution for a poetry that wants to break free from lyric constraints and extend its ability to represent the modern city and self. Pound's 1916 poem "The Lake Isle" (which parodies Yeats's famous lyric, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree") reveals, alongside "In a Station of the Metro," the thematic and formal expansion that the Imagist poetic line enabled. In "The Lake Isle," Pound begins with an invocation, "O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves," then enters "a little tobacco-shop," itemizes its contents ("the little bright boxes," "the loose fragrant cavendish," "the shag," and the "Virginia"), and speaks to "the whores dropping in for a word or two in passing" (Pound 1990: 202).

After Imagism poems such as these can compete with the novel as an exemplary "modern" artistic practice in a number of ways. First, the rapidity of movement from line to line seems more accurately to represent the hurried sense impression of perceiver in a modern city, and it can represent urban character more accurately. Second, poetry can portray history expansively through the almost archaeological layering of language. For example, in "The Lake Isle," there is the classical invocation of the ode ("O God, O Venus, O Mercury"), the Elizabethan plea ("I beseech you"), the nineteenth-century domestic lyric ("the little bright boxes"), and the demotic language of the modern city ("for a flip word and to tidy their hair a bit."). Third, poetry can now include any form of discourse or idiom through the use of quotation. Fourth, this extended use of quotation enables an escape from the constriction of poetry's long tradition: Pound no longer needs to write an ode because gesturing toward it provides enough information. In short, Imagist poetics ensured that poetry's content could expand to include all forms of writing and language. However, this expansion generated a major structural problem itself: how do you control, contain, and justify the poem's extended content?

One of the central figures in the history of the post-Poundian fragmentary epic is Basil Bunting, whose *Briggflatts* has influenced, in direct and indirect ways, a number of British poets working after its publication in 1966. Bunting, who had been published by Pound (in the 1933 *Active Anthology*) and had been singled out by Pound as one struggling "in the desert," had contemplated a long poem for at least ten years before he began *Briggflatts*. Neil Astley alludes to the myth that Bunting finally undertook the poem in order to show the younger poet, Tom Pickard (who had involved Bunting in the Newcastle poetry scene that congregated at Morden Tower), how to write a long poem. As well as Pound and Eliot, his models were the American poets William Carlos Williams (whose *Paterson* synthesized materials from Williams's life with the history of the New Jersey city

that gives the poem its title) and Louis Zukofsky (whose long poem, *A*, drew on musical and older poetic forms to impose structural coherence on a wide range of divergent thematic and source materials). Bunting himself wrote that the “content” of his poem was almost incidental. What was important to him was the form, he claimed, the architectonic structure, and once he determined that, the rest was simply a matter of filling it in.

That structure – five sections and a coda – is filled with details from Bunting’s experience, with allusions to history, mythology, theology, and other poetry. The organization is partly seasonal; it is possible to see a progression from spring in the first section (“each pebble its part/for the fells’ late spring” [2009: 13]) to winter in the fifth (“Winter wrings pigment/from petal and slough” [2009: 30]). The four seasons are interrupted by the middle (third) section, described by Bunting in his only published note on the poem as “Alexander’s trip to the limits of the world and its futility,” and the poem is concluded by a coda Bunting characterized as “a confession of our ignorance” (2009: 40). But the poem’s structure is perhaps more powerfully and usefully seen (or heard) as a musical one. In a letter to Zukofsky, Bunting admits his ambition to write “a QED sonata to earn the hatred of all the tasteful critics,” and the sonatas of Scarlatti have been pointed out as structural influences on the poem. The five-part musical structure, though, is one we also find in T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, each of which is named for a place significant in Eliot’s life (as *Briggflatts* is named for a Quaker meetinghouse in Cumbria, which Bunting had visited when he was a student). Like Eliot’s poems, Bunting’s long poem occurs in five musical movements, whose themes (like the themes stated and developed in sonatas) are introduced and then elaborated upon not through narrative or argumentative logic but, instead, through a sort of harmonic juxtaposition. Sonic similarity, associative logics, visual similarities, or contiguities propel us through the movement, with the seasonal, autobiographical, and historico-mythic materials recurring and intertwining like the motifs of the madrigals Bunting names in the poem’s second line.

Among the most prolific contemporary British writers of the fragmented long poem is Peter Reading, who has, at this writing, published over twenty volumes of poetry. His work is renowned for its attention to “ugly” subject matter: the crime and human misery that result from poverty and the dramatic social inequalities by which British society has been plagued. In *Ukulele Music* (1985), Reading works to find and describe the role that poetry might play in the society his work describes and deplores. He does

so in a manner derived from poets in the tradition of Pound. *Ukulele Music* juxtaposes notes in the “voice” of Reading’s housekeeper, Viv; descriptions of contemporary urban crime based on (and sometimes quoting) news reports; episodes of violence on the high seas from the eighteenth century to the explosion of the first hydrogen bomb on the Bikini Atoll; and the language of ukelele lessons (the poem might be read as a gloss on an old music hall song Viv mentions: “*he plays his Uku uker Youkalalylee while the ship went down*” [1994: 10]). Along the way, Reading also alludes to other poets whose work addresses the intersection of social misery and poetry, particularly Louis MacNeice (whose “Bagpipe Music” is audible in Reading’s title as well as at moments of the poem) and Pound himself (whose Canto I is the model for a key passage in Reading’s poem).

Ukulele Music falls into three sections. In the first, notes from Reading’s housekeeper alternate with descriptions of a grim urban setting and events that take place in that setting, along with explicit and implicit comments on poetry itself (including Reading’s comments on reviews of his own work). The second section narrates five instances of explosive violence at sea or on sea voyages, each in the voice of an unnamed participant. In the third section, the notes from Viv and the poet’s meditations return, but they are interspersed now with instructions from a “*Five-Minute Uke Course*” the poet has bought and is working his way through. Several continuities bind the three parts and the multiple voices and perspectives within each: the fragmentary narrative of Viv and her family, the fact of violence, the seagoing history of the British Empire, and the role of poetry, whether explicitly treated in Reading’s self-reference or implicitly treated through the figure of playing the ukelele. The poem is united, too, by Reading’s savagely satiric view of contemporary England; as Tom Paulin writes, “Like Swift, he is outraged by personal cruelty and the abuse of power, and like Swift he delights in parody and officialese” (1992: 290).

The continuities in *Ukulele Music* must be constructed, though, from fragments (of narrative, of language, of other poems). We see, at the beginning of the poem, a shocking scene of urban violence: two teenaged boys rob a young mother, forcing her to give up her money by cutting her baby’s face and leg with a broken bottle. A bit later, Reading shows three ten-year-old boys throwing abandoned bottles at a group of women queuing for a bus; the wall beside them is graffitied with names, including “TREV.” A few pages further on, Reading describes a cemetery and, within it, a new grave for a ten-year-old, with a wreath left by “Viv.” We see a woman lecturing delinquent boys and being spit on as she walks

away; we read later a note by Viv about having to get her mac cleaned because it has been spit on. Piecing references together, readers can determine that Viv's son, Trevor, is one of the toughs who mugs the young woman at the beginning of the poem and that her nephew is one of the boys who throws bottles (he is later killed by a bus while he plays football in the street) and that Viv herself is the woman who lectures boys as they loiter in front of a butcher shop and gets spit on for her trouble. But Reading also gathers fragments within an individual page in order to link these local events to broader contexts, both political and poetic, as he does here, in a passage early on in the poem's first section:

Mercury falls, it's no go, and the pink geraniums shrivel:
ceilidh and Old Viennese drone as the packet goes down.

When all the cities were felled by the pongoid subspecies in them
(Belfast, Jerusalem, Brum., Liverpool, Beirut) and when
blood-swilling (Allah is wonderful) Middle-East Yahoos had purchased
nuclear hardware, he found distich the only form apt.

(1994: 7)

Reading himself provides the educated reader a strong hint about how to read this poem when, in the third section, he orchestrates the sounding of these themes together in a paraphrase of the first of Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* (itself a motivated translation of part of the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus invokes the spirit of the prophet Tiresias for guidance in his journey home from Troy; Tiresias is, of course, also the central figure in Eliot's *The Waste Land*). Pound translates Homer into a version of alliterative verse he had developed for his translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer." Reading hews more closely to a classical model, performing a version of hexameter distichs common in Greek poetry. Pound's opening line is a famous salvo in the 1920s battles of literary modernism: "And then went down to the ships, set keel to breakers" (Pound 1970: 3). Reading's paraphrase is close enough to make the echo clear: "Finally now we return to the deep, and reaching our dim craft/drag her black hull through safe shale down to the fathomless brine." Pound's translation of Homer and his choice of the ritual invocation of Tiresias make a specific claim for his own poetics: he is making something new out of a specific relationship with the tradition he inherits. Poetry, for Pound, is a kind of necromancy in which the wisdom of the past is enabled to speak anew in the circumstances of the present and to speak with prophetic authority.

Reading's parodic paraphrase of Pound's gambit announces a different program (and prognosis) for poetry with respect to the present it faces:

Wend your luff, messmates, and let go the skysail halliards, mister,
cut the brace pennants and stays, reef the fore-topgallant in,

falling barometer, send down skysail yard from aloft, sir,
strum with felt pick back and forth, lightly across all four strings,

all sail should be double-gasketted, stow the mainsail and cross-jack,
make yr pentameters taut: two-and-a-half feet times two,

bend ye now three lower storm-staysails and a storm spanker, mister,
take in the three upper-tops, close-reef the foresail, F sharp,

tighten the B string and place finger at the back of the second
fret of the A string and keep spondees and dactyls close-clewed,

trim yr heroic hexameter (or it may be dactylic),
splice the pentameter aft, finger yr frets as ye go.

(Reading 1994: 44)

The progression of discourses in this passage is significant. In a storm (and the storm operates as a figure for the unsettled historical moment the poem examines), the captain's orders and the crew's adjustments are the ways to safety. Slipping from such orders regarding sail to orders regarding poetic meter ("make yr pentameters taut"), Reading, like Pound, suggests the ordering and steering capacities long associated with poetry. In place of the tortoiseshell lyre strummed as the epic adventures of Odysseus were recited, Reading gives us the ukelele, a figure for easy and accessible culture. Where Pound invokes the Western literary tradition as a stay against the confusion of Europe after the First World War, Reading rewrites the epic as the music hall song in which the captain plays his ukelele as the ship goes down. Poetry here can offer no redeeming order or meaning, but only a sort of despairing entertainment.

Narrative Poems

The 1970s and 1980s saw a return to narrative in the British long poem. Where the phenomenological long poem dramatized the consolidation of the "I" through an engagement with the world, especially the natural

world, these later narrative long poems tend to acknowledge the lessons of the fragmentary late- or postmodernist long poem: the “I” is questioned rather than consolidated, is shown to be constructed rather than given, and is often presented in paratactic or parodic ways (see Ian Gregson’s discussion of this phenomenon, 1996: 108–24). Another crucial difference is that the speaker in these narratives is often, especially in the best of these poems, not the poet. Instead, the poet constructs a persuasive “self” in order to explore reactions to historical reality through emotions and personal pasts emphatically not his own. The prominent narrative poets of the 1980s and after include James Fenton, Blake Morrison, Andrew Motion, Glyn Maxwell, and Simon Armitage. Autobiography appears in some of this work (e.g., Motion’s “Lines of Desire”), but even when it does so, the irony and skepticism about the “I” continues to be a dominant tonal and rhetorical effect. This skepticism is given specifically political twists in some later narrative poems by, among others, Jackie Kay and Jean “Binta” Breeze, which cast into question some of the confident assumptions about racial and sexual identity that came to the fore in cultural politics of the 1990s and 2000s.

In his discussion of the long narrative poem of this period, Neil Corcoran singles out Peter Reading’s “Ukulele Music,” James Fenton’s “Nest of Vampires,” Blake Morrison’s “The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper,” and Andrew Motion’s “Independence.” As can be seen from our earlier discussion, we consider Reading’s work to be different in kind, but Fenton, Morrison, and Motion are indeed three important exemplars, and we here follow Corcoran’s lead. In their introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, the important anthology they edited and published in 1982, Morrison and Motion describe their own poems and some of the other work they chose in terms of “secret narrative.” “We are often presented with stories that are incomplete,” they write, “or are denied what might normally be considered essential information” (1982: 19). Leaving the reader to fill the gaps, to put the paratactic pieces together, the poets estranged storytelling in their poems. They often did so, in part, by focusing on the marginal, representing events and speakers well outside the social mainstream. We might immediately distinguish the kind of long poem we have in mind here from a poem like Graham’s “The Nightfishing” by pointing to two examples whose speakers are serial killers (the poets who wrote the poems are, to the best of our knowledge, *not* serial killers). Morrison’s 1987 “Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper” adopts the voice of a Yorkshire everyman to tell the story of Peter Sutcliffe, who was convicted in 1981 of murdering thirteen women (and was accused of attacking

others) in Yorkshire. The poem is in some ways an elaboration upon the epigraph Morrison includes, a quotation from Sutcliffe himself: "I were just cleaning up streets, our kid. Just cleaning up streets" (Morrison 1999: 33). The elaboration, however, takes the form of a nameless speaker's tentative identification with Sutcliffe and his hatred of women. The murder and the murderer's motives are held up for understanding, with much of the latter work done by the ballad stanza and the associations of the form itself:

E met a lass called Sonia,
a nery type, a shrew,
oo mithered im an nattered,
but Pete, e thought she'd do.
(1999: 36)

The speaker frequently refers to the broadly shared conviction among his mates that women are hateful, and he adduces such sources as the Bible and common sense in support of this prejudice. Sutcliffe, the poem suggests, is a symptom of a society whose ideas about women is the real culprit behind the murders.

The cultural critique on offer in Fenton's "The Staffordshire Murderers" is more trenchant than that of Morrison's, though the poem's less straightforward approach might at first make it harder to discern. In "Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper," we meet a single speaker through whose consciousness everything is filtered, whereas in Fenton's poem we have three perspectives present in one way or another. There is a narrator or speaker, who only once refers to himself (and even then seems to do so in an archly distancing way), at least one murderer ("he"), and the addressee to whom all this is spoken ("you"). One story the poem seems to tell is of the murder of "you" by the (or a) Staffordshire murderer. The victim nervously walks through a car park; watches mallards in the canal; drives or is driven in a van; is shown his or her "future home," a "snug little cavity" the murderer has built in his dreamlike house; and, finally, faces his or her own death: "The blade flashes a smile./This is your new life. This murder is yours" (Fenton 1994: 61). At the same time, though, there is no single victim or murderer; instead "the Staffordshire murderers wait for their accomplices/And victims." More than this, there is no clear delineation of roles, for "Every victim is an accomplice," just as, in the poem's opening line, "Every fear is a desire. Every desire is a fear." What Fenton's poem is about, ultimately, is this two-part assertion linking desire and fear, which maps onto the similar one linking victims and accomplices. If to want and to fear are

the same, what equates them is the potential or the reality of change; it is the changed circumstance of a desire satisfied that inspires fear. The poem tells a broader “secret narrative,” then, about culture and change.

This broader story is told between the crucial moves in the “murder plot.” Stanzas 8–15 (the middle of the twenty-five-quatrain poem) pull back from the murderer and victim to sketch the landscape – literal and cultural – in which the murder seems to occur. The keynote in this sketch is change:

Large parts of Staffordshire have been undermined.
The trees are in it up to their necks. Fish
Nest in their branches. In one of the Five Towns
An ornamental pond disappeared overnight

Dragging the ducks down with it, down to the old seams
With a sound as of a gigantic bath running out,
Which is in turn the sound of ducks in distress.
Thus History murders mallards.

(1994: 59)

The force that brings about these “murders,” at once smaller (ducks rather than people) and larger (numbers rather than isolated individual instances), is called here “History,” the capital letter suggesting not simply “one thing after another” but, instead, an abstract agency like the dialectic described by Hegel or Marx. The shape History has taken in this particular case is subsidence as a consequence of mining; to “undermine” the landscape is to dig out the substrate on which it rests, and the “old seams” mentioned here are veins of coal or ore mined in the region. We do not hear this sound – what the poet and publisher John Lehman called in the late 1930s “the noise of history” – because we are distracted by spectacles of violence on the surface (the “first reprisals after the drill-sergeant’s coup” enthusiastically witnessed through windows). That violence, including the works of the Staffordshire murderers, Fenton suggests, is simply the superficial working out of the powerful but often invisible movements of real historical change (of “History”).

When the “murder plot” returns, it is to be read against this horizon. The van, the house, and the prepared “future home” all focus attention on this individual murder, but the murderer quickly reminds the victim that he or she is simply one among a vast number: “you cannot seriously have thought you were the first?” Rather, there have been “A thousand preachers, a thousand poisoners,/A thousand martyrs, a thousand murderers.”

The “History” Fenton names earlier in the poem now takes the shape of preachers as poisoners, martyrs as murderers, recapitulating the paired fears and desires, victims and accomplices of the opening stanza. Any death, given the enormity of History, is almost insignificantly small, merely one among the thousand, and, at the same time, any death, to the one whose death it is, is almost unimaginably vast: “this murder is yours.” The poem offers no solution to or wisdom about this truth; instead, it powerfully confronts us with it, provoking us to view critically our society, in which “The good weather brings out the murderers/By the Floral Clock, by the footbridge.”

Representing aberrant personalities, Morrison and Fenton are clearly working not only in a vein of narrative poetry but also within the tradition of the dramatic monologue that descends from Robert Browning through Ezra Pound, Frank Bidart, and others (it is perhaps worth recalling that both Browning and Bidart include murderers among the characters whose speech makes up some of their best-known monologues). As we have shown, the mind of the murderer provides a useful way to comment on prejudice and provincial self-satisfaction. Motion’s narrative poems focus on more mundane figures. By locating them amidst personal and public crises, though, Motion also registers the impact of the sociohistorical. The title poem of his 1981 collection, *Independence*, follows the English manager of a carpet company in India at the moment when that country becomes independent and is partitioned from Pakistan. Where Morrison’s ballad stanzas and Yorkshire dialect render Peter Sutcliffe in an almost cartoonish way and where Fenton’s archly baroque voice foregrounds his poem’s satiric energies, Motion’s main character is a bland businessman who speaks in straightforward sentences, their syntax draped easily across the line endings of Motion’s unrhymed quatrains. The relative “normality” of the speaker helps to underscore the drama of the scenes he recalls and helps us to see how, as Ian Gregson has it, Motion’s “narrators tell stories partly in order to understand themselves by turning themselves into characters” (Motion 1999: 111):

It was dawn in fact
when my journey finished at last –
three days, three nights stop-go
in that rickety Austin, a jangling

sweep from the Punjab down
past Delhi, Agra, Kanpur, to reach
Kamaria: higgledy roofs and the sun
clear into perfect blue. I drove

along sleeping streets, wide-eyed,
 still scared. But no sign of the riots –
 just slogans splashed and dribbling:
Partition. No to Partition. Quit India.
 (1999: 31)

The first stanza here illustrates the voice; the linking verb, the speaker's colloquial "in fact" and "stop-go," and the complaining "rickety" all echo a recognizable, quiet English businessman. Even the Indian place-names might recall a similar catalog of towns and cities to be found in an English sales trip itinerary. The aftermath of riots, when we get to it, stands out as clearly against this tone as the painted (but bloody-sounding) slogans. Here and throughout the poem, Motion captures the irruption of history into the routines of private and commercial life, the interruption by truth of the taken for granted.

The "secret narrative" told in "Independence" is a story of loss. The Englishman loses his carpet factory when its Indian manager tells him, "*Now we are free. No Britishers. // Now you must go.*" He loses his young wife when she dies in childbirth (while he is away on business). He loses the remainder of his carpet business when the Ganges floods and the laborers can produce no carpets while they tend to their flooded land. He loses, by the end of the poem, his sense of himself, his certainty about his own identity now that all upon which that identity had rested has been eroded or washed away. He is, in microcosm, a British Empire in the late 1940s bereft of its colonial possessions, without a servant underclass to say "*sahib*," and uncertain about its (possibly stillborn) future. The poem is framed by the image of the sea. In the opening section, its "craters split/ and slammed shut to the moon," and in the concluding line, it is "a blank horizon returning to grey." Tides figure the forces that open and foreclose possibility. Oceanic vastness figures the illegible character of experience. Framed in this way, the Englishman's experience of Indian independence, and of the independence he now faces, free as he is from the obligations that bound him there, is an erasure – of value, of meaning, and of possibility.

At the same time, though, the retrospective glance of the speaker reinterprets loss as well. On one level, the poem keeps the lost present in the form of traces in memory and in language. In this way Motion's poem mourns losses entailed by the postwar shrinkage of the British Empire, modes of life that have become simply unavailable in the wake

of independence. These modes of life, of course, were always available only to a few and dependent upon the exploitation of native populations, historical facts that do not register within the poem, perhaps because they fall outside the speaker's awareness but perhaps also because they fall into the poet's political blind spot. On another, and perhaps less problematic, level, the poem itself narrates the rising of compensation out of the fact of loss and thereby offers this as at least a possibility. It is only when the speaker loses his carpet factory that he meets the woman who will become his wife. It is when she loses part of herself (her appendix) that the couple cement their relationship. The departure of the wife's father (for England, it seems, in the wake of another business failure – when the carpet makers are unable to work in grief after the death of Gandhi) and the emptiness of his house are linked to the couple's deepening intimacy as they await the birth of their child. This pattern quietly suggests the *possibility*, complicated by unpredictability and the near certainty of new catastrophes, of positive opportunities that might arise precisely from loss, whether that loss is personal, commercial, or historico-political.

Fenton and Motion in their different ways undermine confidence in the notion of a stable and continuous “self”; we are fashioned, each shows, by the forces and accidents of history. The 1980s and 1990s, though, were dominated by political and cultural discourses of “identity.” Women and people of color sought not only political agency but also cultural visibility, and arguments over “multiculturalism” and “identity politics” raged within as well as around the literary world. We will have more to say about the poetry of identity in Chapter 8; here, we want to focus on the intersection of “secret narrative” poetics and questions of identity. There is perhaps no better text for this purpose than the title poem of Jackie Kay's 1991 volume, *The Adoption Papers*. Kay is a poet for whom confident assertions about identity are difficult precisely because of the multiplicity and irresolvability of her own. Kay's biological parents were a Scottish woman and a Nigerian man, she was adopted and raised by a Communist Glaswegian couple, and she is a lesbian. “The Adoption Papers” narrates her life story from the perspectives of the poet herself, her adoptive mother, and her biological mother. These voices are typographically distinguished; each appears in a different typeface. In addition, and perhaps just as importantly, the voices of official discourse, such as government bureaucrats, appear in italics, as do some (but not all) of the voices that utter racist slurs and sentiments at the daughter (a fellow student's cry of “Sambo” is italicized,

while a teacher's assertion that the daughter should be able to dance because "I thought/your people had it in your blood" is not).

While such overt racism occurs from time to time in the poem, the main thrust of "The Adoption Papers" is Kay's search for the foundation of her identity, her quest to find and meet her birth mother, but in doing so it erodes precisely the idea of a foundation for identity. Even as she seeks contact with her biological mother, the daughter acknowledges the questionable value of this desire and sees the importance of her relationship with the adoptive mother:

a few genes, blood, a birth.
 All this bother, certificates, papers.
 It is all so long ago. Does it matter?
 Now I come from her,
 the mother who stole my milk teeth
 ate the digestive left for Santa.

(Kay 1991: 20)

The poem concludes with the daughter hopefully awaiting a letter from her biological mother, but implicitly suggesting emptiness at the heart of identity even if the letter is to arrive, wondering if the mother's handwriting includes "a large circle over her *i*'s" (1991: 34). The "large circle" describes an absence and resembles a zero. This empty signifier sits atop the first-person pronoun that names the self (which here is also italicized, like the voices of the bureaucracy in which the self is textually manifest in state records). Just before this, the adoptive mother asserts her own certainty of the bond between herself and her daughter: "Closer than blood./Thicker than water: Me and my daughter." At the same time, though, the poem registers the intense anxiety associated with uncertainty about identity and its foundations:

After mammy telt me she wisnae my real mammy
 I was scared to death she was gonnie melt
 or something or mibbe disappear in the dead of night.

(1991: 22)

And this anxiety is borne out for the speaker when her adoptive mother suffers a stroke and seems to melt just as the child had imagined she would.

Against the twin threats of emptiness and dissolution, Kay's narrative poses elective affiliations. In the same section (Chapter 6) in which the adoptive mother collapses, the daughter performs an identity mediated neither through the racist ascriptions of classmates or teachers nor through the local culture of her adoptive parents or her Highlander mother (who is linked to a

kind of *echt* Scottishness in the adoptive mother's dream through the image of a tweed hat), but through American popular culture available on records. Her choice is not entirely unrelated to her appearance, though; with a friend, the daughter disavows white American teen idols Donny Osmond and David Cassidy, and instead the two girls "mime to Pearl Bailey/Tired of the life I lead, tired of the blues I breed/and Bessie Smith I can't do without my kitchen man" (1991: 23). Later, Kay writes of the Angela Davis poster on her wall, consolidating her identity now through a figure who links her own racial background ("Her skin is the same too you know./I can see my skin is that colour") and her adoptive parents' politics (her adoptive father gives her a badge saying "FREE ANGELA DAVIS," and both parents praise Davis and argue that her imprisonment in California is "a set up"). Like Morrison, Fenton, and Motion, Kay tells the story of a self and also shows, in her secret narrative, that "self" is a fiction, a construction composed amidst, and in part by, the discourses that prevail at a given cultural moment, but unlike them she emphasizes the intersections of gender and racial discourses.

The Lyric Sequence

In the subtitle of their classic, if somewhat dated, volume on the modern poetic sequence, M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall call the sequence "the genius of modern poetry." It is, they argue, "the decisive form toward which all the developments of modern poetry have tended," a gathering of moments of lyric intensity that depends for its coherence not on narrative continuity but, instead, on "the felt relationships among" those intense centers (1983: 3; 7). They define the modern poetic sequence as "a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole" (1983: 9). More recently, Roland Greene has elaborated upon the mode in which this interaction typically occurs. The sequence derives its power from the productive tension between what Greene calls the ritual elements of lyric and the fictionality emphasized by the typical sequence's "polyvocal realization, its spatiality, its patchworking of heterogeneous fragments" (1991: 15). "Since the first decades of [the twentieth] century," he writes:

the lyric sequence has tended toward a new formal and ideological disposition, which I choose to call artifactuality: several independently realized voices contributing to a composite fiction.

(1991: 14)

One important effect of this disposition, Greene argues, is that it forces “the idea of unitary selfhood and the humanist engagement between poetic speakers and readers into a trenchant reexamination” (1991: 14). Michael Thurston has written (in separate essays on the two poets) about the lyric sequences of Gillian Clarke and Eavan Boland, and he has argued that Boland captures in her poem “Patchwork” the way many lyric sequences (including her own) work. In that fifth poem in her nine-poem sequence, “Domestic Interior,” Boland figures her writing in the construction of a patchwork quilt. When the fragments are laid together in a pattern, she concludes, “these are not bits/they are pieces/and the pieces fit” (Thurston 1999: 146).

While we do not want to claim that the lyric sequence is the genius of postwar British or Irish poetry nor even that it is the preeminent form taken by the long poem during these decades, it certainly has been one important way in which the challenges of the long poem after modernism have been met and addressed. More than that, we want to provide a sense of how to negotiate the shifts from moments of lyric closure to their reopening and revision and the movement from one moment of lyric intensity to the next. Among the many examples we might draw upon here, Anne Stevenson’s *Correspondences* stands out to us as one which combines the virtues of the lyric sequence with a meditation on the position of the woman artist in the postwar period.

Published in 1974, Stevenson’s sequence combines lyric poems with prose sections (letters, newspaper articles and obituaries, a poetry magazine rejection slip, etc.) to trace the history of a family whose significance is that it stands behind the fictional contemporary poet, Kay Boyd, with whose life and career the sequence concludes. *Correspondences* is, in some ways, like Clarke’s *Cofiant* in its ambition to read a nation’s history (in this case, the history of the United States) through the generations of a single family; where Clarke locates her ancestors in the history of Wales and of Welsh union with England, Stevenson positions members of her sequence’s family in the American Civil War, in the commercial economy of the early twentieth century, in the religious battles characteristic of American modernity, and in the educational, medical, and social institutions of mid-twentieth-century America. Like Boland’s sequences, Stevenson’s has as part of its burden an exploration of the situation of the woman poet in the postwar decades; where Boland positions herself through encounters with an old woman on Achill who reminds her of the historical reality of the famine and with the heroic portrait of Aeneas in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Stevenson

develops Kay Boyd's character through conflicts with her mother, through a period of mental illness, and through the literary institutions she must navigate in order to pursue her poetic career.

Key to the sequence is its juxtaposition of voices and textual genres, as these at once create the family at the center of the sequence's narrative and produce the constitutive tension between moments of lyricism and closure (those moments Greene calls ritual) and the dissolution of those moments in the multivocal fabric of the sequence's fiction. Both of these effects are apparent from the beginning of the sequence. After a chronology of the Chandler family's history (from the 1820s to the early 1970s), a diagram of the family tree (from patriarch Adam Ezekiel Chandler to poet-protagonists Ruth Arbeiter and her daughter Kay Boyd), and Ruth Arbeiter's obituary (the precipitating event for the correspondence between her daughters, which frames the sequence), we arrive at the first lyric poem in the sequence, a letter in which Ruth's daughter, Eden, pleads with her sister, Kay, to return to Vermont from her sojourn in London in order to visit their dying mother. The poem ("Eden Ann Whitelaw to her sister Kay Boyd in London") consists of stanzas whose lengths vary but which are all constituted of stair-stepped tercets; the latter is the predominant stanza of the sequence as a whole, and as this first poem reaches its conclusion, the tercets seem to separate from the longer strophes. The explicit purpose of this letter is to persuade an estranged sister to come home, but the dominant focus of the poem is an evocation of the landscape of this home:

Yet never more lovely,
this North-East, this November.
Maples, barren as wires...like
seas of spun wire
between the swell of the cloudbanks
and the black shelving continents of pine.
(2004: 195)

The lyrical meditation on details of nature is linked throughout the poem with memory and with the family's generations, an intertwining that figures the family's dwindling as the writer's mother dies in the autumn's inexorable diminution of land and lake. To turn the page after Eden's closing plea to Kay ("Come help me keep her alive a little longer") is to be jarred from the traditional tropes of this autumnal retrospect by the appearance of a prose document, a news item from the *Clearfield Enquirer* announcing that the late Ruth Arbeiter's house, the Chandler Home, will

be opened to the public for use as a museum and library. We leave behind the figurative language and the closure effects of the letter for the disinterested diction and standard syntax of the newspaper, the “ritual” elements of lyric for the “artifactual” character of the article.

This pattern continues throughout the sequence, whether in similar shifts from lyrically composed letters to prose documents or just through the progression from a letter in one voice (and one stanzaic form) to another. Across the sequence’s paratactic discontinuities, a set of themes emerges to hold the sequence together (along with the fragmentary narrative of the family in the first section and the intense focus on two generations of women poets in the second). Chief among these thematic continuities is estrangement, as parents condemn children, children chafe under parental judgment, spouses negotiate difference and difficulty, and religious devotion struggles against worldly desires. What is important, though, poem by poem, is not these overarching abstractions but, instead, the reconstruction of an individual’s felt experience of them. While the artifactual aspects of the sequence link the individuals to each other as a family and to their historical moments as American citizens, travelers, clergymen, businessmen, wives, and students, the ritual aspects – the verbal and aural repetitions, the figurative language, and the recurrence of that stair-stepped tercet – emphasize the specific gravity of these conflicts for a young wife unhappy in the marriage she has entered:

I try to be brave.
But if you did have a chance to speak to Papa,
 mightn’t you ask him to slip a word,

sort of man to man to Reuben...
about how delicate I am
and how sick every month,
not one of those cows
who can be used and used!

(2004: 213)

Or for a young woman about to enter a marriage about which she remains profoundly ambivalent:

Cold. Midnight-morning.
Candlelight out in the cold.

Oval on the near side
and the far side of the
mimicking window.
My face on the far side
and the near. My life.
This room that I know,
doubled also, hung
there in the snow.

(2004: 224)

Or for the husband who is blind to his new wife's dread, overwhelmed as he is by business failure and over-reliant as he is on a black-and-white religious worldview: "Yea, even as a Salesman of the Lord shall I succeed" (2004: 226).

Correspondences might best be seen as two mutually informing sequences. The first section recounts the history of the family over 100 years in letters and other documents; the second focuses on two generations, especially women, specifically Ruth Arbeiter and Kay Boyd, between 1930 and 1968. The abstract themes apparent throughout the first sequence take on greater depth and specificity as we linger with individuals at greater length in the second. More than this, the abstractions take on a specific vocational significance as we move from the religious preoccupations of the Chandler family of the nineteenth century to the literary dedication of these two women in the twentieth. The sequence comes to be one that treats the difficulties faced by women poets in a society constructed by the patriarchs whose mail we have read over the course of the first section, and the difficulties faced by wives and mothers in the first section become those that at once enable and thwart the poets (who are also wives and mothers) in the second. Especially important for our purposes here, though, is that Stevenson explores these themes in ways that are continuous across the sequence as a whole, and these are also the means by which the lyric sequence in general achieves its effects.

Stevenson went on in the late 1980s to write a biography of Sylvia Plath, and the second section of *Correspondences* echoes some facts of Plath's life in the contours of Kay Boyd's: the professor father, the estrangement from her mother, the difficulties with motherhood, and the institutionalization for depression. For all the tension between mother and daughter here, Stevenson makes clear that they share the plight of the woman who must fight for time and space and institutional recognition in pursuit of a poetic

vocation. A letter Ruth writes to her lover, the novelist Paul Maxwell, ends with a lament about all that stands between the two of them and between Ruth and the poetry she wants to write:

Dearest, what can I say?
 Here, among my chores and my children.
 Mine and my husband's children. So many friends.
 And in between, these incredible perspectives,
 openings entirely, ours in the eddying numbness
 where, as you know, I am waiting for you
 continually.

(2004: 238)

This moment of closure is immediately and relevantly reopened in the next poem, a letter from Ruth's daughter, Kay, to Ruth, written "From an Asylum." In this poem, Kay, too, decries the difficulties of maintaining her poetic vision amidst the demands of both parenthood and her relationship with her mother:

If I am *where* I am
 because I am *what* I am
 will you forgive me?
 (2004: 239)

"*What*" Kay is, this Plath-like poem shows, is a poet, one whose way of seeing (intensely metaphorical) and of speaking (intensely lyrical) is interpreted as madness by the society into which she has difficulty fitting. Finding understanding and common cause in "a crude wooden Mary/dangling her homunculus son" in a chapel she has visited, perhaps in a dream, and finding a resonant image of herself in this carving "Weary and purposeless with suffering," Kay seems to have attempted suicide and comes to herself in the mental hospital ("where they've taken my belt and my/wedding ring, where they/specialise in keeping me weeping") and resolves to try again to fit into the available social roles: "I'll try again. The marriage./The baby. The house. The whole damn bore!" (2004: 243). But this moment, too, is undone by the poem that follows it, a letter to Kay's husband from his lover, which reveals that the poet's failure to fit in is due more to the instability of the social niches than to Kay's inability to shape herself as society demands.

Where the phenomenological long poem constructs a self through a lengthy and intensive engagement with the world and draws its continuity from this process, and where the fragmentary epic abjures

obvious continuity for the paratactic rewards of juxtaposed moments of lyric intensity, and where the narrative poem is held together by the single story even when the story comes through a variety of voices or subject positions, the lyric sequence yokes narrative and/or thematic continuities with lyric closures and disclosures in order to achieve a kind of wholeness out of avowed and discrete parts. It occupies, therefore, a sort of middle ground in the range of options available to modern and postmodern poets with ambitions for the long poem. We conclude this chapter with what might seem an odd topic, the slim volume of separate shorter poems with no narrative or obvious theme to hold them together. Here, too, we might, at least in some important instances, find means toward coherence and wholeness.

The Slim Volume

The slim volume of twenty to thirty poems and about 50–150 pages has been the central form through which a poet's career has been assessed and organized since the nineteenth century. There have been numerous ways in which poets have organized and arranged such volumes to provide coherence and to extend significance between, among, and through the poems. Looking at a volume's organization offers important interpretive opportunities to guide the reading of both individual poems and the volume as a whole. Philip Larkin, for example, published only three slim volumes in his mature career, *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964), and *High Windows* (1974), and he only used the lyric sequence once in these three books (in "Livings"). He is, therefore, a fine example of how a writer of lyric poems can use the slim volume to provide larger structures and ramifications. For instance, the title of a volume supplies an initial overarching view of the collection. In Larkin's case, since *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* are also the titles of individual poems, both those poems become highlighted with the implication that they contain central statements of purpose. "The Whitsun Weddings" exemplifies Larkin's realist verse and his claim to represent "England" as he describes a train journey from Hull to London – from margin to center – in which a number of provincial weddings are completed with the brides and grooms entering the train to begin their honeymoons. Larkin's poetic persona throughout the volume consists of an outsider looking on the social world of commodities primarily defined

by marriage, and “The Whitsun Weddings” displays this with the volume’s most extended conceit. In other words, it most clearly instantiates the volume’s dominant persona and speaking voice:

The poem ends with an image of fertility and dispersal:

We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

(1988: 94)

The poem’s centrality and the intertextual relationship between it, its title, and the title of the volume powerfully suggest an allegorical reading in which the poem stands for, or represents, Larkin’s own poetry. His poems also travel from Hull to London, from his writing table to Faber’s presses; they too move from the margin to the center; and they too are dispersed from the city to the various somewheres of the nation. Like the train, his poems join and contain the provincial and suburban world of England, and like weddings, they bring these worlds together through metaphoric connection.

“High Windows” similarly insists upon being read not only as a stand-alone poem but also in relation to the volume’s title and, hence, the collection as a whole. It also suggests the different characteristics of Larkin’s writing in this, his last volume, compared to his two earlier collections. It contains more explicitly demotic and offensive language (“he’s fucking her,” “bloody birds”); the poet as outsider has become more explicitly voyeuristic; and it opens out into a more insistently symbolic and metaphoric world from which everyone is excluded. In the poem Larkin portrays three generations (his parents’, his own, and the younger generation) and compares their attitudes to sex. The poem initially claims that there has been an increase in freedom, as the speaker imagines “everyone young going down the long slide// To happiness.” However, the speaker then realizes his parents’ generation probably looked at him “forty years back” and thought “He/And his lot will all go down the long slide/Like free bloody birds.” This, in turn, leads to a final seemingly paradisaical image as he thinks of “the deep blue air, that shows/Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless” (1988: 129). This paradise, however, is purely privative: it is not a something; it is not a some-

where; it does not end. In contrast to most of the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*, the majority of the poems in *High Windows* end similarly in a symbolic or metaphoric moment that emphasizes its negation.

As well as titles providing crucial interpretive clues, both the opening and closing poems of a volume invite analytic scrutiny. In Larkin's case all three of his opening poems are almost manifesto-like, functioning as *ars poetica*. *The Less Deceived* begins with "Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album" in which Larkin uses the domestic photograph to map a version of his own poetics. The poems that come after do insist as he puts it here, upon "persuad[ing]" us that "this is a real girl," or real feelings, or real things, "in a real place, // In every sense empirically true" in order to produce a poetry that will be like photography, "faithful and disappointing." Furthermore, the poem ends by suggesting that poetry, or Larkin's poetry, can be more "empirically true" than even photography because the "album":

...holds you like a heaven, and you lie
Unvariably lovely there,
Smaller and clearer as the years go by.
(1988: 44)

The pun on "lie" enacts the distinction: even the truth of photography lies since it cannot acknowledge or represent the effects of time, unlike poetry.

The Whitsun Weddings opens with "Here" which represents another train journey: this time from London to Hull. This thirty-two-line poem consists of four eight-line stanzas, with the first and third rhyming abab-cddc and the second and fourth rhyming abba-cddc; it comprises three sentences, the first of which carries on for 24 ½ lines, consisting of three complete stanzas and ending halfway through the first line of the last stanza. This formal complexity draws attention to one of the characteristics of this volume's poems: formal experimentation held within a variety of rhyming stanzaic patterns, some of which are Larkin's own invention. The poem itself moves from a pastoral landscape of "skies and scarecrows, haystacks, hares and pheasants" before entering the suburban and urban spaces of a contemporary British "large town" where "domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster." Larkin, however, connects these two realms together as he describes the town as a "pastoral of ships up streets." Larkin joins the industrial present with the rural past and suggests the nation's continuous and organic history that the poet and the poem represent.

This reading is reinforced by the last two words of the first huge sentence that provide its grammatical subject and main verb: all this description is “where removed lives/Loneliness clarifies” (1988: 80). The poet and the poem are “removed lives,” but their very “loneliness” and isolation “clarifies” – brings to light – the empirical multiplicity of the world and unites them in the poem’s precise and yet perpetually shifting “Here.” The meaning and placing of “Here” then intensifies the claim of “The Whitsun Weddings” as poem, title, and volume that Larkin’s poems are attenuated rituals that encapsulate “England.”

The first poem of *High Windows*, similarly, interacts with the title poem, but this time by way of contrast. Like “High Windows” and many other poems in the collection, “To the Sea” represents three generations (the grandparents, the parents, and the children), but this time, rather than presenting disjunction, Larkin suggests their conjunction through the enacting of the family (and national) ritual of going to the seaside. The poem ends by celebrating this ritual:

It may be that through habit these do best
 Coming to water clumsily undressed
 Yearly; teaching their children by a sort
 Of clowning; helping the old, too, as they ought.
 (1988: 122)

The themes of ritual, either surviving or decaying, of old age, and of families continue throughout the volume as the poems oscillate between hope and despair. The former poems seem to look back to the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*, whereas the latter poems suggest Larkin’s development and change.

As well as the title, the title poem, and the opening poem, a volume’s final poem also occupies a privileged interpretive position. Larkin ends all three of these volumes with elegies that, in turn, demand to be read allegorically. In *The Less Deceived* the description of the retired, famous racehorses whose names live in “almanac[s]” but who now “have slipped” those “names” and live in a gentle twilight has always been read as representing the immediate postwar, postimperial Britain of the postwar state. (It also perhaps represents Larkin’s vision of his own poetry and, by implication, English poetry: fed by past glories but living on in a gentle retirement.) “An Arundel Tomb” ends *The Whitsun Weddings*, and in common with “Here” and “The Whitsun Weddings,” the poem empha-

sizes union as it naturalizes historical change. Here the signifiers of feudal aristocracy are figured as the emblems of bourgeois companionate marriage since Larkin praises the sculptor for carving the couple “holding hands” and makes of that image an argument for continuity across time:

The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

(1988: 117)

Although only an “almost instinct” and although only “almost true,” the poem’s ending and the poem as the volume’s ending – the last line of the poem and the last line of the volume – emphasize loving continuity, the survival of love, the survival of poetry (the tomb), and the survival of England (Arundel).

In contrast, *High Windows* closes with “The Explosion”: a poem that tells the story of a mining disaster. Like “High Windows” and many other poems in the collection, it ends with a seemingly utopian vision of the world, in this case with “the eggs unbroken,” a vision that the poem makes clear has already been negated and dismantled. As we have seen with “To the Sea,” Larkin’s last volume revolves around the question of the survival and destruction of communal rituals, and “The Explosion” depicts both to operate as a concluding synthesis of the previous poems. It celebrates the collective life of the miners that seems to combine industrial work (“Down the lane came men in pitboots”), nature (“One chased after rabbits; lost them;/Came back with a nest of lark’s eggs;/Showed them”), and religion (“Plain as lettering in the chapels”). On the one hand, they are all destroyed by the explosion. On the other hand, they are all recreated for a moment in the imagination of the wives who, therefore, function as surrogates for the poet himself, who represents both the “explosion” and the impossibly “unbroken eggs” (1988: 154). In this final poem of his last collection, published in 1973, Larkin imagines and elegizes the contours of the postwar dream of social democracy, making all the more ironic his later support of Margaret Thatcher. (Poems perhaps contain deeper truths than their makers.)

As well as titles, first poems, and last poems, poets often arrange poems in sequences within volumes, as well as creating variety and internal reference.

Larkin often paired poems to produce a deepened critical effect. In *The Whitsun Weddings*, for example, the vulgarity of the graffitied “tuberous cock and balls” that destroys the image of the smiling woman in “Sunny Prestatyn” is gentled by the subsequent “First Sight” that portrays the first day of newly born lambs. The urban, male environment of violence and aggression becomes contrasted with the rural, maternal space of birth and comfort. This pairing also ensures that the advertising hopes imaged by “the girl on the poster” become linked to the “Earth’s immeasurable surprise” that awaits the lambs: both moments representing things that are “too good for this life.” In *High Windows* the moon poem “Sad Steps” is followed by the sun poem “Solar,” and the public indictment “Homage to a Government” is next to the private one, “This Be The Verse.”

Other poets have more explicitly created an overarching structure to their individual poems. As John Waters points out, this has been central to the work of Northern Irish poets and seems to be a response both to Yeats’ earlier example and to each other’s practice (2009: 101). Seamus Heaney, for example, divides *North* into two parts: the first, he argues, focuses on the mythic and historical underpinnings of the violence in Northern Ireland; the second details its present political and aesthetic concerns. Heaney chooses different verse forms to accommodate their different subject matter.

Most of the poems in the first part are written in a distinctive, four-line, predominantly two or three stress meter that Heaney views as being appropriate to the image and the idea of digging into the depths of the historical landscape. The shortness of the lines creates a run-on effect so that each line seems to lead deeper into the historical and mythic ground. “The Grauballe Man” opens:

As if he had been poured
In tar, he lies
On a pillow of turf
And seems to weep

The black river of himself.
(1975: 35)

Here the image of the peat-preserved prehistoric man found in Grauballe generates thick description that emphasizes viscous fluidity (“poured/in tar,” “weep,” “black river”). The image also becomes self-referential through the use in the last line of what Christopher Ricks

calls a self-infolding simile. The poem continues to use these metaphors of depth and extends them to include the poet's own consciousness: "I first saw his twisted face/ In a photograph" and "now he lies/ Perfected in my memory" (1975: 36). Heaney continues to link death and birth in a violent manner and brings together both past and present through the medium of their preservation ("photograph," "peat," and "memory"). He also returns to the idea of the self-referential nature of representation since the man "lies/perfected in [Heaney's] memory." The poem ends by combining past and present, artistic and actual violent death: the death of the Grauballe man, of the famous sculpture "the Dying Gaul," and of the "hooded victim[s]."

In his book, *Seamus Heaney*, Morrison observes that Heaney reinforces *North's* two-section pattern through his use of the myth of Antaeus and Hercules. Antaeus was the giant son of Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Gaia, the goddess of the earth, who was all-powerful as long as he remained rooted to the ground. He challenged, defeated, and killed everyone who tried to pass him. As such, for Heaney he is the perfect emblem of the poems in the first part of "North," and the first poem appropriately enough is called "Antaeus" and provides us with his dramatic monolog:

I cannot be weaned
Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins.
Down here in my cave
Girdered with root and rock
I am cradled in the dark that wombed me.
(1975: 12)

As usual in the first section, the body and chthonic consciousness become linked to a womb-like maternal landscape. Fittingly, the last poem of the first section, entitled "Hercules and Antaeus," tells of his defeat. Hercules kills Antaeus by lifting him off the ground into the air and into the light: "Out of his element/Into a dream of loss // And origins" (1975: 52). In terms of the collection's structure, this event leads into the second section of the volume with its language of "civilized" and "rational" discourse; in terms of the portrayal of poetic subjectivity, this overthrow echoes the Oedipal complex where the male child is violently dispossessed of the maternal body through the power and authority of the father and turns to identifying with the father. As a result, the memory of, and desire for, the maternal body becomes thrust down into the unconscious to return endlessly in the

guise of signs, symbols, and repetitions. Within the larger historical and mythical ideological narrative of *North*, Antaeus, the maternal, and the landscape are associated with Ireland, Gaelic, and Heaney's shorter line, whereas Hercules, the paternal, and the rational are connected to England, English, and the iambic pentameter.

Accordingly, most of the poems in the second part are written in a loose iambic pentameter and are much more discursive and informal. "Whatever You Say Say Nothing" begins:

I'm writing just after an encounter
 With an English journalist in search of 'views
 On the Irish thing'. I'm back in winter
 Quarters where bad news is no longer news."
 (1975: 57)

Throughout this section Heaney addresses, debates, and questions the present state of Northern Ireland in a predominantly non-metaphoric and conversational way. In the final poem of the section (and the volume as a whole), "Singing School," Heaney charts the growth of his own poetic consciousness. Comparing rural Northern Ireland with rural England, Heaney ends by returning to the short lines and quatrains of the first section. He does so, however, to argue for an "escap[e]" from the "massacre[s]" into the realm of the pastoral and the imagination. The volume as a whole narrates the story of Heaney's poetic consciousness as it moves through the deep chthonic world of its historical and mythic subconscious, to the surface world of rational social consciousness, and to the higher world of imaginative and aesthetic balance where he is "neither internee nor informer."

Of the Irish and Northern Irish poets, Thomas Kinsella has perhaps the most complex relationship with the arrangement and publication of individual volumes. After publishing with large presses like Dolmen in Ireland, Alfred Knopf in the United States, and Oxford University Press in England, he began in 1972 to publish a series of pamphlets through his own press, Peppercanister. Named after the local slang for St. Stephen's Church in Dublin, the first booklet ("Butcher's Dozen: A Lesson for the Octave of Widgery") was a powerful and polemical response to the judicial cover-up by Lord Widgery of the events of Bloody Sunday. The immediate, local, and political impetus for this collection provides a key to the context of Kinsella's publication history since and suggests that "peppercanister" also

carries the connotation of street violence. From 1972 on Kinsella first releases his poems through limited editions via Peppercanister and then revises and rearranges the poems before publishing them in a slim volume with a large press (first Oxford University Press, then Carcanet). Consequently, as David Tubridy charts, the poems, their context, and their meanings alter dramatically, something that Kinsella considers and, indeed, discusses in his poetry itself.

For example, between 1988 and 1991 Kinsella published five pamphlets through Peppercanister – *One Fond Embrace* in 1988, *Personal Places* and *Poems from Centre City* in 1990, and *Madonna and Other Poems* and *Open Court* in 1991; they were also numbered in their order in the press's publishing sequence, Peppercanister 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. In this order each pamphlet foregrounds the immediate local context for the poetry, emphasizing Kinsella's desire that these poems have a direct effect on the cultural politics of Ireland, especially Dublin. *One Fond Embrace* (1988) reads as a flyting response to a series of political and cultural figures, such as Charles Haughey, Edna Longley, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and unnamed town planners, architects, and bureaucrats. In the pamphlet's single poem, Kinsella defends his poetics, emphasizes his poetry's foundations on the historical and geographical grounds of Dublin, and attacks the contemporary political, social, and economic environment of Dublin, especially in relation to its destruction of old areas and buildings. The lyrics of *Personal Places* (1990) continue to represent the relationship between Kinsella's imagination, based on familial memories located in particular places, and the destruction of those places. The poem "Night Conference, Wood Quay: 6 June 1979," as Maurice Harmon points out, concerns public protests about Dublin's redevelopment of Wood Quay, of which Kinsella was a significant opponent (2008: 173). *Poems from Centre City* (1990) continues the investigation of private memory and public events through the medium of Dublin and its places but extends its historical focus through its allusions to James Joyce, who becomes an exemplary figure because of what Kinsella sees as his emphasis on the realities of Dublin city life. (It is also perhaps a response to a very different representation of Joyce as exemplary figure in Heaney's *Station Island*.) In contrast *Madonna and Other Poems* (1991) is a series of more personal lyrics revolving around Kinsella's mother, and *Open Court* (1990) contains Dante-esque satiric encounters with a number of poets that ends in "Dream" with an image of the poets as "ghosts" who "are merely shaking their heads" (2001: 322) and who reveal an Irish poetic world, in

Tubridy's words, "lacking dynamism or purpose" (2001: 212). In short, the Peppercanister volumes emphasize the pressing, contingent, and local contexts of the poems and seek to intervene in immediate Dublin and Irish political and cultural questions.

In 1994 Kinsella collected these poems in a volume published by Oxford University Press which he called *From Centre City*. In arranging this volume, Kinsella kept the sequence of Peppercanister pamphlets and the order of the poems in these pamphlets, but he removed the pamphlets' titles and added three short untitled lyrics to the *Open Court* poems to end the volume. (These three lyrics later became part of a longer sequence, "Glenmacnass," and were published in the 2000 Peppercanister pamphlet, *Littlebody*.) *From Centre City* begins with the poem, "One Fond Embrace," and then is divided into four sections, corresponding to the four other Peppercanister pamphlets, numbered by roman numerals. This division into five (prologue and four parts) and the lack of subtitles suggest not only that the collection should be read as one long sequence but also that it alludes to the five-part structure, we described earlier, of such modernist poems as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Bunting's *Briggflatts*. Accordingly, Kinsella's volume now emphasizes his poetry's transnational connections and his modernist poetic lineage. The poems also suggest a poetic journey, as they begin with the initial attack in "One Fond Embrace" on Irish political and cultural figures and move through the relationship between public and private places in Sections I and II, a relationship that becomes more immediate and personal with the poems in Section III, especially those on his mother. This, in turn, implies an investigation of Kinsella's subconscious motivations and structures – and Kinsella's has had a deep interest in Jung – that leads to the final Dante-esque journey of "Open Court." However, rather than ending with the apathetic poetic ghosts of the Peppercanister *Open Court*, the three additional lyrics end with the poet's escape from the Underworld and lead to a renewed declaration of Kinsella's poetic vocation as he claims his difference from the poetry and poetics of his day with the volume's final lines: "I turned away in refusal,/and held a handful of high grass/sweet and grey to my face" (1994: 69).

Kinsella is perhaps exceptional in the meticulous and varied ways in which he uses the structure of the slim volume not only to construct meanings for poems but also to alter their meanings. However, all poets carefully think of the arrangement of their collections, recognizing it offers them the ability to extend significance between, among, and through the

individual poems themselves. Indeed, length and the long poem have remained a constant preoccupation for postwar poets, and we have only been able to examine in this chapter a few poems from the multiplicity of examples. We want to end, however, not by listing all the titles we could have looked at, but by pointing out that in spite of what we believe is the importance and power of the varieties of long poems, they remain relatively untaught and unexamined. Once again institutional structures influence what poetry is read and taught. Long poems are rarely in anthologies, and if they are, they tend to be excerpted and teachers need to spend many more class sessions to cover a single long poem. Long poems are also harder to set for timed examinations. Nevertheless, the long poem has survived and thrived in postwar British and Irish poetry, and it shows every evidence of continuing to do so in the twenty-first century whatever its position on syllabi and curricula.

Subject To, Subject Of

For much of its history, English poetry (the poetry of England, but also poetry written in the English language elsewhere) has been dominated by an apparently stable and confident first-person speaker, the person who calls himself or herself “I” and who reports on his or her experiences, interpretations, and emotional states. “I” has done, seen, heard, felt, and thought many things during the last few hundred years, from knowing where an elusive deer might be found to having his senses pained by a drowsy numbness, from marking marks of weakness and woe to drowning while being mistaken for waving. And while “I” has often been distressed and has sometimes contemplated the fact that “I” must eventually cease to be, “I” has, by and large, been pretty confident about his or her coherence, continuity, and (until death, at least) existence.

Grammatically, the speaking “I” is the subject of sentences (“I” is the first-person singular pronoun in the nominative, or subjective, case). The person named by the pronoun is known as the subject, whether actual or fictional. (Although we are suggesting in this chapter that the persona in a poem is always fictional even if it is supposed to refer to an actual person.) In everyday and commonsense speech, we tend to assume a lot about the subject, whether as the speaker in a lyric poem or as a person going about daily routines. I simply am, and when I talk about myself I know the self I talk about. I can point to myself: I can recall my past; and I can name my sensations and feelings and thoughts, confident that they originate within and belong to me. When we think more systematically and rigorously about this quality of being (subjectivity), though, we realize that our

assumptions aren't as firmly grounded as we think. We change our minds, for example, so that what we think on one day is not necessarily what we thought the day before and might not be what we think the next day. If our thoughts are the basis of our continuity, then we are as changeable as we are stable. Since we remember our past thoughts, opinions, and feelings, perhaps memory is the foundation of our coherence as subjects. However, memory is itself shifting, partial, and incomplete, leading to the conclusion that our "selves" are as well. Biologists tell us that the cells that make up our bodies are constantly replacing themselves and physicists inform us that our smallest particles are in constant movement. Even at the most fundamentally material level, then, we are anything but constant and continuous.

Thinkers such as Michel Foucault, who are often labeled "poststructuralists," have gone even further in questioning the nature of the subject and in ways that are especially important for postwar poetry. These theorists and others suggest, among other things, that we have put the cart before the horse when we think of ourselves (subjects) as producers of language. In fact, we could see ourselves as produced by language. That first-person singular pronoun, which we assume humans sometime in the distant past came up with in order to name themselves, should more accurately be seen as the means by which we came to conceive of ourselves as "selves," as the individual subjects not just of grammatical utterances but of our very lives. In books such as *The History of Sexuality*, *Madness and Civilization*, and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argued that subjects are produced not only in and through language but also, and significantly, through the specific *discourses* of social institutions and practices. Each of us is the subject of medical discourse, for example, and, at the same time, the subject of educational, legal, political, and numerous other discourses. Think of every institution that might have in its cabinet a file with your name on it. You are a subject of the discourse associated with each of those institutions. And because the priorities and practices, the assumptions and values, of each of those discourses are different, you are a different kind of subject in each case. For Foucault, what holds all of these disparate yous together is simply social convention.

The term "self" suggests an agent, an originator of intention and action, and assumes a certain amount of power available that this self can exercise. The term subject, on the other hand, leads us to think about power differently. The phrase "subject of," as in "subject of the sentence," emphasizes the subject's agency, but the phrase "subject to" locates the subject as the recipient rather than the originator or exerciser of power. We are subject *to*

laws and rules, subject *to* the wills and whims of others. We are *subjected*. Even when we are the subjects of our own sentences, we are subject both to the rules of grammar and to other tacitly agreed-upon, but largely invisible, conventions.

What, you might be wondering, does all this have to do with poetry? Well, there are at least three things. Firstly, much of the important and innovative thought about subjectivity in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s concerned itself with the production of the subject in and through language and discourse. Language is poetry's province, so poetry – as a kind of language use that privileges the qualities of language-as-language – is a place where the nature of what language produces could be seen as a central preoccupation. Secondly, many poets, aware of the new philosophical and political thinking about the subject, used their poems as fields to explore subjectivity itself. Thirdly, the British literary marketplace in the 1950s and after became newly open not only to poems experimenting with ideas of subjectivity but more importantly to poems by kinds of subjects who had previously had little access to the means of literary production, including women, people of color, working-class writers, and writers from the regional and colonial peripheries.

The latter point has sometimes occasioned two misunderstandings or oversimplifications we want to avoid from the outset. First, there is an often unstated assumption that poets from social groups and cultural locations “on the margins” are somehow parochial. While the themes and experiences of poets from the cultural “center” are claimed to be universal, understandable to, and sharable by all sorts of readers, those of, say, women poets or black poets are often thought to be of interest only to women readers or black readers. This incorrect assumption proceeds from the fact that culturally central identities (by which is meant, most of the time, the subject position of the middle-class white male) tend to be *unmarked*, while so-called “marginal” identities are *marked*. The unmarked is positioned as the universal, while the marked becomes limited to its own sphere. At the same time, there is often a second assumption that while writers from unmarked social locations have wide-ranging interests, writers from marked locations are interested only in their own specific identities, communities, and subjectivities. This latter assumption has given rise to both defenses and denunciations of a poetics of identity (corollary, often, to “identity politics”).

We can go some way toward avoiding these faulty assumptions if we think of poets as located within a matrix that combines poets' subject

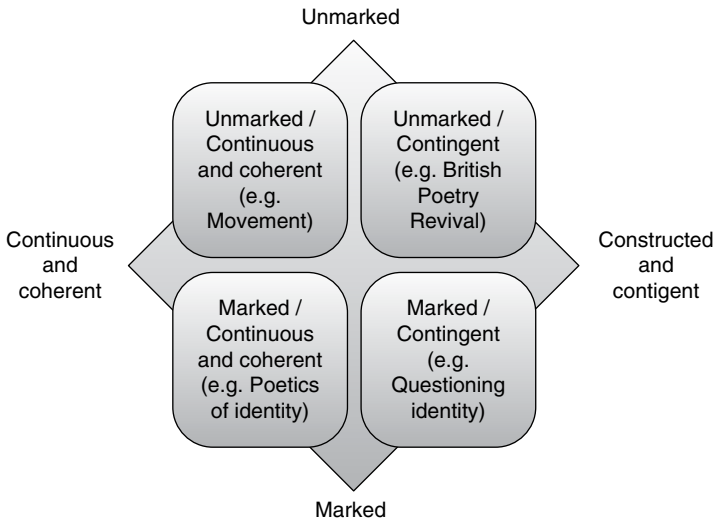


Figure 8.1 Graphing identity and subjectivity.

positions and their own ideas about subjectivity. David Kellogg's essay, "The Self in the Poetic Field," provides us with a means to map these ideas about the subject. There he "suggest[s] a structure for contemporary American poetry" by constructing a grid with two axes (a vertical and a horizontal one) whose poles are tradition/innovation and self/community (2000: 97–98), and this grid enables him to map and bring together an enormous variety of contemporary American poets and poetries. Accordingly, we will use his model here (Figure 8.1), but rename his terms. Imagine instead a graph whose vertical axis runs from unmarked identities to marked and whose horizontal axis extends from the assumption that selfhood is continuous and coherent to the notion that subjectivities or identities are contingent and changeable.

Around the intersection of these axes, we have four quadrants. In the upper left, we can locate poets from unmarked social locations (largely middle-class white male poets) for whom identity is a settled question (often so completely settled that it does not even suggest itself as a theme). In the upper-right quadrant, we find poets whose identities are unmarked but whose ideas about identity are very different; they see subjectivity as produced rather than given, as unstable and indeterminate, and, more often than not, as linguistically generated. In addition, because subjectivity is a live question, it often occurs as a theme in these poets'

work. The bottom-left quadrant includes those poets whose identities are marked (women poets, poets of color) and for whom identity (however “problematic” it might be in political terms) seems settled and fixed, while on the lower right, we find poets whose identities are marked but for whom identity itself is a problem (in the philosophical sense – something to be probed, explored, and questioned).

In what follows, we discuss some representative poets from each of these quadrants in order to sketch the wide variety of ways in which subjectivity and the category of the subject are active in British and Irish poetry of the last half century. Since we treat elsewhere a good deal of poetry that might be located in the upper two quadrants of our graph, we will treat them fairly briefly here. In the bulk of this chapter, we focus on two groups of poets whose identities are, in one way or another, “marked”: those for whom identity is given rather than constructed and is, therefore, a political problem and those for whom identity is constructed rather than given and is, therefore, a philosophical as well as a political problem. We want to emphasize that this is a heuristic and in no way definitive.

The Upper Left : Unmarked / Continuous and Coherent

The upper-left quadrant of the graph is epitomized by (though certainly not limited to) the “Movement” poets, writers like Philip Larkin, John Wain, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Robert Conquest, and the early Thom Gunn. The “Movement” was christened as such by *Spectator* editor D.J. Scott in 1954, and the poets appeared together (among others) in two anthologies edited by poets in the group: *Poets of the 1950s* (1955), edited by Enright, and *New Lines* (1956), which Robert Conquest edited. These poets shared not only an antipathy to what they saw as various sorts of “excess” (from the hyper-romanticism of Dylan Thomas to the hyper-experimentalism of T.S. Eliot) but also a certainty about who they were and how what mattered to them must matter in general. Against what Conquest, in his Introduction to *New Lines*, characterizes as 1940s poetry’s “mistake” of “giving the Id a sound player on the percussion side” (1956: xi), the Movement poets represented “a sound and fruitful attitude to poetry,” an attitude whose key components are empiricism, determinable meaning, and a “refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language” (xiv–xv). We will have more to say about the Movement in Chapter 9, and Blake Morrison has quite a lot to say about

it in his 1980 book, *The Movement*, (see Morrison 1980), but for our purposes here, we will draft one poet associated with the Movement – Donald Davie – to represent this quadrant of our graph.

Davie was both an important poet (author of more than ten volumes of verse) and an articulate advocate for the poetic principles of the Movement. In his 1952 study, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, Davie writes “to dislocate syntax in poetry is to threaten the rule of law in the civilized community” (1952: 99). For Davie, the English language when cast into the rhetorical, syntactic, and poetic forms inherited from the English poetic tradition and used to name, describe, and interpret the experience of Englishmen in an England whose past informed its present could help to condition England and Englishness against all that threatened them during the Cold War’s era of cultural upheaval. We realize that, especially in the context of a chapter like this one, that last sentence might sound judgmental or pejorative. It is, though, a fairly straightforward paraphrase of Davie’s own descriptions of his aims, and Davie was a poet able to bring powerful poetry out of those intentions.

In his 1969 poem, “A Conditioned Air,” for example, we see Davie’s linguistic, rhetorical, historical, and literary preoccupations (as well as his assumptions about subjectivity) producing a devastating and yet quietly affirmative portrait of the English poet in an impoverished English (literal and cultural) landscape. The poem opens with familiarity:

A wind I know blows dirt
In and out of the town that I was born in,
The same wind blowing the same dirt in and out.
(2002: 194)

Davie’s language here enacts what the lines describe; just as the speaker has become familiar with the town and the wind through repeated experience of them, we experience the repetition of “wind,” “dirt,” “in and out,” and, especially as the poem continues, “same.” This atmosphere of sameness elicits a desire for inspiration. Davie turns in the next lines to pose against this “same wind” a more dramatic and, perhaps, inspiring one (a “cloud-cleaving/Typhoon of Crusoe”) and to address, in an apostrophe, the Romantic poets (“Masters of the last century”) whose “hunger for afflatus” produced such works as Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.” Initially, the contrast seems at first to cast a dull present against a past imagined as less dull, a present characterized by repetition against a past seen as original. The “Masters” of the past, though,

had no typhoon either. Poets past and present, Davie suggests, either share the same wind as their inspiration or share the same desire for inspiration figured as a new, exotic, or more powerful wind (a “Typhoon of Crusoe” to “satisfy your hunger for afflatus”). When we put the oblique references to predecessor poets together with the title’s pun – “air” can refer not only to the wind but also to a song or poem – we see that the relationship developed in the first few lines is most pressingly and intimately felt in terms of how the poet – whether Davie or a predecessor – is or is not inspired.

Davie gives the problem of inspiration a twist, though, because he suffers not only the repetitive sameness registered in the first lines but also a sense of troubled and attenuated connection. Where the wind to which Coleridge (who might hover behind the reference to a “plaint in the mouth of the hearth”) and Shelley “attended” had both emotional and national significance (it “Was a draught in the flue of England”), Davie writes of himself “I attend/How the electric motor/Gulps and recovers.” His link to “England” is not immediate or natural; he has no inspiring wind whistling down the nation’s chimney. It is, instead, mediated by electric power and mass culture, by the motor and the television. And even that mediated connection is threatened since a high wind “Out in the country” (and so not even present in the town) “slaps at a power line.” This makes the electric motor gulp and in the uncertainty and pulsing of the power “The image on the television screen/Contracts and distends like a reptilian eye” (2002: 194). That “high wind” is, on the one hand, figuratively linked to inspiration and the tradition of inspired poetry. On the other hand, it is destructive, a figure for rapid social change and disorder. The wind not only messes with the picture on the poet’s TV, but it also destroys the country’s trees and has destroyed its past poets, as well; the “branches suffer” “much as you did.” We might at this point pause to see how Davie places himself in a tradition that includes not only the poets who courted inspiration but also those, like the Yeats of “A Prayer for My Daughter,” for example, who feared storms (literal and figurative) and sought protection from them in the aristocracy, its estates, and its custom and ceremony. While the “Masters of the last/Century” suffered “Retardations” in the howling winds of inspiration and political upheaval, Davie subtly but emphatically turns from them to the “quietly blasting/Hot-air grille.” Though he stands before an “empty hearth,” bereft of the fire around which a community might coalesce, and though he occupies “an unfocused house” (a house which is etymologically without a fireplace as its central point), Davie does have an alternative “wind” to which to attend. The

house's heating system produces "conditioned airs," quiet and artificial but effective, and the poet in this setting produces his own "conditioned air," his song tamed by and for and to this setting and these circumstances. Rather than the winds of change, he chooses comfortable domesticity – as both setting and style – and offers these as what he has learned to love "as small as that is," for its quietly effective way of keeping inspiration, and its dangers, at bay. And, given the pun we mentioned before, this resolution stands for the poetry Davie prefers (and writes) as well.

The Upper Right : Unmarked / Contingent and Constructed

Another name for the upper-left-hand quadrant of our graph, at least through the 1970s, might be "the British poetry mainstream." The dominant, most accessible, most familiar, and most widely read poetry magazines were filled with poems by poets whose identity was conventionally unmarked (by, again, mostly middle-class, educated, white men) who assumed the coherence and continuity of their own subjectivity and of subjectivity in general. Such poems also filled the books produced by the largest presses with the largest sales, and these books were reviewed in the large-circulation magazines and won the majority of the honors and prizes given for poetry. By the 1960s, however, a good deal of poetry in the British Isles questioned the assumptions undergirding mainstream poetry and a growing networks of poets, little magazines, small presses, and reading series made up a sort of alternative universe. Here the modernist "excess" abjured by the Movement poets was instead mined for techniques and inspiration, and the straightforward and accessible language and the traditional forms of the mainstream poets were replaced by difficult or abstruse language and experimental forms that called into question the very subject assumed and expressed in the mainstream. We should emphasize here, however, that this alternative universe was, especially early on, also largely run and populated by poets whose identities were conventionally unmarked (by, i.e., mostly middle-class, university-educated white men).

If the poets of the Movement illustrate the first quadrant of our graph, this second quadrant might well be illustrated by poets associated with the "British Poetry Revival" of the 1960s and 1970s, poets whose work was gathered in such polemical anthologies as Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville's 1987 *A Various Art* and Eric Mottram's "A Treacherous

Assault on British Poetry” section of the 1988 anthology, *The New British Poetry*. These poets include (along with the editors themselves) Asa Benveniste, Bob Cobbing, Allen Fisher, Roy Fisher, Lee Harwood, John James, Barry MacSweeney, Jeff Nuttall, Douglas Oliver, J.H. Prynne, Tom Pickard, Tom Raworth, John Riley, Peter Riley, and Iain Sinclair. As with the Movement, we have more to say about the British Poetry Revival in Chapter 9. What is important to know here is that, for all the differences in specific influences (some poets were captivated by the American Beat or Black Mountain or New York schools, for instance) and in specific stylistic commitments or thematic interests, these poets generally shared a skepticism about commonsense assumptions regarding the subject and a dedication to exploring this in their work. Where the mainstream work of Movement poets (and many others) set out to express, however ironically, the emotional experience of the poet (or, less often, a character invented by the poet), the work of the Revival poets set out to explore the ways emotions, experiences, and the experiencing consciousness themselves were produced by language. They turned their attention to the means of perception rather than (or at least in addition to) the thing perceived.

We can see some of the differences between Movement and Revival preoccupations and poetics in the opening gambits of a few poems drawn from *A Various Art*:

I am from language and will return to language
& no one will know
what else I might have been

storm waves blot out the lights
along the seafront of Hove and Brighton

...

I wasn't there
(Peter Riley, “I am from language and will
return to language” [Crozier and
Longville 1987: 299])

The qualities as they continue are the silk under the hand; because their celestial progress, across the sky, is so hopeless & so to be hoped for. I hope for silk, always, and the strands are not pure though the name is so. The name is the sidereal display, it is what we *know* we cannot now have.

The last light is the name it carries,
it is this binds us to our unbroken trust.

(J.H. Prynne, "Sketch for a Financial
Theory of the Self" [Crozier and
Longville 1987: 233])

You know I'm working Jan, you know
I am John. From up here your chairs
scrape oceanically all the time and
birds shriek, sheafs
of first drafts wing from my desk.
These will I'm writing, don't think of
floating paper darts from a
cliff-face.

(Douglas Oliver, "When I Was in
Bridport" [Crozier and Longville 1987: 197])

I begin with a name. It isn't you
profiled against an orange skyline.
Nor the light that dazzled me when I opened a door
and realized after, I don't know how long
I stood there holding on to the doorknob, I faced
due west. It is early morning in March
which is the name of nothing I might hold to
since I can speak only from my temporary place
in the solar system.

(Andrew Crozier, "February Evenings"
[Crozier and Longville 1987: 69])

At first glance, the poems might not seem so different from something like Davie's "A Conditioned Air." Their lines generally proceed from the left margin; their sentences tend, or appear, to be complete and grammatical. And there is no shortage of first-person pronouns, singular in the excerpts by Riley, Oliver, and Crozier, plural in the passage from Prynne. Upon closer reading, though, we see that skepticism about the subject and their attention to the means by which the subject and its interiority are constructed rather than given. These are present in the titles of Riley's and Prynne's poems; Riley explicitly links subject to language and Prynne locates the genesis of the "self" in the history of commodities and their trade. In Oliver's and Crozier's cases, their close attention to time and space overturns commonsense assumptions so that the subject becomes a function of the means of perception rather than the generator.

Tom Raworth has made a compelling career of restlessly experimenting with poetic means for decentering the speaking subject. These range from the epigrammatic to the epic, from long poems consisting of single-word lines to long poems consisting of prose-like blocks, and from sequences of something like sonnets to sequences of something like journal entries. At one end of one continuum, we find a poem like “Reference,” which reads, in its entirety:

this is the poem from which i quote
 ‘this is the poem from which i quote.’
 (1984: 73)

The question of whether the “I” that quotes preexists the “I” quoted is rendered unanswerable and infinitely circular. Elsewhere, Raworth goes on at length to show the processes of perception and interpretation without grounding them in an identifiable or coherent “I.” In “Pretense,” we find sixteen blocks of prose, the sentences precisely describing objects and sensory experience, but providing no continuous consciousness (a speaking “i” appears from time to time, but nothing suggests this “i” is the same from one appearance to another) to organize or ground the impressions:

a shiny black coffin inlaid with silver diamonds. face more perfect than life.
 simple problems. removing the area of revulsion (for want of a better word).
 capsules of air beneath the city: around them cartoon cats’ eyes blink in the
 dark: above them molecules flash back to their past.
 (1984: 170)

In some of his earlier work, Raworth dramatizes the desire for, and problems with, subjective coherence, foregrounding language itself among those problems through practices like incremental repetition (as in the well-known and anthologized “You’ve Ruined My Evening/You’ve Ruined My Life”):

i would be eight people and then the difficulties vanish
 only as one i contain the complications
 in a warm house roofed with the rib-cage of an elephant
 i pass my grey mornings re-running the reels
 and the images are the same but the emphasis shifts.
 (1984: 32)

The poem repeats and reshuffles the words and images of these lines, performing something very much like what Raworth describes in the last

two lines quoted here, a rerunning of frames so that while the elements are consistent, their significance changes. This may be as illustrative an example as we can offer of the questions and tactics that characterize a good deal of experimental poetry since the 1960s that critically and skeptically examines the “self” often taken for granted in most poetry of the 1950s and after.

The Lower Left : Marked / Continuous and Coherent

At about the same time as many poets undertook skeptical explorations of the subject’s contingency, many poets from groups that had historically been largely excluded from the poetry publishing world (poets of color, women poets, and more) finally found access to the means of literary production and circulation. Beginning in the 1950s, women poets were increasingly able to publish their work in magazines, to have their books published by presses both small and large, to get their books reviewed, and to be taken seriously as poets. One key factor in this increasing access was the broader movement for political and social equality for women, and another was the rise of informal networks of women writers who provided each other mutual support through workshops, publishing collectives, and other means. In a similar way, postwar immigration that brought young writers from South Asia and the Caribbean to London and to British universities led to a slow and fitful opening of the poetry publishing world to poets of color. For many poets among both of these groups (and something similar could be said of many working-class poets and poets from “peripheral” regions of the British Isles), their marked identity suggested a fixed and given nature of the subject. There was nothing contingent or contestable about one’s identity, it seemed to many, if that identity was rooted in the phenotypical facts of skin color or genitalia. These factors had long kept them marginalized from the literary spheres, especially the poetic mainstream. Now that they were able to publish their work, that work would often forcefully emphasize the poets’ identity. While some critics in the mainstream would find this poetry to be parochial in its interests (as if the interests of middle-class white men were universal), the experiences distinctive to women and to people of color were now available for poetic expression.

That last word – “expression” – is an important one for much women’s poetry produced during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. As Linda Kinnahan

points out, the “flowering of poetry by women” during these decades, which “featured a lyric ‘I’ speaking directly and accessibly of her life as a woman,” is often called the “‘expressive’ mode of feminist poetics” (2009: 180–81). Kinnahan nicely summarizes the imperatives and justifications for this mode of women’s poetry:

Just as the women’s movement of the 1970s raised urgent questions about women’s voice, identity, and experience, the explosive upsurge of poetry by women at this time asserted the legitimacy of the female-marked ‘I’ of the lyric poem, directly challenging condescending attitudes toward women’s poetry as narrow, trivial, emotional, sentimental, home-bound, or private (and not ‘universal’ in its focus on female spheres or activities).

(2009: 181)

To characterize poems as “expressive,” of course, is to gather them on the basis of one similarity in a way that obscures other significant differences (of theme, of style, and so on). So while we are going to touch on a number of poets whose work is in the “expressive” mode, we want to keep the differences visible and to attend to their significance. To that end, it is useful to group poets and poems within the “expressive” mode. In the next few pages, we will discuss some poems that make women’s experience central in direct and accessible ways, some poems that directly address (and seek to revise or resist) the ways women have been silenced and objectified in the arts, and some poems that take an explicitly ironic stance toward the experiences and expressions they offer.

To make “women’s experience” central is to render visible and meaningful some activities, relationships, and perspectives typically left unaddressed in poetry (on the assumption that they are not “universally” meaningful). The work of keeping house and caring for children, for example, does not receive a great deal of attention in the canonical traditions of British and Irish poetry, and when it does (in a poem like Yeats’s “A Prayer for My Daughter,” for example), it is only to provoke a move to questions of “universal” value; while Yeats opens his poem with concern for the baby daughter threatened by the storm, both storm and daughter quickly become figures for the abstractions with which the poem is really concerned. Gillian Allnutt’s selection of “Quote Feminist Unquote Poetry” in *The New British Poetry*, however, includes poems that focus explicitly and solely on childbirth, child raising, and housekeeping. Jeni Couzyn’s “Cartography of the Subtle Heart” (Allnutt et al. 1988: 89) finds

transformative sweetness in the birth of the poet's daughter, while Angie Gilligan's "Household Dilemma" makes a sharp point about the unpleasantness of cleaning "the little plates/in the sink/and the big spoon/and the baked beany pan," an unpleasantness avoided by mother and children alike (1988: 97), and Caroline Halliday deploys a knowing bathos in an "ode to my daughter's plimsolls and the mess in her room" (1988: 101).

Such activities are sometimes elevated to sacramental status, as in Eavan Boland's "Domestic Interior" sequence (1982). Nursing a baby, taking a young child out for a walk with bicycle and teddy bear, rocking a cradle, and getting a child to sleep are all held up as activities that, in their enactment of relationship, provide meaning to the speaker's life. While in "Monotony," the speaker wonders, as she goes through the house "sheafing nappies," whether "at these altars,/warm shrines,/washing machines, dryers," she is "priestess/or sacrifice" (1990: 141), in "Hymn" she compares the routines of baby feeding and bottle washing to the Incarnation. The nursery lamp is "the star/of my nativity," the nursery is an altar at which "the psalter of dawn" is recited, and "the world/was made flesh" (in a near-quotation from the Gospel of John) (1990: 144). In her "Letter from a Far Country," Gillian Clarke at once establishes housework as the drudgery that keeps her from the "far country" of writing and of the imagination and sees in it the ritual and sacred performance of love. On the one hand, cleaning house and caring for the family is simply labor, comparable to that of a snow plough or road sweeper:

The washing machine drones
in the distance. From time to time
as it falls silent I fill baskets
with damp clothes and carry them
into the garden, hang them out.
(1997: 45)

The speaker polishes furniture, organizes chests and cupboards, and cooks and cans, but laundry seems to be the never-ending and omnipresent, even the defining activity:

We have been counting,
folding, measuring, making,
tenderly laundering cloth
ever since we have been women.
(1997: 48)

The lists of activities, though, are also rife with metaphors that point to poetry itself. The laundry slips into the figure of waves in the sea “folded meticulously.” The jars of jams and jellies preserve past and present for the future – “Familiar days are stored whole/in bottles” – just as the poem does (1997: 49), and finally, like Boland, Clarke offers her housework in terms of Eucharistic ritual:

It is easy to make of love
these ceremonials. As priests
we fold cloth, break bread, share wine,
hope there’s enough to go round.

(1997: 50)

These poets all seek to balance the undeniable dullness and difficulty of household labor with its significance as the practice of care, to set the time it takes away from the work of poetry against the ways it might resemble, and might energize, poetry. By so doing, they transvalue both traditional female labor and the traditional content of poetry.

That the female subject has, for most of literary history, been an object for the use of male poets is a truism against which many women poets of the 1960s and after have explicitly rejected. Poems that set out to revise the traditional male subject/female object relationship take a variety of forms. In some, the conventions of love poetry are simply held in place with the roles reversed, so that the woman speaks, describes, desires, and remembers. This is the approach the Irish poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill takes in “*Gan do Chid Eadaigh*” (translated, by Paul Muldoon, as “Nude”). “The long and short/of it is I’d far rather see you nude,” the poem begins, and Ni Dhomhnaill pursues the convention of the blazon – the serial description of one after another of the beloved’s physical attributes, familiar from Donne’s “Elegy XIX: On His Mistress Going to Bed,” and already ironized by Shakespeare in Sonnet 130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”) – with a subversive enthusiasm:

Your broad, sinewy
shoulders and your flank
smooth as the snow
on a snow-bank.

Your back, your slender waist,

and, of course,
the root that is the very seat
of pleasure, the pleasure-source.

(1993: 92–93)

Just as Donne's poem, itself participating in a tradition extending back to the Hebrew Song of Songs, links the body of the mistress to a desired land, and just as centuries of Irish poets have deployed the blazoned woman as a figure for Eire, or Ireland, Ni Dhomhnaill associates the body of her male beloved with features of the landscape. Her awareness of the tradition is especially apparent in the poem's concluding gesture, when she admits that, though she prefers her lover nude, he'd better wear clothes to the dance so as not to drive the women of Ireland mad (as the various female personifications of Ireland were believed to drive men mad with the desire to liberate and protect her).

Often, the poet takes explicit aim at the traditions that have silenced women. We can see this in a number of poems on the theme of the artist's model. While the artist is a creative agent, imposing his will on the materials of paint or clay or stone, the model is simply a medium. While she might mutely inspire, she remains inactive, preserved by the artist's genius, perhaps, but captured in a way that renders her object rather than subject. This has been a preoccupation of Eavan Boland's throughout her career. Her 1967 volume, *New Territory*, includes "From the Painting *Back from Market* by Chardin," in which Boland sympathetically renders the figure in Chardin's painting and disparages the artist. Boland moves seamlessly from description of the woman as she appears in the painting, her clothes and expression, to the inner life these things suggest. In the painted eyes, the poet sees evidence of dreams, of love. The artist, though, "has fixed/Her limbs in color and her heart in line" (1996: 18). Abstracted into form, the woman-as-subject becomes an object, and this transformation prompts the poet to "think of what great art removes:/Hazard and death. The future and the past./A woman's secret history and her loves." Fifteen years later, in "Degas's Laundresses" (published in Boland's 1982 volume, *Night Feed*), the critique is more pointed still. The first half of the poem (three of its six six-line stanzas) focuses on the laundresses. The verbs of Boland's sentences take the present tense and the indicative mood as if to animate (or reanimate) the figures Degas represents. The laundresses "rise," the "seam dreams" (1996: 115). They are "roll-sleeved Aphrodites," goddesses who love

and live. With the introduction of the painter, however, the poem takes a sinister tone:

Wait. There behind you.
A man. There behind you.
Whatever you do don't turn.
(1996: 18)

The male artist now becomes the central figure and the active agent. He stakes his easel, sharpens his charcoal. Boland's diction suggests the violence in artistic representation (and a phallic dimension that genders the violence), and she makes these implications explicit when the poem's concluding line figures the painter's mind as the laundresses' "winding sheet," – their burial shroud.

Sympathetic as they are to their female subjects, these poems of Boland do not give them voices of their own. In "Not My Best Side," U.A. Fanthorpe provides voices for all three figures in a painting of St. George slaying a dragon. The "hero," who speaks last in the poem, is quite critically depicted. Armed not only with his sword but also with "diplomas in Dragon/Management and Virgin Reclamation," he wonders aloud at the dragon's resistance to playing its scripted part, to the damsel's desire for a better role. He concludes by silencing his fellow portrait objects: "What, in any case, does it matter what/You want? You're in my way" (2005: 43). St. George sounds especially terrible speaking after the much more sympathetic dragon, who simply complains that the artist did not allow him to "pose properly," that he has been misrepresented, but also that both his victim and his enemy have been badly portrayed too. Most justified in her complaints, the woman threatened by the dragon and rescued by the knight speaks in the poem's middle section. "It's hard for a girl to be sure if/She wants to be rescued," she begins, and Fanthorpe allows her all the ambivalence inherent in the subject position of woman constructed by a culture that values the virtues of the knight. At least the dragon liked her and paid attention to her. And the dragon sported a "sexy tail." As appealing as the dragon is to her, and as unappealing as the knight threatens to be (invisible beneath his armor's "machinery," "He might have acne, blackheads even,/Bad breath for all I could tell"), she is unfortunately stuck with the few options made available to her by the system. Once the dragon is defeated, she has no choice but to go off with the knight: "a girl's got to think of her future" (2005: 42–3).

Carol Ann Duffy's "Standing Female Nude" (1985) goes further still. Duffy not only makes the artist's model the poem's speaker and agent, she also offers, from the model's point of view, a critical stance toward the male artist who would silence and (mis)represent her. "Six hours like this for a few francs," the poem opens:

Belly nipple arse in the window light,
he drains the colour from me. Further to the right,
Madame. And do try to be still.
I shall be represented analytically and hung
in great museums.

(1985: 46)

The artist controls and quiets his model. His work takes her to pieces ("analytically" means, literally, as if taking apart). And Duffy's enjambment leaves us suspended on "hung" just long enough to hear and feel the violence (as if hanged by the neck) beneath the surface here. Over the course of the poem, though, the model gets to make her own judgments. She contrasts the painter's concern with the elements of representation ("volume, space") against her own more worldly concern "with the next meal." She lives in the world of appetite and feeling. Her body responds to the cold of the studio. The difference here is not that the painter escapes the bodily; the model tells us that at times, when his concentration fails, he "stiffens for my warmth." Where she consciously accepts and engages her bodily position in the world, the painter evades and sublimates it. Sexually tempted by the model (who also works as a prostitute and whose services in that line the painter cannot afford), the painter "possesses" her "on the canvas" instead, with sex at once suggested and replaced by the way he "dips the brush/repeatedly into the paint." He is, for these reasons, in the eye of the model at least, a "little man," not at all superior to her. And indeed, by the end of the poem, Duffy's speaker has asserted her superiority to the painter. She inhabits her body with awareness and pleasure, and while she has to sell her "art," at least she acknowledges this. Finally, the speaker judges the painter's attempt to render her and finds it to be unsuccessful. Shown the finished painting, she simply asks for her payment and her shawl (with the latter image she reclaims control of her body by recovering it) and says "It does not look like me" (1985: 46).

With the dramatic monologue, we enter the broader realm of the persona poem, in which a speaker *not* (or not immediately or necessarily) identified

with the poet does the expressive lyric work, and the adjacent realm of the third-person character poem, in which a narrative voice reports on the subjective experience of a named and described figure. The 1980s saw several instances of what we might call persona and character series – groups of poems in which the same persona appears. In Jo Shapcott’s “Mad Cow” poems and Grace Nichols’s “fat black woman” poems, the personae enable a balance between the lyric poem’s expressive mode and an ironic distance that shows the subject whose emotions and reactions are expressed to be itself a construction.

Nichols grew up in Guyana, on the coast of South America (a British colony until 1966), and after studying at the University of Guyana and working as a journalist and teacher, she moved to England in 1977. In her 1984 collection, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, Nichols develops a type – the “fat black woman” of the title – through whom to explore the experience of a subject marginalized in multiple ways, on the basis of her race, her sex, her size, and her implicit colonial status. In “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” (not included in that volume but appearing in Tuma’s Oxford *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British Poetry* and in *New British Poetry*, edited by Don Paterson and Charles Simic), Nichols contrasts two generations of such subjects, devoting the first fourteen lines of the poem to the title character’s memory of her mother before turning in the final two lines to the contemporary generation. The remembered mother is depicted in immediately recognizable stereotypical terms. She is recalled as “playing/the Jovial Jemima,” a happily nurturing “Mama” who generously cooks pancakes and cares for white children while “feeding her own children on Satanic bread” (Tuma 2001: 780). The concluding couplet suggests a simply antithetical relationship between the “Mama” and “this fat black woman,” who emphatically “ain’t no Jemima,” but a closer look at the stereotypical portrait of the mother shows that neither was she. Rather, the mother *played* the “Jovial Jemima,” the capitalized adjective advancing this as a character or mask. Her laughter, as she tosses pancakes not to the waiting white children but “to heaven,” is “murderous.” In this context, even the intimate act of “pressing” the heads of her white charges to her “big-aproned breasts” takes on a subtly threatening tone. If the pancakes are being tossed to heaven, perhaps the Satanic bread which the mother’s own children are fed is, in an inversion of typical values, a better meal.

How can that be? We should hover over the adjective, “Satanic,” for while it might seem simply to be a dramatic way to call the bread fed to the mother’s

own children evil or hellish, it is a striking and strange way to do so and that strangeness should make us pause. Satan might be a figure for evil, but he is also, if we think about his representation (as Lucifer) in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a figure for rebellion against an order that seems unjust. To feed children Satanic bread might be to nourish them with the awareness that blessings are flowing away from them and to others, to instill in them a desire to rebel against this order of things. In that case, the "But" at the beginning of the couplet means not simply that the contemporary "fat black woman" is unlike "her Mama," but also that she is able to be unlike the previous generation *because of* that "Mama" and her subtle performances of resistance.

In her "Mad Cow" poems, Jo Shapcott undertakes a critical meditation on contemporary female subjectivity in Britain. The poems appear in her second volume, *Phrase Book* (1992). That book's title poem questions the taken-for-granted identity of body and subject; while the speaker presents herself "standing here inside my skin,/which will do for a Human Remains Pouch/for the moment," she emphasizes throughout "Phrase Book" that what makes her "an Englishwoman" is the complex set of discourses by which she is informed, especially television coverage of war. The figure of the "Mad Cow" punningly condenses public health concerns about meat infected with bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE) (mad cow disease) – an outbreak of which shook British confidence in the safety of the food system during the 1980s – and insulting slang terms for a woman behaving indecorously. This condensation continues throughout the poems themselves; in them the "Mad Cow" speaks and acts as a woman driven to desperation by her desires and the ways these desires are at once constructed and thwarted by her society, but she does so in ways that also invoke the pathetic figure of the "mad cow" suffering from BSE. In "Mad Cow Dance," for example, Shapcott captures the woman's compulsion to take pleasure in and from her body, with or without the partner for whom she must compete in the "market":

I like to dance. Bang. I love to dance. Push.

It makes me savage and brilliant. Stomp. To
my own rhythm, rhythm. I lead or I don't
have a partner. No market for partners,
just this wide floor for the dance.

I think I was born here. Swoop. I don't care.

(2000: 73)

Physical movement is present as stage direction or reported action, but it is also implicitly scripted in the repetition of sounds, the repeated “I” and “an” in the first line, the “r” in the fourth, and the “I” and “r” in the last line quoted. The poem itself dances to the “rhythm, rhythm” it produces, but it also evokes, through the image of the “wide floor” and the sense of careening out of control, news footage of cows unable to stand, stumbling and falling in pens and fields. Shapcott draws the complex signification of the title figure through the poem when she later writes of the speaker’s tail banging “thwack against the backs/of my legs” or of how her muscle fibers give a charge at once electric and affective and when she writes of how the speaker and her friends will “hoof it til dawn.” By so doing, she links a woman’s desperate desire for “local pleasure” with the suffering of the diseased farm animal.

Where we might expect this connection to produce a figure of pathos, Shapcott’s insistence on her pun and the speaker’s unqualified enthusiasm in her pursuit instead render a figure that seems subtly threatening to the order that drives her “mad.” Ultimately, though, it seems that the condensation signaled by the title spells a bad end for the poem’s persona. As sentences reel on at greater length and as the described dance gets wilder, the “Mad Cow” becomes an objectified spectacle. The closing lines refer obliquely to American poet William Carlos Williams’s “The pure products of America go crazy” (often called “To Elsie”):

just watch me
become
pure product, pure

use,
pure perfume,
jasmine and fucked.

(2000: 74)

Shapcott’s echo of Williams works on multiple levels: at this point, her poem’s lines shorten to resemble the American poet’s; the phrase “pure product” recalls Williams almost directly; “jasmine” and perfume are drawn from Williams’s poem. Invisibly, but significantly, Williams describes the object of his attention, Elsie, in bovine terms (Elsie was also the name of the cartoon cow who advertised Borden’s milk). When Shapcott’s “Mad Cow” becomes “pure product,” she becomes simultaneously the singular result (the product) of the culture of consumer products that at once inflames and seeks to contain her desire and a version of Williams’s portrayal of the,

sexualized, and broken-minded Elsie. We cannot pass over the poem's very last line without comment, for the poem's final word, in this reading, emphatically points out both the speaker's objectification and its consequences. "Fucked" here suggests not only that the "Mad Cow" is available for sexual "use" (and has probably already been used in such a way) but also, in the broader colloquial sense, that she is without options or resources – powerless, doomed.

Or is she? Just as Nichols's language could be read as cutting in two ways, so that a subversive power was latent in the expression of exclusion and oppression, Shapcott's retains the possibility of resistance even in its exploration of an apparently diseased and fatal loss of control. Though "split" becomes "splats" as the "Mad Cow" dances wildly, she is the agent throughout the poem, and the addressee, the "sitting-down reader," is commanded by the speaker to listen and to watch. The outrageous dancing of the speaker and her friends is active resistance; they "kick out, kick back" against the "characters // who don't dance," against the ideas of order implicitly attributed to the reader. Against this horizon, even the closing lines might be legible as a powerful ownership of the speaker's subject position. To become "jasmine and fucked" is to become a figure for beauty, the exotic, and the sexually liberated, and to speak of becoming "jasmine and fucked," especially under the imperative of "just watch me," is to assert an aggressive capacity for desire. The power of Shapcott's poem, and of her "Mad Cow" poems in general, derives in part from this irresolvable instability. They explore and expose the contradictory ways the female subject in late twentieth-century Britain has been represented.

As should already be apparent, there is room for irony even in poems that explicitly address the problems of subjectivity and those faced by certain kinds of subjects. This irony often introduces into the poem a sense of awareness about how the represented subject is constructed (this is, perhaps, especially true in the dramatic monologue). It is important to call attention here to some poems by women in which the plight of women is held up not for sympathetic identification or political affiliation but, instead, for acidly ironic consideration. Stevie Smith, for instance, though she suffered from the limitations faced by women writers, artists, and professionals in the 1950s (and from depression that led to suicide attempts), brings the metrical and verbal resources of light verse to bear on just this plight faced by "the girl who typed the letters" in "Deeply Morbid":

Deeply morbid deeply morbid was the girl who typed the letters
Always out of office hours running with her social betters

But when daylight and the darkness of the office closed about her
 Not for this ah not for this her office colleagues came to doubt her
 It was that look within her eye
 Why did it always seem to say goodbye?

(1988: 64)

Smith exploits the ironic distance between the poem's tripping trochaic octometer and the lexical meaning of the words and phrases she repeats: "deeply morbid," "solitary," "all alone." Suspected by her co-workers of suicidal tendencies, she escapes into the National Gallery and is transported by the high romantic canvases of J.M.W. Turner. The poem refrains from any critique of the circumstances in which Joan (for that is the young woman's name) works and lives, refrains from eliciting the reader's sympathy, and instead holds Joan at a distance. In a similar way, the poem lightly treats (by literalizing) the compensations of aesthetic transport. At the museum, Joan moves from one canvas to another, seeming to turn to stone as she stands before the paintings. Eventually, the canvas she loves "more dearly" seems to call to her seductively – "Come away, come away / All alone" – and when she hesitates, the painted ocean spray reaches out and sucks her into the painting. While she disappears from daily life, the poem's speaker envies Joan (the poem offers no critical resistance to the trapping of women in the two dimensions of the painted canvas here), for she walks happily on "the painted shore," and "happy" now replaces "morbid" and "solitary" as the insistently repeated word.

And while numerous women poets of the 1960s and 1970s wrote boldly about the female body, the processes of menstruation, the pains of childbirth, and the pleasures of sex or breastfeeding, some, like Fleur Adcock, wrote in a voice closer to Philip Larkin's and distanced themselves from the celebrated body. In her 1971 poem, "Against Coupling," Adcock writes "of *not* feeling a trespassing tongue/forced into one's mouth, one's breath/smothered, nipples crushed against the/ribcage, and that metallic tingling/in the chin set off by a certain odd nerve" (2000: 49, our emphasis). But what begins by sounding like a rejection of the body turns out, instead, to be a different kind of critical exploration of female subjective experience. The problem is not sexual pleasure; it is the conventional enmeshment of that pleasure with men and the discourses of romance. The patriarchal gaze that claims it brings a young woman to awareness of her bodily desire should be avoided because it makes a woman's "own eyes blur." As stirring as it might be at first, the experience of sexual coupling quickly becomes, Adcock

writes, a “no longer novel exercise” (2000: 50). The diction here deliberately diminishes sex; where the cultural discourses of desire articulate it in terms of transport and ecstasy, Adcock reduces sex to routine, “exercise” as at once an empty practice and the movement of the body for utilitarian, rather than pleasurable, ends. Adcock blames this reduction to routine on the repetitive experience of sentimental romantic narratives. After a while, she writes, “one feels like the lady in Leeds who/had seen *The Sound of Music* eighty-six times” or has watched too many versions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as performed annually by secondary school students. In both of these narratives, “coupling” is a key issue since both work through obstacles in order to bring lovers together in comically satisfying conclusions. By so doing, both perpetuate the repetition that drains desire of pleasure by drawing it into the traces of marriage. Instead of this routinization through narrative repetition, the poem concludes by suggesting that women reclaim their bodies and their pleasure. “No need to set the scene,” Adcock writes. A few minutes of masturbation, as part of a woman’s own routine of quiet and solitary pleasures (a routine in which both body and mind are involved, through the bath and lunch on one hand and the Sunday newspapers on the other), can satisfy the body without encumbering it (or female desire) in patriarchal cultural discourses (2000: 50).

While these poems (and others like them) might signal the fictional character of the subject whose thoughts and feelings are uttered, they tend not to question the fact of subjects who have, and express, their thoughts and feelings. And much the same can be said of a good deal of the poetry published by poets of color during these decades. With new (or at least wider) access to the means of literary production, immigrant poets from former colonies in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean and poets descended from these immigrants worked to bring the authenticity of their subjective experience onto the poetic page. Where for many white women poets, the means to the articulation of authenticity lay principally in theme and imagery, for many black British poets, the means were drawn largely from vernacular language and culture, especially popular musical forms of the West Indies and the West Indian immigrant communities.

As Fred D’Aguiar polemically reminds us, “Black poetry in Britain began with the publication of Phyllis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*” in London in 1773 (1993: 51). As D’Aguiar’s own quick move to more recent poets suggests, though, it was really only two hundred years later that the work of black poets again achieved recognition

in the metropole, and when it did so (in Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Arrivants* trilogy in 1973 and Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Dread Beat an' Blood* in 1975), it sought to express the authentic subjectivity of the black poet in slang and rhythms drawn from jazz, blues, and reggae. Where D'Aguiar links the two through their early 1970s London publication, Brathwaite and Johnson represent two distinct generations of poetry from the Anglophone Caribbean; Brathwaite was born in 1930 in Bridgetown, Barbados, and published his first work in the mid-1960s (including the individual volumes that make up the *Arrivants* trilogy: *Rights of Passage*, *Masks*, and *Islands*), and Johnson was born in Chapelton, Jamaica, in 1952 (*Dread Beat an' Blood* is his second book, published just a year after his first volume, *Voices of the Living and the Dead*). Brathwaite, then, is a contemporary of Ted Hughes and Fleur Adcock, while Johnson is a contemporary of Paul Muldoon and Carol Ann Duffy.

Generation should not be called upon to explain all the differences in poetic style or in the understandings of subjectivity that inform poets' work, but it is one factor that helps to account for the different temporal emphases in Brathwaite's and Johnson's poems. Brathwaite's poems of the late 1960s ground the Barbadian subject in the history of colonialism and the practices of resistance to it, while Johnson's dramatize a West Indian immigrant subject's reaction to the contemporary pressures of prejudice in the metropolitan "center" of the former empire. A comparison will help to illustrate the point. In the next few pages, we will set Brathwaite's 1967 poem, "Calypso," alongside Johnson's 1973 poem, "Dread Beat an' Blood." Both poems include representations of cultural expression, but each positions the expression in a specific intersection of time and space and each draws from it a specific tone and conclusion.

In "Calypso," from *Rights of Passage*, Brathwaite adapts the syncretic popular music form named in the title to rehearse the history of colonial exploitation and express cultural identity and resistance. As Paul Gilroy writes, music has long been an important extra-verbal cultural resource for blacks in the circum-Atlantic world. A key to Gilroy's understanding of black intellectuals' thought is the way it insistently maintains a connection to the terror of slavery; music, he argues, is a cultural practice in which "closeness to the ineffable terrors of slavery was kept alive – carefully cultivated – in ritualized, social forms" (1993: 73). Ideas of identity and authenticity are thus developed, contested, and literally performed in black communities from the American South to the Caribbean. Calypso music, for example, originated in Trinidad and Tobago, and it exemplifies both cultural mixing

and the resourcefulness of the oppressed and silenced. Just as creole dialects formed from the interrelation of African and European languages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, calypso music combines elements of African, French, Spanish, and British music. It is also a form of cultural *marronage*; when slaves were forbidden from communicating with each other in speech, they began to sing, borrowing and adapting words from various African languages as well as the languages of the slave owners and colonial powers. This adaptation often took (and takes) the form of wordplay and syncopation. When they were forbidden from playing drums with sticks or clubs, they fashioned instruments from the cast-off detritus of trade: steel pans, dustbin lids, and, eventually, oil drums. Calypso, then, grows out of the specific history of enslaved and colonized peoples of the Caribbean islands (especially Trinidad, but also, as it spread around the region, other islands like Jamaica and Barbados).

Brathwaite's poem spends the first three of its four numbered parts narrating the colonial history of Caribbean islands (Cuba, San Domingo, Puerto Rico, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Bonaire, and, especially, Barbados and Jamaica) in a voice that performs some calypso-like styles. The creation myth that explains the islands as the result of a game of ducks and drakes, in which rocks are skipped along the surface of the water, is told in a web of wordplay, rhyme, and assonance:

curved stone hissed into reef
wave teeth fanged into clay
white splash flashed into spray
Bathsheba Montego Bay.

(1973: 48)

When the creation story concludes in two tourist resorts (Barbados's Bathsheba and Jamaica's Montego Bay), the narrative shifts to the history of sugar plantations. Here, too, Brathwaite plays on both story and language with rhythm and patterned sound:

And of course it was a wonderful time
a profitable hospitable well-worth-your-time
when captains carried receipts for rices
letter spices wigs
opera glasses swaggering asses
debtors vices pigs.

(1973: 48)

Notice how different these lines sound and feel when compared with lines either in a standard English meter or in a free verse with less obvious rhythm; “profitable hospitable” is difficult to pronounce, as if the irony here would make it hard to speak such a thing in the context of slavery and colonialism. The line “opera glasses swaggering asses” combines rhythmic repetition with assonance and consonance to suggest the character of the possessors of those lorgnettes.

The history of the first three parts brings us to the present of the fourth, which introduces the first-person plural point of view at the same time as it describes “hot calypso dancing.” Brathwaite describes the dance from within it, strongly linking it to resistance and critique. While white tourists are objects of ridicule for the ways they distance themselves, protecting themselves from the elements with straw hats and putting the mediation of cameras between themselves and their surroundings, the dancers inhabit their world with comfort and virtuosic joy:

For we glance the banjo
dance the limbo
grow our crops by maljo

have loose morals
gather corrals
father our neighbour’s quarrels.

(1973: 49)

Rhythm and wordplay are key again, but here they enact the ease enabled by the dancers’ vernacular culture. They are subjects *of* (produced by the historical exigencies and economic exploitations of colonialism), but they are also subjects *who* (transformers of their inheritance and their habitation into resources of nourishment, resistance, self-control, and subversive pleasure).

Johnson’s “Dread Beat an’ Blood” begins in a version of Brathwaite’s conclusion, with music, dance, and the cultural specificity of (post) colonial culture. The scene here, in contrast, is an urban nightclub (cues in some of the volume’s other poems suggest a Brixton locale), and Brathwaite’s rum and calypso have been traded for marijuana (“ganja”) and reggae (“dread beat”). More than this, the playful subversion of Brathwaite’s poem has given way to violence, enacted by, within, and upon the immigrant community represented in the poem, the “brothers an sisters

rocking.” Where the music of “Calypso” slyly insults the white colonists of the past and the white tourists of the present and claims a space for pleasure and self-determination, the music in Johnson’s poem is figured in terms of blood and fire. It is the subjugated subject’s capacity for violence. And the music *of* the poem differs from Brathwaite’s too; instead of the latter’s patterned assonance and rhyme, Johnson offers insistent repetition of a few key words and images – “blood,” “burning,” “bleeding,” “fire” – and of the present progressive tense that makes the poem’s action continual and apparently never-ending:

music blazing sounding thumping fire blood
brothers an sisters rocking stopping rocking
music breaking out bleeding out thumping out fire burning.
(2002: 5)

The lack of punctuation works with the verb endings and rhythm to propel us through the lines just as the dancers are propelled by the music and the marijuana, but especially by their own “hurting breaking hurting” toward the climactic violence of the poem’s final stanza, where a “he” whose pride has been crushed and whose rage can no longer be contained lashes out at a “her,” where a knife wielded by one man finds and cuts the flesh of another, and where the whole scene dissolves into “blood bitterness exploding fire wailing blood and bleeding.”

Trinidadian calypso, a carnival music that slips around colonialism’s attempts to silence its subjects by mingling languages, switching codes, and adapting castoffs into instruments, informs Brathwaite’s poem. Reggae, derived from Jamaica’s dancehall culture and the explicit, militant and millenarian anti-colonialism of Rastafarian spirituality, thumps through Johnson’s. D’Aguiar writes of the echo of reggae’s dub beat in Johnson’s lines, and we might also read the single disyllabic words set off at the ends of some lines here as an echo of the treble guitar chords that sound on reggae’s emphatic upbeats. Although the poem’s sounds mimic reggae music, Johnson’s poems’ themes and situations refer directly to the culture from which reggae emerged. The dub and ganja of “Dread Beat an Blood” are common and legible metonyms for dancehall; “Yout Scene” refers to Desmond’s Hip City, a Brixton record store famous in the 1970s for its Jamaican music; “Five Nights of Bleeding,” a response to the murder of Leroy Harris and the near-rioting surrounding it, mentions music clubs in Finsbury Park and Brixton, refers to

reggae throughout its six parts, and, in part two, directly describes dancehall music and links it to a politicized anger and violence:

night number one was in brixton
 soprano B sound system
 was a beating out a rhythm with a fire
 coming down his reggae reggae wire
 it was a soun shaking down your spinal column
 a bad music tearing up your flesh
 an the rebels them start a fighting.

(2002: 6)

The technology undergirding dancehall (the sound system), the heavy bass that physically affects its listeners, and the entire cultural politics condensed into the repeated “reggae,” shown here as an electric transmission directly into listener’s bodies, all enact as well as describe the connection Johnson suggests between cultural affirmation and the violence that ensues when it is suppressed and embattled.

A final element of Brathwaite’s and Johnson’s poetry that bears some attention in the context of the representation of subjectivity is dialect. From time to time, in both poets’ hands, the orthographically and typographically created dialect can slow down the reader unfamiliar with it. Here are the first two stanzas of Johnson’s “All Wi Doin Is Defendin”:

war...war...
 mi seh lissen
 oppressin man
 hear what I say if yu can
 wi have
 a greivous blow fi blow.

(2002: 11)

And here is a passage from Brathwaite’s “Wings of a Dove”:

feet feel firm

 pun de firm stones; na
 good pickney born
 from de flesh
 o’ dem bones.

(1973: 44)

Both poets script the page for a Jamaican voice (though Brathwaite is from Barbados, “Wings of a Dove” is set in Jamaica), using nonstandard spellings and elisions to create an authentic sounding voice. It is worth noting that while they share this purpose, the specific use to which the voice is put differs from poet to poet along lines similar to those drawn by their references to divergent musical styles. Johnson’s dialect is sketched across the strong beats and insistent end-rhymes of the lines and propels a threat of violence. Brathwaite’s speaker is trenchantly critical of the “clean-face browns” – the light-skinned middle-class, of Kingston – but the critique exploits onomatopoeia and odd rhythmic emphases to trip and pun, to land glancing blows in a vocabulary of joking negation. Ultimately, though, the dialect for both implicitly guarantees a subjective authenticity (as it does in Dabydeen’s *Coolie Odyssey*). It is in *this* language, the poems imply, that their subjects speak and think.

Dialect, however, can also (just like the cultural forces of musical styles) suggest that the subject *is* in some important ways what the culture that surrounds it shapes it to be. The last section of this chapter will focus on some poets from marked subject positions whose work explores this dependence of the subject on the discourses that produce it. It is important to note, however, that even among those poets for whom the coherence and speaking power of the subject are assumed, there is often an understanding that the subject is determined by its situation. Indeed, this understanding is sometimes precisely the point: the female subject in a patriarchal society or the racially marked subject in a racist society is worthy of attention after centuries of suppression because it arises from experiences quite different from those that shaped the unmarked, or allegedly “universal,” subject position, the identity that can pretend not to be an identity.

We can see dialect doing this kind of defamiliarizing work in poems a rough contemporary of Linton Kwesi Johnson: Jean “Binta” Breeze. Breeze is an immensely popular performance poet; born and educated in Jamaica (she attended the Jamaican School of Drama), she has for decades now been a participant in that island’s dub poetry scene. Because it is an important formal antecedent for some of Breeze’s best-known poems, and because it is a stylistic analogue of Breeze’s dialect, dub merits a little explanation. (We are providing only a little, although dub is a much more complex phenomenon that we do not have time to describe in detail.) The style grew out of recording and performance innovations in Jamaican dancehall and discotheque culture in the 1960s. Two-track recording technology enabled the separation of instrumental and vocal tracks, and

Jamaican recording engineers used this to preserve a recorded instrumental track (the *riddim*) and to record different vocalists' versions to mix with that track. Vocal tracks could, then, be "dubbed" out – muted so that dancehall disk jockeys (DJs) could speak over the instrumental track. The vocal thus provided was a form of the "toasting" that had early emerged as a key feature of dancehall performance culture. As Norman Stolzoff describes it

The art of toasting, a form of extemporaneous speech making similar to what occurs in the tea meeting or other folk forms, involved the creation of interesting verbal sounds, delivered in a rhyming verse that offered some commentary on the proceedings. Successful toasting... depended on the ability to embody several different roles (i.e., cheerleader, wisecracker, and jive talker) and voice registers (i.e., talk, singing, and high-pitched squeals).
(2000: 56)

Both live in dancehalls and discotheques and recorded in studios, dub performance blended this improvisational vocalizing with the manipulation of existing vocal tracks, dropping the vocal out to create space for the DJ to toast, and raising it back up to provide variety, recognizability, and intensity (2000: 92).

In her well-known 1988 poem, "Riddym Ravings (The Mad Woman's Poem)," Breeze brings the practices of dub performance to the page. The speaker's identity is marked by her pronounced dialect as well as the experiences she recounts. The poem's "identity" is marked not only by these features but also by the thematic presence of the DJ and an alternation of voices that resembles the interplay of vocal track and overdubbed improvisation definitive of dub performance. The mad woman of the title is driven mad by her situation; she is poor, perhaps sick, often homeless, and has been exploited by the men of the town. To say that she *is* mad, though, is to accept (as she implicitly does) the town's judgment of her. Her critique of the culture that surrounds her, and her way of finding a haven and resource in the voice of the DJ in her head, might be read not as madness, but as resistance.

The interplay of improvisational toasting (over a "riddim" track) and recorded sung vocal in dub is a suggestive analogue for the alternation of the speaker's narration of her situation and history and the songlike refrain in "Riddym Ravings." The differences between these two voices are emphasized by typography, as well: the rhythmically irregular and unrhymed narration is in Roman type, while the rhymed and rhythmic

refrain is in italics. The stanzas of narration tell a story of poverty, social exclusion, and the implacable character of institutions that would control the movements and locations of the poor. But poverty is mapped onto “the country” in this narrative, so that the rural, authentic “island” culture is marginalized and policed. It is in reaction to the “mad” woman’s homelessness; to her scavenging for scraps at the butcher shop, in the garbage, and on the street; to her initial openness and politeness (markers of her “country” manner); and to her bathing at a public standpipe that the authorities in Kingston (the doctor and the landlord) respond by sending her to the Bellevue mental hospital. Our summary necessarily fails to suggest the way Breeze’s dialect linguistically enacts the cultural alienation and authenticity of her speaker:

de fus time dem kar me go a Bellevue
was fit di dactar an de landlord operate
an tek de radio outa mi head

...

ah di same night wen dem trow mi out fi no pay de rent
mi haffi sleep outta door wid de Channel One riddym box
and de D.J. fly up eena mi head....

(2011: 37)

A minute’s reading makes most lines clear to the reader unfamiliar with the dialect, but the real key to understanding is simply to pronounce the words and lines as written; it is the voice that carries much of the sense here, and the poem’s “plot” makes clear that the woman is as incomprehensible to the local authorities as she might initially be to a reader unused to her pronunciation and speech patterns. The problem, over and over, seems to be not anything inherent in her but, instead, the way the city does not suit her, the way she cannot find a space for herself in it.

The speaker’s chief resource is the song the DJ continues to sing on the radio in her head (a radio she manages, one way and another, to replace every time the authorities remove it):

*Eh, Eh,
no feel no way
town is a place dat ah really kean stay
dem kudda – ribbit mi han
eh – ribbit mi toe
mi waan go a country go look mango.*

(2011: 37)

Where the “mad” woman recounts her fate in town in the verse paragraphs, the refrain offers the country as her refuge. Where the town is a place of privation, a place even, the refrain suggests, bereft of feeling, the country is characterized by the mango, a metonym suggestive of nourishment, sweetness, and pleasure, the antithesis of the city, with its scarce and rotten food and its rejection of the speaker and her ways. The poem’s structuring opposition of town and country is embedded in the oppositions of roman and italic type, of free verse and rhythmic regularity, and of unrhymed and rhymed lines. What this helps us to see is that the “mad” woman is sustained not only by the country and what it represents through the symbol of the mango but also by the voice of the DJ that continually plays the song of the country in the speaker’s head. It is, then, not geography that matters so much here as culture. And when, at the poem’s conclusion, the authorities deploy electric shock to “treat” or “cure” the woman, to make her tractable, and to make her fit into the society of the town (the island’s colonial capital, Kingston – the “king’s town”), they do so in order finally to erase this disruptive local, indigenous culture from her mind. Against this, the DJ finally cries out in a way that calls this cultural deletion what it is: “*Murther*” (2011: 40).

Against this existential cultural threat, numerous poets assert, whether in dialect or in less emphatically marked language, the value of the marked identity and the cultures associated with such identities. We close this quadrant of our diagram with two poets in whose work the coherence of the marked subject position is often assumed and for whom language and the social ascription of identity are nevertheless at stake. For Fred D’Aguiar and Sujata Bhatt, cosmopolitan mobility is an important part of lived experience and the “self” their poems represent. Both have spent a great deal of time far from their birthplaces. Born in Ahmedabad, India, Bhatt has lived and worked in Canada and the United States. At this moment of writing, she lives in Germany. (As such she exemplifies the permeability of the categories “Postwar British and Irish Poetry” that we explored in Chapter 1.) D’Aguiar, as prominent as an anthologist and critic of black British poetry as he is as a poet, was born in London but grew up largely in Guyana. He now lives and teaches in the United States.

D’Aguiar’s concern with the intersection of poetry, citizenship, race, and subjectivity is signaled by the title of his 1993 volume, *British Subjects*. Unlike the poets we turn to in the next section of this chapter, D’Aguiar

confidently assumes the position of the partially expatriated black British subject. His poems, though, do evince attention to the way this subjectivity is performed or manifested in language. More than this, he subtly draws our awareness to the fact that this is the case for other identities as well. In “Home,” D’Aguiar writes of his return to London after long spells away. Metonymy does important work in this poem, signifying the grounding of identities in details of setting and speech. A red phone box stands for London and makes the speaker miss his original “home.” His excited heartbeat as the plane lands at Heathrow is a “jazzy drum solo”; the figure, like the afro in the speaker’s passport photo mentioned a few stanzas later, marks his race (in this case culturally, where the hair style blends culture and phenotype). But every person in the poem is similarly marked. A customs officer is located in terms both of geography and culture by his voice, “with Surrey loam caked/on the tongue,” while a cab driver is located in terms of class (and his racism tacitly explained) by his “cockney” accent (1993b: 14).

The poem’s rhetoric, diction, and form most strongly affirm the speaker’s (and through him the black British subject’s) claim to London and England as “home,” a claim asserted as equal in validity to the claims or, more properly perhaps, the unquestioned assumptions of customs agent and cab driver. Metonymy is crucial to this part of the poem’s burden as well, for it is in its specific details that D’Aguiar loves and thereby lays claim to this “home”:

Grey light and close skies I love you.
Chokey streets, roundabouts and streetlamps
with tyres chucked round tem, I love you.
(1993b: 14)

Note the moves from general to specific here, from far to near or large to small. Light becomes sky, streets become roundabouts, the category of streetlamps is embodied in those with “tyres” (whose British spelling is, for a poet who has taught for years in the United States, *chosen*). Notice, too, that the repeated “I love you” produces an emphatic rhyme in this stanza, which at once underlines the sentiment and reminds us that the rest of the poem’s quatrains are not rhymed (though most tie two of their lines’ endings together with assonance or consonance). Why does this matter? It matters because, among other things, the rhyme enacts what the poem’s concluding quatrain avers. “We must all sing for our suppers,” D’Aguiar writes in the last line, “or else” (1993b: 15). There is a quiet echo of Auden

here (who wrote, in “September 1, 1939,” that “we must love one another or die”). D’Aguiar replaces the abstract and ideal “love one another” with the (slightly) more imaginable necessity of song, grounded in the quatrain’s central image of a robin singing “so the worm can wind to the surface”. On one level, this enactment is simply D’Aguiar doing what critics since F.R. Leavis have told us good poets do: they manipulate language so that it not only describes but also performs the meaning to which it points. More importantly, D’Aguiar lays claim here to the role of the poet who sings for his supper, who makes his language sing, and who, in this final quatrain’s deft jests, assumes for himself the power to affect the world that he ascribes to the robin. This power might have consequences beyond the page. This last quatrain begins with an address to a police officer, an authority figure who functions like the customs official, and the cab driver as a metonym for the state: “Police officer, your boots need re-heeling.” We would have to make an effort *not* to hear the homonym “healing” here, and through this we might also hear D’Aguiar implying a claim that the power to effect that “healing” is his. Like the “home” he makes of London, this power belongs to the explicitly, inescapably *marked* poet.

For Sujata Bhatt, language opens onto the experience of the body, and linguistically mediated experience is saturated with historical and geographical specificity. In Bhatt’s case, the specific experience is that of the postcolonial subject. Where for D’Aguiar language offered a means for the marked figure to stake a claim on the metropole and its culture as home, for Bhatt it is a way for the cosmopolitan subject to maintain a connection with the culturally specific “home” of memory and the (post)colonial margin. From its title through its final line, Bhatt’s poem “Sherdi” emphasizes its speaker’s Indian origins. The poem is published with its title first in Hindi script and then, within parentheses, transliterated into Latin characters. Bhatt recalls learning to eat sugar cane in Sanosra, in her native Gujarat. Bhatt uses Hindi words for sugar cane; the title is Hindi for the plant, and she calls its husk “chaal” and its juice “russ.” At the same time, Bhatt focuses on the densely and powerfully somatic character of her linguistically and culturally specific memory. Teeth tear, bite, and chew in this poem, and children’s bodies are warmed by the sun. In the first two stanzas, this physicality has the effect of melding past and present. While the poem begins in the past tense, thereby locating what follows both elsewhere and in another time, once the description of the experience begins the tense shifts to present, as if to show how these indelible moments continue into the time of remembering.

In the poem's third and final stanza, we return to the present – “So tonight” – and Bhatt effects another melding or slippage, now not from one time or place to another but from the body of the beloved to the sugar cane she so palpably recalls:

When you tell me to use my teeth,
to suck hard, harder,
then, I smell sugar cane grass,
in your hair.

(1997: 20)

Two key poetic processes are at work here. First, Bhatt condenses body and sugar cane through the precisely remembered and rendered oral action of the speaker's own body. What the two have in common, at least at first, is their shared role as the objects of these actions. This brings about the second process. Just as D'Aguiar establishes his London home through the metonyms of phone box and roundabout, Bhatt re-creates her Gujarat home through the metonym of sugar cane. If the lover's hair is cane grass and cane grass figures the faraway, remembered land, then the lover's body is, in effect, the land. Together, these two processes ground the speaking subject in embodied memory. The speaker concludes that the beloved “would like to be/sherdi” would like to reembody for the speaker the remembered pleasures of a Gujarati childhood. In such recollections, the continuity of identity, even through removal from its geographical, linguistic, and cultural roots, is ensured and enacted by the poem's self-referentiality which unites the title, the lover's claim, and the poet's desire.

The Lower Right : Marked / Constructed and Contingent

As we have seen, some poets for whom identity remains vitally important as the location from which they experience and speak evince an awareness of that identity's contingency. By and large, however, these poets' work assumes a coherent and continuous identity rather than questioning or challenging it in the ways we saw some experimental poets doing. Such questioning, of course, is not limited to poets whose identities are “unmarked” in contemporary culture, and we turn now to the work of poets whose identities are “marked” but who emphasize in

their poetry the constructed character of those identities. For these poets, poetry is not a means for speaking either the truth of a certain kind of subject or the truth as experienced by such a subject. Rather, poetry is for them a tool for exposing the contingency, the multiplicity, and the variability of truth and subjectivity alike.

We can most quickly suggest this difference by looking at two contrasting examples. Selima Hill opens her short lyric, "I Know I Ought to Love You," not only by repeating the title's assertion of self-knowledge but also by reporting on the emotional experience and expression of the "I": "Screaming is the best I can do." Here the speaker feels and knows her feeling; she expresses her feeling immediately, in a way that seems to derive from within herself. Against this, consider these lines from early in Veronica Forrest-Thomson's "Cordelia: or, 'A Poem Should Not Mean, But Be'":

I with no middle flight intend the truth to speak out plain
Of honour truth and love gone by that has come back again
The fact is one grows weary of the love that comes again.
I may not know much about gods but I know that
Eros is a strong purple god.
And that there is a point where incest becomes
Tradition. I don't mean that literally:
I don't love my brother or he me.

(2008: 152)

Again, we meet an "I" who seems to know herself, to speak out of her own experience. This speaker, though, seems more obviously artificial than Hill's. The insistent rhyme scheme, including the repetition of "again" (which enacts the sense of repetition within the word itself), pulls us away from the sense of an "authentic" self. Diction and syntax add to the effect, especially when we shift from the elevated sound of the first two lines to the demotic self-interruption – "I don't mean that literally" – a few lines later. Those first lines are not only elevated, but they are also allusive; Forrest-Thomson almost quotes Milton, who writes, in *Paradise Lost*, of his "advent'rous song/That with no middle flight intends to soar." She alludes, two lines later, to T.S. Eliot's "The Dry Salvages": "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god." The "self" here is mediated rather than immediate; it is actually made, in some ways, of texts that preexist this poem.

Forrest-Thomson exemplifies the kind of work that dramatizes the production of the subject in and through language. Her poems elaborate ideas

she developed at the same time in the scholarly writing she undertook as a doctoral student at Cambridge in the 1960s and 1970s (where she studied with J.H. Prynne), and we can see her as part of the scene in which several poets we mentioned in the second section of this chapter operated (Crozier, Riley, etc.). Influenced by the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, by the poststructuralist linguistics and psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, Forrest-Thomson sought, in both her critical writing and her poetry, to show how the explicit artifice of poetic language (as opposed to naively mimetic or referential language) might make visible the ways taken-for-granted language produces taken-for-granted orderings of experience and might make available new conceptual categories, new ways of making sense. Instead of intelligibly communicating a readily comprehensible feeling or interpretation of experience, Forrest-Thomson's poems rework the relationship of language and experience.

We said that Forrest-Thomson can be seen as part of the experimental poetry scene that included Prynne, Crozier, and others (the so-called Cambridge School), but she must also be seen as pursuing ends distinct from those of her fellow Cambridge poets, for Forrest-Thomson, especially in a poem like "Cordelia: or, 'A Poem Should Not Mean, But Be,'" tries to trouble the production of gendered subjects through the conventions of literary discourse. The poem performs a wittily aggressive interruption of a male poetic tradition. It does so not as Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill does, by simply standing the conventions on their heads and inverting the subject/object positions, but by rewriting the conventions through the very sentences and lines of the poem, especially in ironic re-quotations and allusions. In quick succession, she alludes to Lewis Carroll, a music hall song, and Shakespeare; in this she is similar to T.S. Eliot, who juxtaposes popular songs and lines from the most canonical poems. But Forrest-Thomson alludes to Eliot as well and does so in a way that calls attention to the prominence of rape in *The Waste Land*: "March is the cruelest station/Taking on bullying men/and were you really afraid they would rape you?" (2008: 154). As Linda Kinnahan writes, Forrest-Thomson's "encounters with male tradition, through spliced chains of allusion and parody, question not only representations of women but gendered authority and voice" (2009: 161).

One early draft title for this poem was "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and like Eliot, Forrest-Thomson reconstructs a tradition by gathering fragments, but, unlike Eliot, she revises the fragments and juxtaposes them to emphasize how women are threatened and silenced. Doing so, she "talks back," writing herself into the story by name, demonstrating her own descent and dissent from this tradition but also her descent from the tradi-

tion of dissenting women who talked and fought back, like Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra. The poem does climactically produce a "self" that speaks, but this moment, arriving after 170 lines of playful and arch rewriting, emphasizes precisely the way the "self" is produced rather than given:

It is the kick, my love, and not the nightingale
 I like larking up kicks myself
 But not kicking.
 They that have power to hurt and do so
 Should not be blamed by Shakespeare or anyone else
 For hurting though such is the race of poets
 That they will blame them anyway.
 However it is a pretty productive process
 Especially if one may be plumber as well as poet
 And thus unstop the drain as well as writing
Poetic Artifice "Pain stopped play" and
 Several other books and poems including
1974 and All That (seriously though)
 I, Veronica did it, truth-finding, truth-seeking
 Muck-raking, bringing victory.

(2008: 156)

Notice how Forrest-Thomson moves from the revised quotation of Shakespeare to the wordplay that changes "lark" from noun to verb and "kick" from verb to noun and from there back to Shakespeare (this time a quotation from Sonnet 94, "They that have the power to hurt, and will do none"). The second allusion here is an indirect form of self-reference since Forrest-Thomson writes extensively of this sonnet in her book, *Poetic Artifice*. When the book is named a couple of lines later, the self-reference becomes explicit, but, like the "self" named "I, Veronica" in this poem, the book is produced by the poem it discusses. Or, really, book and poem, self, and book and poem are all inextricable and mutually determining. And in "book and poem," we must include this poem itself, titled, in an early draft, "Pain Stopped Play."

The insistent and provocative play of allusion and parody, of linguistic and literary revision in an effort toward political revision, provides the key to the fourth and final quadrant of our graph. Like the work of experimental poets of the upper-right quadrant, poems like "Cordelia" call attention to the ways language and literary convention shape the subject and make possible certain modes of being or meaning while foreclosing others. At the

same time, poems like this lay bare the dynamics of power in which subjects marked in certain ways – by sex or race or class or region – are marginalized, silenced, and, sometimes violently, acted upon. They do so, in part, by deploying strategies which, taken together, produce what the French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous calls *écriture féminine* (“women’s writing”). In her influential 1975 essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous writes that “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (1976: 876). Since woman is defined in terms of absence, gap, passivity, lack, and madness in the masculine writing that has dominated Western literature, women’s writing, Cixous argues, must find the textual means for enacting these. A poetics of the nonlinear, irrational, and incomplete, of rupture rather than continuity, *écriture féminine* offers what Julia Kristeva calls a “revolution of poetic language.”

Along with Forrest-Thomson, Denise Riley and Wendy Mulford can be seen as forming a group within the Cambridge School, the three composing poems that make the female speaking “I” a problematic effect of language rather than a preexisting self – problematic not least because the language that produces the I comes laden with patriarchal assumptions. For all three, the problem with language that produces the female subject in a patriarchal society derives, at least in part, from the English literary tradition itself; that is, these three poets focus a good deal of their work on the gendered politics of poetry, and each in her way seeks to reclaim poetry and poetic language as spaces and practices more hospitable to women. In her 1992 poem, “When it’s time to go,” Riley is fairly direct about this. After establishing a logical connection between condition and consequence in the first stanza, a “when/then” statement that derives a desire to escape from such figures of literary convention as “when an inverse brand of professional unhappiness/taps on its wristwatch ‘as a realist I...,’” she firmly sets herself apart from all this in a one-line stanza: “No, this isn’t me. It’s just my motor running” (2000: 59). The line not only disavows the position of the speaking subject, but it also, in the image of the motor, acknowledges that “this” – the set of circumstances described in the opening lines – drives the subject. The short poem concludes with an apostrophe to English poetry itself, complete with the “O” that announces such conventionally self-conscious lyric moments. “We blush to hear thee lie/Above thy deep and dreamless,” Riley writes. The allusion to the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” suggests a parallel; the “classic cadences” of the lyric tradition are like the birthplace of Christ. Perhaps they give rise to truths that have some saving power, or, more likely, the idea that they do

so comes under some aspersion here. The pun on lie enacts this double-ness: in the context of the allusion, lie simply suggests positioning, so that the cadences are placed “above,” but in the context of the sentence it more strongly suggests dishonesty: we blush to hear the cadences of the lyric tradition tell their (un)truths.

Wendy Mulford works a similar linguistic vein, writing poems that, as Kinnahan puts it, “foreground women’s experiences and knowledge, the ‘I,’ as constructed – and reconstructed – through language” (2009: 161). Mulford is perhaps as well known for her work publishing experimental poetry as she is for her poems themselves. In 1972, she founded Street Editions in Cambridge, a small press devoted to “linguistically innovative” poetry (the press merged with Ken Edwards’ Reality Studios in 1993 to form Reality Street, which continues to publish experimental poetry from the British Isles). Among Street Editions’ early publications was Forrest-Thomson’s posthumous *On the Periphery* (1976), which included “Cordelia.” Like both Forrest-Thomson and Riley, Mulford delivers a speaking “I” in her poems, but, also like these poets, she disrupts any easy sense we might have of who this speaker is, of whether the speaker is a continuous and coherent “self.” In a fairly early poem like “how do you live” (first published in her 1985 volume, *The A.B.C. of Writing*, whose title revises that of Ezra Pound’s polemical 1934 *ABC of Reading*), Mulford so aggressively interrupts the poem’s “I” that it seems as though she wishes to erase it, to answer the title’s question without providing a center from which the answer might be seen to emanate.

In some of her more recent work, such as the sequences *The Bay of Naples* (published by Reality Studios in 1992) and *The East Anglia Sequence* (1998), Mulford effectively disperses the “I” through impressions of and meditations on landscape, so that while details are registered and even interpreted, no “self” takes ownership of either impression or interpretation:

gold hard lithe hard leaps shadowward
 striking a spar across the dirty ocean
 loss yes off course loveliness
 tall backed skyward dropping
 glowing toes point back to
 hammered earth.

(1998: 17)

This segment from the “Dunwich” section of the sequence musters numerous adjectives to limn the seen as precisely as possible; the light alone gets four descriptive terms in the first line, one (“hard”) repeated as if to emphasize this quality above others. The voice here both interprets and acknowledges alternative interpretations. “Of course” lies buried in “off course,” so that the wayward loveliness that the line distinguishes from loss is at the same time set into a ghostly apposition with it. Elements of the natural word are personified (the light has “glowing toes”). What we would expect in any lyrical disposition of the landscape is present here, but what is missing is precisely the self-identified I/eye that does the disposing.

A good deal of experimental poetry by women, however, goes well beyond the troubling of the subject and the dramatization of the female subject’s production through language. In some of the striking work of poets like Maggie O’Sullivan or Caroline Bergvall, language seems to emanate, to act and interact, with no subject in sight either to produce it or as a product of it. Instead, these poems play (that is the right verb) with the material itself, with the possibilities of meaning that might be found in or, often, brought to the compilation of words and parts of words, phrases, and scraps of sentences. Parataxis, the juxtaposition of fragments that have no obvious logical connection, is a key technique in this work, and paraphrase, the translation of the words and phrases, lines, and stanzas into more readily comprehensible versions, is almost certainly, is often programmatically, doomed to frustration and failure. Here, for example, is the opening of O’Sullivan’s 1993 poem, “Starlings”:

Lived Daily
or Both
Daily
the Living
structuring
Bone-Seed,

Pelage,
Aqueous,

YONDERLY –
lazybed of need –
CLOUD-SANG.

(1993: 41)

This poem, from O'Sullivan's 1993 collection, *In the House of the Shaman*, lies at the more legible end of the continuum of O'Sullivan's poetry. Like Bob Cobbing and Allen Fisher, O'Sullivan often experiments with the effects of collage and layering that render some parts of a page difficult to read. In *From the Handbook of That and Furriery*, for example, she collages cutout pieces of pages from music scores and pages filled with text in different languages alongside pages of her poetry. Even here, though, we can see how O'Sullivan's priorities differ from those of many women poets we have so far discussed. No speaker steps out of this language to report on her experience, to interpret the world, or to express a feeling. Indeed, no subject can readily be found at all, beyond the birds to whose possible presence we are clued in by the poem's title. It is possible and enjoyable to see how the first two words repeat in slightly different versions and in different order, with "or both" standing as a sort of pivot between them, to see (as Keith Tuma suggests) how bone and integument or covering ("Pelage") might indicate birds, a possibility perhaps picked up by the location of singing in clouds. Equally, if not more important, are the poem's exploration of the physical space of the page and its scattering of bits of language as a collagist might place bits of paper or fabric. Furthermore, the pronunciation of the lines, especially if the spaces are performed as pauses of varying lengths, reveals a kind of music in the words.

We make those last suggestions in part because O'Sullivan, like many poets whose work experiments in these ways, is an artist and performer, influenced as much by visual artists (Kurt Schwitters and Joseph Beuys, in O'Sullivan's case) as by other avant-garde literary figures. Caroline Bergvall, too, moves as much in the worlds of visual and performance art as in that of poetry. Indeed, as the author's note in *Meddle English* (her 2011 volume of new and selected texts), puts it, her "projects and research alternate between published writings pieces and performance-oriented, often sound-driven language projects," with her books "noted for their combination of performative, visual and literary textualities" (2011: 167). The title of this collection is telling, for Bergvall's poetic practice is precisely to "meddle," to play with and interrupt, English (the language and its poetic traditions). In her "Shorter Chaucer Tales," she quotes, nearly quotes, invents, inverts, modernizes, repeats, revises, and translates the language of Geoffrey Chaucer. In "Cropper," whose third print version appears in *Meddle English* (the piece originated in an online Norwegian magazine), she repeats with incremental differences a sentence (whose first version reads "Some never had a body to call their own before it was taken away"), translating each

version first into Norwegian and then into French before bringing it back, retranslated and thereby altered, into English, whereupon she begins the process again (2011: 147). In the pieces that make up *Goan Atom (Doll)*, she combines processes of linguistic degradation and reassembly influenced by Gertrude Stein, concrete and typographical practices like those of American experimental poet Susan Howe, and multilingual repetition in an exploration of the body (as physical assembly, as product of scientific discourse and experimentation, in language, etc.):

Enter DOLLY
Entered enters
Enters entered
Enter entre
En train en trail
En trav ail aie
La Bour La bour La bour
wears god on a strap
shares mickey with all your friends.
(2011: 73)

Note how incremental repetition effects a shift from English (variations on “enter”) to French (“entre”) and how that shift invites us to enter a space between (“entre”). Once in that space, work becomes the object of (literal) analysis, as “travail” is split into its syllables, and then, through a similar syllabic splitting, we reenter English via “La bour.” Work is done by both language and bodies; Bergvall’s work *on* language (as a body and as a means by which we know the body) reads and renders the varieties of violence potentially entailed.

In work like this, we might wonder why the specific subject position the poet occupies should matter. If the point is simply to interrupt and irritate, to play, then what difference does identity make? There are a few ways to think about this. One is to see the ways in which poets like O’Sullivan and Bergvall deploy (and destroy) language as examples of a specifically feminist understanding of poetic language. In the work of Julia Kristeva, the accessible and commonsense language of everyday speech, the marketplace and the law court, constitutes a symbolic realm in which order and meaning are inextricably linked to patriarchy. In this way of thinking, such language communicates the law of a symbolic father, and when we speak this language, we re-create ourselves over and over again in that symbolic

father's image – we know ourselves as subjects of that father's order. Against the symbolic order, Kristeva and others pose poetic language, language whose material properties overshadow its potential meaningfulness, language that interrupts the symbolic order and performs disorder or chaos (at least in the terms set by the symbolic order). Kristeva terms such language feminine. It is characterized by absences (of meaning, of order, of reason, of instrumental utility or conventionally agreed-upon value) that are linked to the absence of the phallus, the symbol of the patriarchal order. In composing their poems in ways calculated to disrupt and disturb, to resist paraphrase, interpretation, or meaning, poets like O'Sullivan and Bergvall can be seen as participating in what Cixous and others have called *écriture féminine*, women's writing *against* the masculine order of traditional poetics.

In addition, we should note the targets of the revisionist techniques in this work. When Bergvall performs her disruptive strategies on the texts of, say, Geoffrey Chaucer, the poet conventionally acknowledged as the beginning of the English poetic tradition, she adds an element of specifically feminist revision of that tradition's values and expectations, just as O'Sullivan revises the masculine associations of the Irish shamanic traditions. While the female subject is neither represented nor "given voice" in a conventional way, allowed to speak *as* a coherent and recognizable "self," female subjectivity is performed in these intersections of writing practices and poetic roles.

The modes of experimentation associated with the British Poetry Revival (which encompasses the work of many of these poets) have been turned not only on the representation, objectification, and silencing of women in and by the literary tradition but also on the marginalization of racially marked subjects, on the history of slavery and colonialism that brought such subjects into the realms of the British empire and the British literary tradition. Carlyle Reedy's "The Slave Ship," a poem Peter Barry has offered as an illustration of the British Poetry Revival's key stylistic elements, uses the disruption of sentences, the juxtaposition of fragments, and the alternation of Roman and italic print to destabilize the poem's speaker(s) – black or white, slave or slaver. From the opening lines, the poem shows the speakers being produced by the dynamics of power and the control of the body in the slave ship's regime. However, the impossibility of firmly linking voice and speaker, of identifying, say, Roman type with one and italic with another, effects the permeability even of the boundaries this power dynamic might establish:

chain beat me to death 3 am the 2nd
clattering against a door tonight I
not slept I all *its ring links, only clank*
smoke lost return on *the bone of my body*
head, temple, *all over* to neck breast
in pagan blue, plunging, *I so naked*
intake to belly buttocks, the *charms*
they put you under, *it is not good*, what is used
with chains they put you in, in the hold of the ship
on in the human in
the white *voices sometime some one amongst us sing.*
(2012: 60)

The “me” beaten by the chain in the first line might be the same as the “us” who sing in the last line quoted here; the italicized lines’ focus on the body and the repetition of the chain suggest that this might be so. It is impossible to say so with confidence, since the utterances of this voice are so discontinuous, and since some of their features (like the focus on the body) also characterize the lines spoken by the “I” in Roman type. With that speaker, as well, grammatical fragmentation makes any solid identification impossible. What the poem seems to emphasize above any interplay between identifiable speakers is precisely the interpenetration of these subjects, so that the verbal and physical violence endemic to the slave trade affects both (or all) the poem’s voices. The history for which the slave ship is a metonym is, Reedy’s poem suggests, a history that harms all who are produced and implicated in it.

As Lauri Ramey has argued, the relationship of racial identity and experimental poetic practice in Britain has been problematic. If, in the argument put forward by critics like Kwesi Owusu and R. Victoria Arana, black British poets whose careers began in the 1980s have constituted an avant-garde by “inserting their previously disregarded voices and perspectives into the narrative of the mainstream as recuperated missing and essential elements” (2004: 191), then where is the political or poetic utility of something like destabilizing the speaking subject? As we showed in the previous section of this chapter, much work by poets of color in Britain and its former colonies has given voice to marginalized subjects and has demonstrated the production of those subjects through the histories of colonialism and racial prejudice. These poets’ narratives and personae, their formal fusions, and racial performances reveal the specific ground on which their subject positions are based. To those we discussed before – Nichols and Breeze, Brathwaite

and Johnson, and D'Aguiar and Bhatt – we might add other such powerful poets as E.A. Markham and Benjamin Zephaniah. Like Brathwaite's, Markham's poems draw the racially marked speaker from the specific histories of Caribbean colonies and immigrant experience, mixing references to pop culture and sports (especially, as in "Towards the End of a Century," cricket) with allusions to Shakespeare to voice the West Indian British subject. And like Johnson's, Zephaniah's poems deploy the rhythms of dub and the virtuosic verbal gestures of Jamaican toasting culture to decry the parlous condition of race relations in the metropole. To these we might add other poets whose work we discuss elsewhere in this book, including Derek Walcott, Jackie Kay, and David Dabydeen. Few poets indeed, though, begin from their racially marked subject positions to erode the politically efficacious ground of the racial subject itself.

One who does is Anthony Joseph. As Ramey, one of the very few critics to have taken up Joseph's work, argues, the "imaginative mélange of deconstructed, composite and alternative ways of conceiving and conveying a range of identities and experiences," the synthesis of "the African imagination," and "formal innovation" characteristic of Joseph's work have neither been widespread in contemporary poetry nor especially well received in Joseph's own case (2004: 194–5). Joseph's "formal poetics," Ramey writes, is "'normative' for an avant-garde poet interested in decentering and re-conceptualizing identity," but precisely this profile, unusual among poets interested in (often because they find themselves biographically connected to) colonialism and diaspora, has "rendered him invisible" (2004: 195). "Nothing really is really new," Joseph writes in "Plasticine":

every we see how we see
 appears in cubic sense only as
 approximate appropriation/cannibalizm from another.
 (1997: 46)

The poem, like his other work, provides no access to the authentic experience of a marked subject. Indeed, Joseph's poems work to reveal the falsity of any claim for authenticity of experience, whether of the marked or unmarked subject. Instead, his poems suggest, subjects constantly engage in practices of appropriation – of stories, diction, style – and assembly. For Joseph, as for Derek Walcott, the literary and cultural heritage of Europe is at once irritating and enabling; for Joseph, though,

the answer is not to write about this difficulty within the received forms of the English literary tradition, marking the unmarked voice by speaking from within its codes. Instead, Joseph attacks the codes and the notion of voice at once in a difficult rant titled “europeisinmyass”:

dontsleeponyourbackyoullhavenightmareso
nethingilearndformyselffictionispretensein
theroleoftheego.

(1997: 52)

The five pages of text that make up this poem, unbroken by punctuation or space, radically enjambed so that words continue over the ends of lines, jam together the speaker’s experiences, reading, memories, and arguments, the difficulty of reading enacting a difficulty of negotiating the various codes by which the subject is constantly producing and reproducing itself. This speaker’s voice is an effect of ventriloquism rather than the expression of a given and coherent and continuous self. If there is any sort of universal experience shared by humans, Joseph’s work suggests, it is this shared groundlessness and constructedness.

It is possible, however, to maintain a critical skepticism about the marked subject position while speaking from it in ways less aggressively difficult than Joseph’s textual strategies. D.S. Marriott, for example, writes poems whose lines all begin at the left margin of the page, whose sentences are complete and grammatical, and whose speakers are even (often, at least) content to call themselves “I.” He is, for all that, no less interested in exploring the foundations of identity as critical and problematic questions rather than confident (and hidden) assumptions. Like Forrest-Thomson, Marriott deploys intertextuality to ground his speaking subjects in webs of previous speech and writing. The important intertextual relationships in his poems are often with writers who themselves write about absence or nothingness, who themselves see the subject as shifting, provisional, and contingent, the product rather than the agent of historical processes. Herman Melville, whose “Whiteness of the Whale” chapter in *Moby Dick* expresses existential horror at the prospect of blank nonbeing, figures crucially in Marriott’s 2008 volume, *Hoodoo Voodoo*. That book’s first poem is titled after Melville’s chapter, and in the wake of destruction left by its white whale, Marriott finds “nowhere to sail to,/no wind to save you,” the doubled negation leaving the “you” afloat in a sea that “moves on, as it should” (2008: 4). In “Veil, No. 2,” Marriott quietly addresses Andrew

Crozier, whose “Veil Poem” itself circles around questions of epistemology and identity. “Limping” is, at times, a loose imitation of Rainer Maria von Rilke’s fourth Duino Elegy, and in it Marriott recounts the failed and impossible attempt to commune with his dead father, a failed and impossible attempt, that is, to know the ancestral ground of his own subjectivity. Even in poems whose dialogues are with artists for whom racial identity is central (the African American poet Amiri Baraka or the African American artist Kara Walker), Marriott is as devoted to questioning racial identity as to expressing it. Addressing Walker, whose best-known artworks are composed of cutout silhouettes reenacting the history of sexual and racial violence in the pre-Civil War American South, Marriott at once acknowledges the “ground” Walker’s figures compose, a historical “ground loaded with cum/and cotton gins, in the swamps/bloodbaths form which the boy drinks” (2008: 49) and insists on the constructed character of that ground. Rather than a historical given, it is, just as Walker’s own works are, something produced by acts of cutting, shaping, and juxtaposing. As the poem reaches its conclusion, Marriott directly addresses the artist, linking her vision to absence and gap and ultimately to the nonbeing figured by death:

In the game of such terror, Kara:
 the eye
 that search out, and spies, brings to light,
 that fucks
 in the long ago rememory of night;
 the eye
 that flees and evades, and fools,
 holding the void
 that kindles you
 together with you in the chasm.

(2008: 53)

A racial history that cannot be denied, whose effects are still palpable in the political and cultural reality of the present day, is also, Marriott writes, one that is not in any ontological way present. It is, instead, a construction, a “rememory” that is required because all of the grounds of memory, history, and identity erode.

By way of conclusion in this chapter, we want to reiterate that our four-part division of the field of poems having to do with subjects and subjectivity is a heuristic, a fiction we find useful even as we acknowledge its fictional character. Readers should keep in mind the possibility

that new meanings, or at least new emphases, might be revealed simply by moving a poet's work from one quadrant of our graph to another. Stevie Smith, for example, might as readily be located in the lower right as in the lower left. With its insistent irony, her work can be read as critical of assumptions regarding feminine identity; it can be read as calling attention to the constructed and contingent character of these categories. We would say the same for many of the poets we have considered in this chapter. Where we have located Kamau Brathwaite and Linton Kwesi Johnson in the "Marked/Continuous and Coherent" section of the field, we could as easily locate both poets in the "Marked/Constructed and Contingent" section, since both poets ground identity in the shifting sands of history and admit the complexity of subjectivity as it emerges through the discourses of race. In a similar way, a poet like Maggie O'Sullivan or David Marriott could be located in the "Marked/Continuous and Coherent" quadrant, with O'Sullivan's practices of *écriture féminine* reinforcing, as much as questioning, female subjectivity and with Marriott's insistence on racially specific histories locating his speakers and himself firmly within the categories of blackness. As part of a good critical reading practice, we would suggest that readers experiment by thinking about what a poet's work looks like when regarded as "belonging to" one or another part of the field as we have divided it. What emerges from such experimentation is the recognition that – just as subjects can be seen as being produced by discourses – the subject of medicine by the questions a doctor asks, the subject of the state by those the police or the tax authority ask, the poem can be seen as in important ways "produced" by the act of reading, by the particular questions asked of it and the interpretive possibilities opened or foreclosed by these questions.

Anthologies and Groups

Larger literary historical narratives tend to construct coherent patterns around the emergence, consolidation, and dismantling of particular aesthetic groups or practices; by dividing poets and poetry into generations or decades; or by tracing the careers of individual poets. Historical accounts can also be founded around other forms of relationship such as identity, geography, or large-scale sociohistorical changes (such as from welfare-state consensus to neoliberal individualism or from relatively monocultural to multicultural Britain). In this book, for example, we have used a variety of methods to provide narrative progression. In Chapter 1 we compared and contrasted Eliot with Agbabi to suggest both aesthetic and social similarities and differences between the first half of the twentieth century and the second; in Chapter 2 we provided a conventional narrative history of Britain and Ireland since 1945; in Chapter 3 we focused on various institutional structures and contexts; and in Chapters 4–8, we used formal and thematic categories. In this chapter, we want to trace a series of movements, groups, and affiliations that have been used to categorize and bring together poets and their poetries.

Readers of poetry, however, usually encounter individual poems and poets, rather than poetic groupings, and they encounter them primarily through educational institutions. (Although with the expansion of poetry into new venues and new media, from poetry slams to blogs, this may no longer be the case, particularly if the lyrics of popular music are taken into consideration.) Educational institutions of all levels usually teach from anthologies, and anthologies have helped to determine what poetry

is read, taught, and written about in the postwar period. Anthologies range from those targeted to a popular and commercial readership to those directed to the more restricted field of “serious poetry readers,” to those aimed at further and higher educational audiences, and to those designed to be used by elementary and secondary school readers. Therefore, anthologies in all their variety remain crucial to the construction of the postwar cultural field called “poetry.” In fact, both Anthony Thwaite and Randall Stevenson model their histories of the period on what Thwaite calls “the programmatic and polemical anthology” (1996: 1; 2004: 166).

There are other ways in which groups and movements can emerge and be named. As we saw in Chapter 3, they can be organized around a particular journal such as *The English Intelligencer* or *PN Review*, around writing workshops like Hobsbaum’s and Boland’s different “groups,” or around a particular press such as Carcanet or Bloodaxe. Reviewers also wield power as they suggest links, connections, and provide names that, at times, have stuck – as happened with J.D. Scott’s anonymous article in *The Spectator* that first coined the term “the Movement” and with James Fenton’s use of the adjective “Martian” to describe the writing of Craig Raine and others. More generally, as we have suggested throughout this book, academic critics situate poets within larger aesthetic terms such as modernism, late modernism, postmodernism, poetry of place, various versions of the long poem, and so on. Nevertheless, the polemical anthology has been the way most poetic groups have come into public view in the postwar period, which is why in this chapter we follow Thwaite’s and Stevenson’s model.

In fact, anthologies, as Barbara Korte contends, have always been central to the formation and construction of literary canons and literary history, from *Tottel’s Miscellany* (1557) to the *Dryden-Tonson Miscellanies* (1684–1709), to Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), to Johnson’s *The Works of the English Poets* (1779–1788), to Palgrave’s *The Golden Treasury* (1861), and to Quiller-Couch’s *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1900) (Korte 2000: 6–7). However, since the twentieth century, the importance of anthologies has been qualitatively and quantitatively different. Throughout the past hundred years or so, newly identified literary groups and movements have emerged through their publishing manifestos and anthologies that define, advertise, publicize, and polemicalize them; indeed, the manifestos and anthologies usually instantiate these groups’ existence. Following on from the emergence of such new formations, anthologies are produced that seek to collate and

combine these various groups and movements in a larger historical frame. For example, poets and poems in Pound's 1914 *Des Imagistes* anthology became integrated into Yeats's 1936 collection, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935*. The effect of this process ensures that these oppositional and alternative groupings are incorporated within a dominant canonical economy through a process of selection and recategorization.

As such, anthologies provide a rich resource for literary critics. We can consider how an anthology was published, who published it, and who its intended audience seems to have been. We can examine the introductory essay for its various claims; for the ways in which it charts particular literary traditions, lineages, or poetic values; and for its explicit or implicit ideologies. We can look at the selection of poets, who is included and who is excluded, how they are ordered, and how they are introduced. It can also be useful to locate common themes and common stylistic and formal choices. Finally, its reception history can be revealing. Who reviewed it and where was it reviewed? Did other poets and critics respond to it? Does it become a point of reference years after it was published? All these things help to situate the anthology both in its temporal moment and in relation to a larger history.

At the center of the anthologizing process in the twentieth century has been the dialectic between the ideas of the new and innovative and the ideas of the canon and tradition. As Hans-Werner Ludwig points out, “the word ‘new’ occurs” with “striking...frequency” in the titles of anthologies since 1900; these include Harriet Monroe's *The New Poetry* (1917); Michael Robert's *New Signatures* (1932); J.F. Hendry's *The New Apocalypse* (1940); Robert Conquest's *New Lines* (1956); Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry* (1962); Gillian Allnutt, Fred D'Aguiar, Ken Edwards, and Eric Mottram's *The New British Poetry* (1988); Adrian Clarke and Robert Sheppard's *Floating Capital: New Poets from London* (1991); Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley's *The New Poetry* (1993); and Don Paterson's and Charles Simic's *New British Poetry* (2004) (Ludwig 2000: 171). Such volumes have then tended to be followed by anthologies whose titles use a clearer periodizing term, such as modern, contemporary, or a date: for example, Michael Robert's *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), Edward Lucie-Smith's *British Poetry since 1945* (1970), Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982), Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford's *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (1998), Edna Longley's *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th-Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland* (2000),

Keith Tuma's Oxford *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (2001), and Jahan Ramazani's *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003). Common to all such volumes, both those asserting the newness of the poems collected and those declaring their poems' historical exemplarity, has been the claim and counterclaim that the poetry included not only represents a break from some historical and literary past but also corresponds to some new sociohistorical development.

Every anthology thus raises the question of its representativeness and claims its value both as a document of narrative and difference and as a document of structure and similarity. Each anthology then raises the oscillation between the diachronic and the synchronic that any mapping of a period undergoes. The former traces the change from one example to another, emphasizing the difference between them; the latter maps the similarity between one example and another, emphasizing the resemblance between them. Steve Evans, David Kellogg, and others have argued that Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the cultural field as a semiautonomous space within the social world provides an invaluable aid to mapping contemporary poetry. In Bourdieu's terms, the poetic field consists of every single event or utterance that concerns or refers to poetry (from poems, criticism, performances, conversations and so on) with no value judgments applied or attached. The poetic field itself comprises a series of position-takings and positions. Position-takings are the various ways that any poetic utterance relates to the poetic field itself. Any position-taking brings in evaluative ideas because any utterance in the poetic field will assume certain attitudes toward its own expression in relation to other poetic utterances (Bourdieu 1993: 55–67; Evans 1997: 21–22; Kellogg 2000–2001: 98–99). If a position-taking gains enough leverage in the poetic field as a whole, then it becomes, what Evans terms, “congealed” into a position or abstract value (Evans 1997: 22). Successful position-takings are those that become established as a position. Such positions can range from the formal to the thematic or ideological. They can include a valued type of lyric, a preferred tradition, a publishing house (“Faber poet”), or in fact anything that is assigned value in the poetic field. As Evans says, “position-takings,” then, occur “in time,” whereas “positions hold a place” (1997: 23). In this light, anthologies, like Conquest's *New Lines*, Alvarez's *The New Poetry*, and Morrison and Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, are all position-takings, but because they have come to define the mainstream of postwar British and Irish poetry, they have hardened into a position. That is to say, these three anthologies have collectively become identified as the

hegemonic poetic canon, for which, as Andrew Crozier observes, the names Larkin, Hughes, and Heaney have become positional shorthand (1983: 202).

The first major anthology of the postwar period, however, was the 1949 collection *A New Romantic Anthology*, edited by Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece. This was the last of three anthologies – the first two, *The New Apocalypse* and *The White Horseman*, edited by J.F. Hendry, and Hendry and Treece, were published in 1940 and 1941, respectively – that announced a poetic movement called either “the new apocalypse” or the “new Romantics.” George Baker, G.S. Fraser, J.F. Hendry, W.S. Graham, Norman MacCaig, Nicholas Moore, Dylan Thomas, and Vernon Watkins were poets who were included in one or more of the anthologies. Combining an interest in Surrealism’s exploration of the unconscious through symbols, an emphasis on the organic in opposition to the mechanical, and a belief in the visionary nature of the poet, the poetry in these anthologies eschews discursive and conversational language and accentuates language’s metaphoric, symbolic, and materialistic aspects. Although Dylan Thomas, after being published in the first anthology, denied membership, his “Fern Hill” – which we read in Chapter 4 – provides an example of this movement’s poetics.

Although its poetics and poetry were derided in the next decade, it has remained an influence or connection, above all with poets who are interested in the unconscious, especially in relation to myth. (Also important here has been Robert Graves’ poetry and writing, in particular *The White Goddess* (1948), where he argued that each poem emerged from a poet’s encounter with the muse who, in turn, linked the poet to an originary Celtic Matriarchal Goddess.) Its continuing relevance can be seen not only in its members who continued writing into the following decades like W.S. Graham, George Barker, and Norman MacCaig but also in later poets such as Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove. Recently, the “new apocalypse” has begun not only to be reassessed but also to gain a greater visibility.

A major reason for its relative invisibility was Robert Conquest’s 1956 anthology, *New Lines*, alongside D.J. Enright’s earlier *Poets of the 1950s*, which introduced the poetry of, among others, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn. This anthology and the writings that surrounded it quickly and decisively set the terms for what is often called the “mainstream” of poetry during the postwar period. As Blake Morrison argues, at the heart of Robert Conquest’s and Movement aesthetics lies an anti-Romantic and anti-modernist poetics that explicitly

resists metaphysical and transcendental claims (1980: 145–91). Accordingly, in contrast to the new apocalypse, Movement poetry consists primarily of denotation, rather than connotation. Conquest in his polemical preface to the volume famously asserts that:

If one had briefly to distinguish this poetry of the 50s from its predecessors, I believe the most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of theoretical constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and – like modern philosophy – is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. This reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience (insofar as that is not blind or retrogressive) of our time.

(1956: xiv–xv)

Movement poetry then manifests a dislike of larger theoretical or historical claims, and its first aesthetic and thematic principle is irony. At times explicit, and at all times implicit, was a distrust of the larger claims of Romantic and modernist poetry, both of which, primarily through the figures of Nietzsche, Pound, and Yeats, had become by the 1950s associated with fascism and irrationality. As Donald Davie wrote in his 1952 *Purity of Diction in English Verse*, “the development from imagism in poetry to fascism in politics is clear and unbroken” (1952: 99). Critics such as Stephen Burt and Neil Corcoran have argued that this dislike of large totalizing claims, alongside an embrace of a distinctively English tradition grounded in Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas, correlates with the period’s attempt to negotiate a distinctively British ideological position in relation to fascist and Stalinist totalitarianisms and to American McCarthyism (Burt 2009: 35–36; Corcoran 1993: 1940 82–3).

Accordingly, Movement poetry emphasizes empirical reality and common sense and claims authority for the authentic voice and experience of the speaking, poetic “I.” The poetry of the Movement, as Corcoran observes, tends to be “discursive–argumentative” lyrics in strict stanzaic and rhyming schemes, often constructed around some form of external or internal dialogue or debate (1993: 82). The poetry often directly addresses the reader in a confidential manner, assuming and producing a reader who shares the same situation and values as the speaker. It takes its bearings from the literary criticism of F.R. Leavis and William Empson, with the former’s famous concluding exhortation, “this is so, isn’t it?” (1986: 277), and the latter’s rational explanation of a poem’s multiple meanings through

extended paraphrase. (It should also be mentioned here that the Movement was the first generation of poets for whom the default was university education in the field of English.) The influence of this type of practical criticism can be clearly seen in the work of “the Group” founded in the late 1950s by Philip Hobsbaum, who was taught by Leavis at the University of Cambridge and whose Ph.D. was supervised by Empson at the University of Sheffield (Hobsbaum 1987: 84). As we pointed out in Chapter 3, the 1963 *A Group Anthology*, which Hobsbaum edited along with Edward Lucie-Smith, even has a transcript of one of their writing sessions where the terms of critique are the rationality and consistency of a poem’s narrative and images, especially as they conclude in an ironic vision. Accordingly, there is very little difference between the poems in *A Group Anthology* and those in *New Lines*. Hobsbaum also provides a crucial link between this poetry of the late 1950s and the poems selected in 1982 by Morrison and Motion since he later set up the Belfast Group whose members included Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon.

Philip Larkin’s poetry came to be seen as the paradigmatic poetry of *New Lines* and the Movement as a whole, especially the three longest lyrics selected in *New Lines*, “I Remember, I Remember,” “Church Going,” and “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album”; all three also took a central place in Larkin’s first “mature” collection, *The Less Deceived*, published in 1955. The title of “Church Going” sets up an Empsonian ambiguity in that it means both going to church sacredly as a believer and going to church secularly as a tourist. It also carries the idea that the church is departing as a viable and functioning institution because such secular tourists outnumber sacred believers. In this way, the poem represents not only the secular nature of the Movement but also the increasing secularization of postwar British culture. The postwar generations of poets are the first for whom some form of churchgoing was not necessarily a characteristic of their upbringing. Indeed, Matthew Arnold’s “long, withdrawing roar” of the departure of Christian faith continues to be heard throughout the period, often through the exploration of different sites and forms of the sacred.

The poem’s argument explores the ambiguity of the title, and the speaker asks what will survive of the church when the sacred has entirely disappeared from the world. Larkin characteristically dismisses a series of rhetorical questions with an ironic shrug: “I’ve no idea/What this accoutered frowsty barn is worth” (Conquest 1956: 21). Equally characteristic of both Larkin and the Movement, the final stanza opens out to a larger

generalization that emphasizes the local and the locale: people will continue “gravitat[ing]” to the church because “so many dead lie round” (Conquest 1956: 22). The sacred may not survive, but the fact of the English “ground” will remain. Movement poetry, then, circumscribes what can be seen or said into the empirical present and lays claim to a truth telling predicated on what Crozier calls the “enunciation” of a single, coherent, and knowable subject (2000: 193). Furthermore, this single subject, as Praseeda Gopinath argues, tends to be constructed around the figure of an ironic, middle-class, and English masculinity (2009: 374–6).

Al Alvarez’s *The New Poetry*, published by Penguin in 1962 and in a second edition in 1966, reacts explicitly against this dominant poetic voice, even as it becomes the next mainstream anthology. (The second edition was the most influential because Alvarez added Sylvia Plath to his opening section, “The Americans”; previously this section had only included Robert Lowell and John Berryman.) Importantly, this collection was also a crossover success, garnering a large, popular audience, and still remains in print. Although retroactively both *New Lines* and *The New Poetry* have congealed into a position, the anthology is also a position-taking, since in his preface Alvarez critiques *New Lines* and unfavorably compares Philip Larkin, as the exemplary Movement poet, with Ted Hughes, who, Alvarez claims, exemplifies the “new” poetry.

In his preface, Alvarez attacks what he terms the Movement’s “academic-administrative verse” that is “polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished and, in its quiet way, even intelligent” (1966: 23). Alvarez extends this aesthetic critique to a social one, arguing that the Movement is English “lower middle class,” and, accordingly, it exemplifies what he famously terms the “Gentility principle,” that is, the “belief that life is always more or less orderly, people are always more or less polite, their emotions and habits are more or less decent and more or less controllable” (1966: 25). In contrast, Alvarez argues that the events of the twentieth century have destroyed these liberal notions and that to survive and to remain relevant, English poetry needs to confront the pressure of the century’s horrors. More specifically he argues that two things have altered: first, “mass evil... has been magnified to match the scale of mass society” and, second, “mass evil outside us has developed precisely with psychoanalysis” (1966: 26–7).

For Alvarez, poetry has to seek new content that addresses epochal violence and frame it within a psychoanalysis predicated upon trauma. Like Conquest’s selection, Alvarez’s chosen poems not only remain within the frame of a lyric “I” but also stay committed to the notion of authenticity.

This authenticity, however, is no longer predicated on social agreement and empirical mundanity, but rather depends upon the evocations of physical, emotional, and mental extremity. Instead of the poetry revealing an ironically rational world, poem after poem uncovers a world of irrational violence. Sylvia Plath's and Ted Hughes's poetry came to exemplify the anthology and this "new" poetics. In poems like "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," and "Mary's Song," Plath sets up metaphoric links between the historical suffering of collectives and the psychic torment of the female speaker. These metaphoric links, in turn, produce images of universal trauma based upon a sacrificial myth:

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in,
O Golden child the world will kill and eat.
(Alvarez 1966: 72)

Here the end of "Mary's Song" combines the poem's various thematic and figurative clusters: Mary is the mother of Christ and mourner of Christ; she is also the Jewish Mary who gives birth to the founder of a religion, the later anti-Semitism of which was a contributing factor in the "holocaust." The poem begins with a mother cooking "the Sunday lamb," linking Christ's sacrifice with the domestic sacrifice of women, and ends with them all being sacrificed, killed, and eaten. The final apostrophe, in turn, implies the interrelationship between motherhood, violent sacrifice, and creation. As Geoffrey Hill writes in "Genesis," another central poem in the anthology: "By blood we live the hot the cold,/To ravage and redeem the world: /There is no bloodless myth will hold" (Alvarez 1966: 199). Ted Hughes similarly links creation with destruction, sexuality with violence, as he turns to the natural world to write a lyric poetry of mythic violence. In "Thrushes," for example, he uses a form of sprung rhythm to argue that thrushes exemplify a natural world that operates without ratiocination. For Hughes, all action is necessarily violent and is linked to creative energies: the same power that forces the thrush to attack and kill forces "Mozart's brain" to compose (Alvarez 1966: 85).

The anthology's emphasis on the individual subject, free of social constraints, a freedom more often than not figured as sexual in nature, alongside a celebration of extremity, has often been given the name "Confessional." M.L. Rosenthal coined this term in a 1959 review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, and it became attached to a group of American poets (including the

four Alvarez anthologized in *The New Poetry* – Lowell, Berryman, Sexton, and Plath). Such poetry focuses on individual subjectivity when it transgresses social norms, often through such things as illicit sexual liaisons, alcohol, drugs, anger, violence, and madness. The form and subject matter of this poetry can be correlated to the social changes of the 1960s, especially in relation to the generation who reached adulthood during the decade. Indeed, Stevenson suggests this link between this “new” poetry and the new popular culture manifested itself most explicitly with the First International Poetry Incarnation at the Albert Hall in 1965, next with the best-selling 1967 Penguin volume, *The Mersey Sound*, and then with Michael Horowitz’s 1967 anthology, *Children of Albion: Poetry of the ‘Underground’ in Britain*. As Stevenson observes, the Albert Hall event was “as close to a rock concert as a poetry reading could come, attracting an audience of seven thousand, decked with flowers as they entered” (2004: 183); *The Mersey Sound* selection sold “more than a quarter of a million copies” (2004: 181); and the *Children of Albion* anthology revealed a vibrant poetic counterculture focused on “poetry readings...tours and performances” (2004; 183). We have already discussed poets of *The Mersey Sound* in Chapter 3, but also typical of the performance poetry of the time was the political content of a someone like Adrian Mitchell, with his rousing “To Whom It May Concern (Tell Me Lies About Vietnam).”

Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion’s *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) is the final volume in this mainstream line. Their preface is also a position-taking since they argue that “a shift of sensibility” has occurred in the twenty years since the Alvarez anthology (1982: 11). Morrison and Motion explicitly link this change to the poets and poetry of Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s and highlight the importance of the “emergence and example of Seamus Heaney” (1982: 13). They argue that in contrast to Larkin and Hughes, Heaney uses a “larger historical framework” and an “oblique” language that is able to “embod[y] politics, history and locality” (1982: 13). Accordingly, they emphasize the ways in which Heaney and the other poets in the volume investigate etymologies and the history of language use to represent “the relationship between art and politics, between the private and the public, between conscious ‘making’ and intuitive ‘inspiration’” (1982: 16). In poems like “Anahorish,” as we saw in Chapter 4, Heaney explores a name or word whose etymological roots are Gaelic, rather than Anglo-Saxon. The poem begins with Heaney defining the title (“my place of clear water”) and, hence, translating it (Morrison and Motion 1982: 23). By so doing, he claims poetic owner-

ship of both the landscape and the inscape that the word now denotes in the poem. Turning to the materiality of the Gaelic word's sound, he figures it as a maternal landscape: "Anahorish, soft gradient/Of consonant, vowel meadow" (Morrison and Motion 1982: 23). Like many of the poets in the anthology, Heaney uses the history of language to make larger historical, political, and aesthetic claims; in his case, they concern the "true" ownership of Anahorish and, by extension, Northern Ireland itself. These larger claims become even more explicit in the so-called bog poems from his 1975 slim volume *North*, whose importance Morrison and Motion emphasize in their introduction. In these poems, as we saw at the end of Chapter 7, Heaney sets up the relationship between Ireland and England as a series of binary oppositions in which Ireland includes Gaelic, vowels, the maternal, Roman Catholicism, softness, and memory and in which England includes English, consonants, the paternal, Protestantism, hardness, and action. The poetic self straddles the gap and figuratively explores this fissure through the archaeological and psychological conceit of digging into preservative peat bogs.

A similar use of etymology, local lore, and dialect occurs in the other Northern Irish poets included in the anthology. Indeed, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, and Medbh McGuckian were often known as the "Northern Irish poets" to the exclusion of other writers from there, not only because of their place of birth and thematic content but also because all of them except McGuckian were published by Faber. Its use also occurs in those poets, from Scotland and England, who take class as their subject matter. Ken Worpole calls this "Scholarship-Boy" poetry after the process of social mobility whereby working-class boys moved through the grammar school system to the universities. (This particular social formation was virtually brought to an end with the implementation of comprehensive schools in the later 1960s and early 1970s.) Douglas Dunn and Tony Harrison, for instance, often interrogate a phrase, word, tradition, or event to show how a received meaning hides a history of the violent dispossession and silencing of the nonruling class. In "Gardeners," for example, Dunn revises the tradition of the country-house poem by giving voice to one of the anonymous gardeners who planted and constructed an imaginary "Loamshire" estate (Morrison and Motion 1982: 56). In his extended *School of Eloquence* sequence of sixteen line "sonnets," as we discussed in Chapter 4, Harrison similarly explores the silenced and lost voices of the past. He usually undertakes this excavation through a complex use of ambiguity – as is evident in the ending to "On Not Being Milton": "In the silence round all poetry we

quote/ Tidd the Cato Street conspirator who wrote: // *Sir I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting*" (Morrison and Motion 1982: 43). Tidd is a "bad hand" in the sense of "hand" as a worker since he is trying to right social and economic injustice; he is, therefore, a good hand at "righting" in the sense of righting a wrong. However, since he was caught and punished, he ends up being a "Bad Hand at Righting," in the sense of being successful as a "conspirator." Harrison, in turn, seeks to right the historical wrong by being a good hand at writing through quoting (and rhyming) Tidd's misspelled words. The poet, in turn, then spans the gap between the world he seeks to represent and the poetic tradition in which he represents it. And both the poem and the poetic self come into being by charting these two spaces.

The anthology also brought to the fore two other types of poetry that were given the names "Martian" and the "new narrative" or "secret narrative verse." The former included Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, and David Sweetman and was named by Fenton after Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" in which the speaker writes a series of riddles as if an alien were describing the world; a book is described as "a mechanical bird" that "perch[es] on the hand." The latter, as we saw in Chapter 7, included Motion and Morrison themselves, as well as James Fenton, and brought longer verse narratives into public light, often through a return to the structures of light verse. Paul Muldoon's longer narratives of the 1970s and 1980s such as "Immram" and "The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants" were also linked to this narrative turn, as were the writings of Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell.

Morrison and Motion's introduction makes clear that they view their anthology as being, in Bourdieu's sense, a "position-taking." They argue that their collection represents a critique of the "position" held by *New Lines* and *The New Poetry*. They aim to extend the "imaginative franchise" by emphasizing the importance of the regions of the archipelago and by addressing explicitly questions of class, especially the working class (1982: 11). However, as Crozier points out, taken together the three anthologies in fact construct a consistent and coherent position that constitutes the mainstream of the postwar period. Crozier notes that this position consists of well-made short lyrics that are predicated on "an authoritative self" which "discours[es] in a world of banal, empirically derived objects and relations" and "depends on its employment of metaphor and simile for poetic vitality" (1983: 229). Indeed, in all three volumes, there is a characteristic use of figurative language to conclude poems. In Movement poetry more often than not the referential side of the figure subverts the

figurative side for ironic effect: Davie ends “The Fountain” with “We ask of fountains only that they play, // Though that was not what Berkeley meant at all” (Conquest 1956: 65); Amis concludes “Against Romanticism” by saying, “Let there be a path leading out of sight./And at its other end a temperate zone:/Woods devoid of beasts, roads that please the foot” (Conquest 1956: 46); and Gunn asserts in the last lines of “Human Condition” that “I, born to fog and waste,/Walk through hypothesis,/An individual” (Conquest 1956: 34). In the poems that dominate Alvarez’s anthology, such as those of Hill, Hughes, and Plath, figure and referent more often than not become entwined. In Plath’s use of metaphor or simile, for example, often the vehicle of one tenor generates the tenor of the next, whereas Hughes in poems such as “The Thought-Fox” plays on the intrinsic doubling of metaphor and simile. As we saw in Chapter 4, “The Thought-Fox,” for example, represents not only poetic thought (the tenor) by the fox (the vehicle) but also the fox (now the tenor) by poetic thought (now the vehicle). This doubleness materializes in the pun of “printed page” where print means both typeface and footprint (Hughes 2003: 21).

In the Motion and Morrison collection, the poems’ figurative language usually works to emphasize the likeness between figure and referent, or the empirical detail is at one with its figuration. The poems generate closure by showing how the seemingly figurative is in fact at one with the empirical detail or the other way round. For Heaney, agricultural digging is the same as poetic digging; for Harrison, righting and writing coalesce; and for Craig Raine, as Edward Larrisey observes, the similes reveal the “poet’s ingenuity” in the making of similes (1990: 161). Crozier accordingly points out that the “homogeneity” in all three volumes “consist[s of] ... the enunciation ... of an empirical subject, and a textual insistence on figures of rhetoric as the discernible signs of the poetic” (2000: 193). Indeed, although Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley argue in the introduction to their 1992 anthology, also called *The New Poetry*, that it represents a “New Generation,” its central figures – Simon Armitage, Lavinia Greenlaw, and Glyn Maxwell – conform to Crozier’s paradigm.

As we traced in Chapter 3, the educational structure reinforces and reproduces this paradigm, as Peter Middleton observes, primarily through the teaching of its anthologies and its examinations (2009: 257–60). These are controlled by companies, such as Edexcel, which set and grade vast numbers of exams and, therefore, direct not only what is taught in British schools but also how it is taught. The poetry section of Edexcel’s

English Literature GCSE, for example, is based on an anthology consisting entirely of short, predominantly lyric poems divided into four sections, “Relationships,” “Clashes and Collisions,” “Somewhere, Anywhere,” and “Taking a Stand.” These titles already suggest both a purposeful narrative and a purpose for poetry: they begin with personal “relationships” that often “clash” and need conflict resolution; this is universally true “anywhere” and reading poetry supports you “taking a stand.” Various teaching guides for this anthology and the exam, for example, those from Edexcel and the *Times Educational Supplement*, place an emphasis both on describing the thoughts and feelings of the speaker and/or the characters in the poems and on recording the use of imagery in the poems. They urge teachers to teach students both to analyze a poem’s voice and tone in order to show what the speaker is like and to examine the way a poem’s imagery describes this speaking self. The student then evaluates the voices, tones, and images according to how realistically they render the person in question.

In response to each of these three anthologies, especially after the Morrison and Motion volume, other anthologies followed, often with their own polemical introductions that affirmed the value of other types of poets and poetry. Frequently such anthologies have been identity based. They have at times asserted a different national identity, such as Irish, Scottish, Welsh, or a separate English regional identity, such as Northern or Northeastern: these include, for example, Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon’s *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1990) and Patrick Crotty’s *Modern Irish Poetry* (1995), Alexander Scott’s *Voices of Our Kind: An Anthology of Modern Scottish Poetry from 1920 to the Present* (1987) and Maurice Lindsay and Lesley Duncan’s *Edinburgh Book of Twentieth-Century Scottish Poetry* (2006), David Lloyd’s *The Urgency of Identity* (1994) and Menna Elfyn and John Rowland’s *The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry* (2003), and Neil Astley’s *Ten North-East Poets* (1980).

Many of these anthologies’ point of identification is gender, including Lilian Mohin’s *One Foot On The Mountain: An Anthology of British Feminist Poetry, 1969–1979* (1980), Jeni Couzyn’s *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985), Carol Rumens’s *Making for the Open: Post Feminist Poetry* (1985), Fleur Adcock’s *The Faber Book of Twentieth-Century Women’s Poetry* (1987), Linda France’s *Sixty Women Poets* (1993), and Maggie O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere: linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & the UK* (1996). Despite their aesthetic and ideological differences, the various introductions highlight the exclusion

of women from the canon and, as such, draw attention to historical and continuing gender bias in the canon. In *New Lines*, for example, Elizabeth Jennings was the solitary woman out of nine poets; there were no women in the first edition of *The New Poetry*, and in the second edition only two of the twenty-eight poets were women (Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton), and both were Americans; and in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, women counted for only five of the twenty poets.

There is also not one person of color in any of these three mainstream anthologies. In reply to this glaring omission, a series of anthologies have drawn attention to the importance of race and ethnicity for assessments of postwar British poetry. These include James Berry's *News For Babylon* (1984), Lemn Sissay's *The Fire People: A Collection of Contemporary Black British Poets* (1998), Karen McCarthy's *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women's Poetry* (1998), Courttia Newland and Kadija Sesay's *IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain* (2000), and Jackie Kay, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson's *Out of Bounds: British Black & Asian Poets* (2012). Taken as part of the poetic field as a whole, all these anthologies reveal what Armitage and Robert Crawford regard in the introduction to their 1998 *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* as the fundamental fact of postwar Britain and its poetry: both have become increasingly decentered, devolved, and democratized to produce a "contemporary culture of pluralism" that can represent a multicultural society of "local accents, dialects, [and] languages" (1998: xxxii).

The importance, nevertheless, of the mainstream center remains, so much so that resistance to it often seems the most obvious similarity between different, more marginalized poetries. The anthology *The New British Poetry*, published by Paladin in 1988, made this common opposition to the mainstream explicit by dividing the collection into four separate sections, each section selected and introduced by one of the editors: "Black British Poetry" edited by Fred D'Aguiar, "Quote Feminist Unquote Poetry" by Gillian Allnutt, "A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry" by Eric Mottram, and "Some Younger Poets" by Ken Edwards. Mottram selected self-described experimental or innovative poetry that opposes mainstream poetics on explicitly aesthetic grounds. The poetry collected in such anthologies as Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville's *A Various Art* (1987), Iain Sinclair's *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK* (1996), Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's *Other: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999), Nicholas Johnson's

Foil: Defining Poetry 1985–2000, and Rod Mengham and John Kinsella's *Vanishing Points: New Modernists Poems* (2004) self-consciously reaches beyond national traditions and locates itself with the transnational traditions of various modernist and avant-garde poetics, including such late modernist poets as Hugh MacDiarmid, David Jones, and Basil Bunting. The poets in these volumes are also concerned with identity, but, as we saw in Chapter 8, in ways that underscore how the self is produced by language, indeed is a function of language itself. Rather than seeing language as passively referential and mimetic in nature, as they claim mainstream poetry does, these poets see language as actively making and constructing the world, including the self that inhabits this world of language. Poetry, then, becomes a privileged space since the epistemological investigation of language becomes the ontological investigation of being itself.

Increasingly, at the center of this tradition lies the work and influence of J.H. Prynne whose poetry explores the systems within which humans are embedded and produced. In the anthology *A Various Art*, the Prynne selection opens with his "Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self," originally published in 1968. The very title announces Prynne's procedures. "Sketch" already emphasizes process and suggests that the poem is a rough draft, an approximation. As such, it draws attention to the fact that poems are temporal occasions, rather than timeless monuments, and that their making remains always incomplete since it includes not only the moment of a poem's written completion but also all its repeated past, present, and future readings. "Financial theory" underscores the larger systems and structures that form "the Self" (Crozier and Longville 1987: 233). The poem examines the question of "names" and the ways in which "names" come to be seen as "things" with relational qualities. The naming of these things marks the emergence of a system of value that transforms names and things, named things, into commodities, the primary marker of which becomes the abstraction of money itself: "Music/travel, habit, and silence are all *money*." The self, in turn, comes to be defined by desire for commodities: "we give the name of/our selves to our needs./We want what we are" (Crozier and Longville 1987: 234). As the poem plots its financial theory, it also sets up a counterplot by repeating key words like "silk," "name," and "stars" in such a way that each time they are used, or referred to, their signification and frame of reference grows to generate an excess of meaning that in the last line gestures beyond monetary returns: "the star & silk of my eye, that will not return" (Crozier and Longville 1987: 234). The pun of I/eye, the dual focus of the preposition "of" with

its combining of the star and silk as that which the I/eye perceives and that which constitutes the I/eye, and the ambiguity of what “that” refers to (“the star & silk”? “the eye”? or “the star & silk of my eye”?) all produce surplus signification that the poem then isolates as particular, singular, and concrete and so cannot be repeated, in contrast to the financial pursuit of surplus value with its endless, general, and abstract returns.

Indeed, Prynne’s use of surplus signification has only increased. In work such as *Her Weasels Wild Returning* (1994), sections of which are selected in Iain Sinclair’s anthology, *Conductors of Chaos* (1996), he continues to explore the systems that make up the world. These systems remain primarily discursive, but the discourses used seem to range across the whole gamut of specialized and unspecialized discursive formations. In this way Prynne seeks to engage with the social totality by citing its various and varied vocabularies and syntax and then impacting them into the compressed space of the poem. As such, the multiple, complementary, and conflicting significations operate, he suggests, “like a network across the whole expanse of the text, with many loops and cross-links of semantic and referring activity which extend the boundaries of relevance, and of control by context, in many directions at once” (2010: 155). Poetry, then, becomes a privileged site precisely because it can hope to evade and resist the instrumentalization of language, precisely because it seeks to give abstract nomenclature the slip.

This returns us to the questions of nomenclature with which this book’s first chapter opened and, more specifically, the way in which such questions have in this period necessarily revolved around the problems of history and identity. These problems, in turn, are embedded within the larger historical narrative of Britain’s progress in the twentieth century from being the center of an empire to becoming a node in the global world’s economy and from seeming a relatively homogenous society to appearing a multicultural and multiethnic one. Certainly the introductory essays of the majority of poetry anthologies published since Morrison and Motion’s 1984 selection point to a culture in which the traditional centers of power and identity (white, middle class, male, London–Cambridge–Oxford) have become less and less hegemonic and have been replaced by a multiplicity of dispersed places and subjects.

As we have emphasized, the poetic field of the postwar period has seen the emergence of new content as previously marginalized or excluded collectives have been able to enter the publishing sphere and the literary marketplace. Although aesthetically and politically varied, moving from

what we saw Kinnahan describe in Chapter 8 as the “expressive mode” to an emphasis on the “constructed, contingent, and multiple nature” of any female self, the poems in anthologies of women poets tend to explore thematics focused on gender definitions, experiences, and identifications (2009: 181). This entry of new content into poetic discourse has brought a corresponding expansion of poetic vocabulary, language, and form. In fact, this is one of the ways literary change occurs: as writers wrestle into representation new content within the frame of preexisting forms, they discover that the form seems inadequate or buckles under the strain and becomes revised, renewed, or transformed.

Frequently, as we have seen, poets from previously marginalized groups have alluded to old poetic traditions, forms, and tropes in order to situate the poem’s occasion within its immediate and longer historical contexts. In Chapters 4 and 8, for example, we discussed the revision of ekphrasis in “Not My Best Side,” when U.A. Fanthorpe comments on Paolo Uccello’s “St. George and the Dragon” by allowing the dragon, the princess, and St. George to speak, with the first two showing complex feelings, whereas St. George reveals nothing but a will to power (2005: 42–44), and in “Standing Female Nude,” when Carol Ann Duffy emphasizes the female model’s physicality in contrast to the abstraction of the art of cubist painter Georges Braque: “he is concerned with volume, space,/I with the next meal” (1985: 46). It also occurs in Grace Nichols’s 2010 collection, *Picasso, I Want My Face Back*, where she writes a sequence of lyrics giving voice to the photographer Dora Maar who was the lover of Picasso and the model for many of his paintings, including his “Weeping Woman.” This painting provides Nichols with a title for one of the poems which moves from the plea “Picasso, I want my face back/the unbroken photography of it” to the command “Picasso, I want my face back/the unbroken geography of it” (2009: 16). The alteration from “photography” to “geography” charts a movement from desiring an accurate representation to aspiring to a presentation of the face in all of its three-dimensional reality.

Such revisions, allusions, and use of earlier representations and of older forms, modes, and motifs generate a complex process by which a previously dominant or canonical history or representation becomes questioned, subverted, and displaced by what has previously been marginalized. As a consequence, the dominant is revealed to be partial, nonuniversal, and marked, and the once marginal’s more capacious representational power becomes manifest precisely because it can also represent its other. That is to say, poems reveal multiple linguistic registers

in which hegemonic or centering language or ideas are set up and commented upon by non-hegemonic languages. In the writing of black British poets, for example, there is often complex interplay between written and oral languages, between literary language and dialect, and between English and Creole. Jean “Binta” Breeze, for example, uses nonstandard spellings to defamiliarize standard written English and, hence, to familiarize vernacular speech. In “The Wife of Bath speaks in Brixton Market,” she brings together the authoritative and founding father of the canonical English literary tradition, Geoffrey Chaucer, with the voice of a contemporary, black British woman who asserts the value of her experiences over the strictures of written authority: “My life is my own bible/wen it come to all de woes/in married life” (2000: 62). Displacing Chaucer’s iambic pentameter rhyming couplets with her own insistent rhythm and rhyme – not only accentuated by the repeated creolized “d” plosive consonants that replace the fricative consonant “th” but also driven forward by the poem’s lack of punctuation (except for the single exclamation mark at the close) – Breeze’s poem emphasizes the speaking voice, functioning as a musical score as much as a written poem. Furthermore, such use of the vernacular expands and connects the myriad vernaculars and creoles of the greater Anglophone world. The poem, then, gestures to the ever-enlarging range, reference, and context of postwar poetry; its emphasis on performance points to the extension of the written poem into the realms of performance and other media; its linguistic range signifies the unfolding extension of poetry’s geography.

Breeze’s poetry could be anthologized, among other titles, as black British poetry, women’s poetry, black British women’s poetry, British poetry, black Atlantic poetry, Anglophone poetry, and more. These and other possible descriptors not only underscore the enormous expansion of the field of “British” poetry at the beginning of the new millennium, but they also accentuate how British poetry’s context exists not so much within these categories, but rather in the mobile links among them, especially as they interact within the space of poems themselves. Given this dynamic connectivity, unsurprisingly, no anthology after Morrison and Motion’s has had, or can have, the same centering and canonical power as the three that constituted the mainstream in the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, if the literary history of British poetry in the twentieth century can be seen as the age of the anthology, the twenty-first century will perhaps be the age of the link, especially since most people will increasingly encounter

poetry primarily through the Internet and other seen and unforeseen communication technologies. Poems and poetry will perhaps exist primarily in the links, spaces, interstices, and circulating relationships between, within, and among such technologies, but we believe their archaic, historical, and contemporary capacity to represent epochal historical changes by wrestling content into form will remain. We hope this book's readings have revealed this capacity and, even more, celebrated it.

Epilogue: Beyond “British,” “Irish,” and “Poetry”

By early in the period covered by this book, it could no longer be said that the sun never set on the British Empire; the empire was quickly falling away, leaving the “Little England” about which so many were concerned. If Britain no longer covered vast stretches of the globe, however, English still did. The colonial education systems British authorities built in South Asia, in Africa, and in the Caribbean (to say nothing of Australia and Canada) kept the language and its literature prominent even as former colonies achieved independence and became new nations. Educated in the English language and in the traditions of English poetry, many writers in these countries have fused their local cultures and these traditions in poetry that remains in some ways “British” though it lives far from the British Isles.

At the same time, some poets interested in language not as a means of communication but, instead, as a physical material to be manipulated, as an artist manipulates paint or clay or stone, experimented with poems that exploited (and often obscured or even eliminated) the semantic (or meaning making) properties of words. Some of these poets explored the physical space of the page by placing words and lines in ways that emphasized aspects of the spatial field, while others combined lines with swathes or splashes of paint or collaged bits of text with fragments of other materials, and still other poets experimented with how the means of literary production – the typewriter, the printing press – could produce effects independent of the meanings of the words they (re)produced.

For some poets, the space of the page itself came under scrutiny and came to be replaced by poetry intended only for live performance or poetry composed for reading only on computer screens. Just as the photocopier, the mimeograph, the typewriter, and the printing press offered opportunities for manipulation of language as physical stuff, the digital “space” of computer memory and monitor allowed poets to explore ways their work unfolded over time, to combine language with nonlinguistic visual and auditory effects, and to invite the reader to engage the poem as an active participant in its making.

Exhaustive treatment of any of these phenomena is beyond the scope of this book. Good books are available on each of these topics earlier, from Jahan Ramazani’s *A Transnational Poetics* to Marjorie Perloff’s *Poetry On and Off the Page* and Peter Middleton’s *Distant Reading* and to Adalaide Morris’s edited collections, *Sound States* and *New Media Poetics*, to name a few. In this brief epilogue, however, we will gesture toward some of the fascinating work that has taken “British” poetry out of the archipelago, out of legibility, and off the physical space of the printed page.

Beyond “British” and “Irish”

To say that the work of many postcolonial Anglophone poets is in part an effect of the colonial education systems and the literary traditions of the colonizing power is not to say that this work is “British” rather than Nigerian or Indian or Jamaican. The complex and potent forms of cultural hybridity produced by postcoloniality have been carefully analyzed by theorists and critics over the last fifty years, and the insights of Edouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and others have, in many cases, informed subsequent generations of poets, so that the conditions of postcoloniality themselves become the manifest content of poems. But to acknowledge the role colonial education and literary traditions have played in this work is to make room for the struggle a poet like Derek Walcott articulately engages in poems and essays throughout the course of a fifty-year career, the struggle to forge a voice that is at once true to its local setting and culture and aware of the implications of the language in which it speaks.

We have, in some of the preceding pages, touched on the work of poets who have spent parts of their lives in Britain or whose publication in Britain has had a powerful impact on the scenes of poetry in the

archipelago (Derek Walcott, Jean “Binta” Breeze, David Dabydeen, Kamau Brathwaite, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Grace Nichols). What, though, of the many poets educated in colonial and postcolonial systems profoundly shaped by British cultural history who have remained in their own nations, who insist, whether explicitly or between the lines of their work, that they are Nigerian or Indian or Jamaican poets? The question is especially pressing in those cases where the national identity of a poet is highlighted, whether because of biographical circumstance or thematic emphasis in the work.

Given the number of former British colonies with thriving poets and poetry scenes, we can only gesture here toward the vast and various poetics in English that are beyond British and Irish, and we want to focus on poets from former British colonies in Africa, in particular Nigeria. The postcolonial literary history of Anglophone Africa makes especially legible the ways in which the legacy of British literature can be inflected in dramatically different ways in specific local, tribal, and national contexts. While the same is true of postcolonial poetry of the Caribbean or of South Asia and elsewhere, it is clear that “Anglophone African poetry” is a label that obscures a wonderful richness and variety, with the work of Nigerian poets quite different from that of Ugandan poets, which differs again from the work of Kenyan or South African or Zimbabwean poets.

Its difficult history since gaining independence from Britain in 1960 has made Nigeria one location that dominates the identity of its poets. From the beginning of its independent history, Nigeria was torn by geographical and tribal divisions, especially between the eastern Igbo and western Yoruba. These were exacerbated by corruption in government institutions and by a series of coups and countercoups throughout the early and middle 1960s. A 1966 coup undertaken largely by military officers from the northern Hausa resulted in massacres of Igbo-speaking people. In response, the eastern region of the Nigerian federation declared itself an independent republic, Biafra, in May 1967. The ensuing civil war, which began that July, lasted for two and a half years, during which the Republic of Biafra was besieged and cut off from trade or resupply and during which between well over a million people died in the eastern region.

Among those of Igbo descent who died during the Nigerian Civil War was the poet Christopher Okigbo. Born in 1932, Okigbo was educated at a Catholic primary school and Government College, in Umuahia, eastern Nigeria. He studied classics at University College, Ibadan, in the west of the country, taking his degree in 1956. Over the next nine years, Okigbo

worked as a librarian and teacher and edited a literary journal, *Transition*. As tensions between east and west rose during 1966, he moved back to eastern Nigeria and worked with Chinua Achebe to found a publishing house, Citadel Press. When the Republic of Biafra broke away from Nigeria in 1967, Okigbo joined the Biafran army. He was killed in action later that year while defending the university town, Nsukka, where he had worked during the early 1960s in the University of Nigeria library.

While still an undergraduate, Okigbo began publishing poems, mostly in his university's student magazine. In 1962, he gained visibility with poems published in the well-known literary magazines *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*, as well as with his pamphlet, *Heavensgate*. This early work evinces the complex literary heritage that informs Okigbo's work. The long poem *Heavensgate* is, Okigbo writes, a "ceremony of innocence." The poem follows its celebrant, a figure Okigbo compares to Orpheus, through the stages of his spiritual journey, stages that Okigbo calls "stations of his cross" (1971: xi). *Heavensgate* begins with an invocation to Idoto, the animating spirit of a village stream, and water recurs throughout the poem as an almost mystically powerful element, at once an agent of cleansing and a kind of beloved (1971: 3). In "Watermaid," the third section of the poem, Okigbo mingles this Igbo folklore with the tropes of English nature lyric. The water spirit is figured in terms of a lioness, even as the seascape is described in a stanza whose images, diction, and slant rhyme echo T.S. Eliot:

salt-white surf on the stones and me,
and lobsters and shells,
in iodine smell –
mid of the salt-emptiness,
sophisticreamy.

(Okigbo 1971: 10)

Refrain-like repetitions open and punctuate the poem, and a moment of self-reference ("fulfilling each moment in a/broken monody" [1971: 13]) concludes it. Other early work, especially the two laments that make up "Silences," draws on a rich range of English and European influences, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose deployment of poetry as a means of religious exploration was an especially powerful model for Okigbo.

With the exacerbation of political tensions and the outbreak of civil war, Okigbo brought politics explicitly into his poetry, decrying corruption in the country's civil society and government institutions and commenting

on the impending violence of war. Okigbo's last work, published posthumously, includes elegies and testaments that ring prophetically, seeming to predict his own death and hoping to be remembered afterwards. The late "Elegy for Alto," composed in 1966 but not published until 1968, when it appeared in *Black Orpheus* months after the poet's death, inveighs against the agents of destruction in Nigeria and in postcolonial Africa more broadly:

POLITICIANS are back in giant hidden steps of howitzers, of detonators –
 THE EAGLES descend on us,
 Bayonets and cannons –
 THE ROBBERS descend on us to strip us of our laughter, of our thunder.
 (1971: 71)

And the poem also makes the poet's prayer in a way that seems to acknowledge his coming death: "O mother mother Earth, unbind me; let this be/my last testament" (1971: 71).

If Okigbo is one of the crucial poets of Nigeria's early postcolonial period, Chris Abani is one of the important poets of the country's present moment. Born just two years before Okigbo's death, Abani is also partially of Igbo descent and his work is shaped by Igbo language and ritual. When his first novel, *Masters of the Board*, was published in 1985, Abani was suspected of conspiring to overthrow the government (the novel's plot resembles a coup that occurred soon after its publication). He was imprisoned for six months. When his second novel, *Sirocco*, angered authorities, Abani was imprisoned for a year. Upon his release, he wrote plays and poems against the government and was once again imprisoned, this time under a death sentence. He was released, however, and left the country, living first in Britain, where he studied for a master's degree, and then (from 1999) in the United States, where he currently resides.

Abani's first collection of poetry, *Kalakuta Republic*, was published in London in 2000. The book's title refers to Kirikiri Prison in Lagos, where political prisoners were imprisoned and, sometimes, tortured. The suffering of prisoners and the cruelty of their torturers are depicted in the poems with clarity and detail; the horrors are neither aestheticized nor softened, the suffering is not sentimentalized. More recent work has often taken a historical long view, as if to suggest that contemporary events in Nigeria simply form a link in a long chain of cruelty and suffering in Africa (whether at the hands of English or European slavers or of the soldiers who fight on

one or another side of one or another dispute). “Blue,” in Abani’s 2004 collection, *Dog Woman*, revisits the African slave trade explored by such poets as Walcott, Dabydeen, and Carlyle Reedy. Abani tightens the focus so that instead of “African” or even “Nigerian,” the kidnapped and enslaved people here are Igbo, and over the course of its stanzas, the poem homes in on one figure, an Igbo woman, who is driven by the unbearable pain within her, “deeper than the blue inside of a flame,” to break away and run across the slave ship’s deck, her handcuffs wielded like an axe. In an echo of Keats or Wallace Stevens, Abani concludes with a sound whose identity, perhaps even whose existence, is uncertain but whose significance is unmistakable; it might be the breaking of the captain’s skull under the swing of the manacle or it might be the musket shot that drops the woman “over the side, her chains wrapped/around his neck in dance.”

In *Hands Washing Water* (2006), Abani explicitly acknowledges his range of influences and continues to comment on the legacy of colonialism in Nigeria. A number of the volume’s poems are dedicated to figures important in the formation of Abani’s style (poets like Lucille Clifton and Yusef Komunyakaa, musicians like Ornette Coleman, and the Japanese artist Horikawa Michio). Abani marks his relationship with Derek Walcott by composing a poem, “Walcott,” of lines he takes from the index of first lines in the older poet’s *Midsummer*; the poem also manifests Abani’s affiliation with the African American poet Terrance Hayes, whose “Lorde” is similarly constructed of lines Hayes took from the index of Audre Lorde’s *Collected Poems*. Though his voice is influenced by a cosmopolitan chorus, Nigeria is always a presence in Abani’s poetry. In “Say Something About Child’s Play,” he recounts in almost parabolic fashion the dialogue between a soldier and a child; when the soldier asks which arm or leg he should “cleave off” the child, his victim replies that he can lose neither an arm nor a leg but that the soldier should cut out his right eye “because it has seen too much” (2006: 68). And in “Aphasia,” whose title names the condition of lost language, Abani meditates upon the erasure of his ancestral language and culture. “My language is dying the same way/my father did,” he writes, ending the poem with the gasped Igbo “*Uwa’m*,” which he glosses, in the volume’s notes, as meaning not only “my world” but also “my life” and “my destiny.” The word “can also be a lament.... At death, it is, quite literally, ‘giving up the ghost’” (2006: 58; 81).

Nigeria is not, of course, the only former British colony in Africa where poets have written profound and influential work. Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa, for example, have all produced poets whose work fuses, in a

wide variety of ways, elements of their local cultures and the British lyric tradition. Uganda's Okot p'Bitek, for instance, brought into English poetry the complex desires and frustrations of rural folk drawn by the promises of urban life and of those left behind in the countryside. Jonathan Kariara, from Kenya, brings a Freudian awareness and a Romantic sense of the connections between lyric speaker and natural world to his local landscape, while Musaemura Zimunya's "Arrivants" brings Shakespeare's evocation of life's repetitive meaninglessness to the cyclical violence, the ebb and flow of refuge and return, in Zimbabwe's history. Similar productive tensions are to be found in the work of many of the poets writing in English in the former British colonies of Africa, from Tatamkulu Afrika, Gail Dundy, and John Matthews in South Africa to Chirikure Chirikure, Chenjerai Hove, and Dambudzo Marechera in Zimbabwe and many more. In such poetry, there is often a vital relationship between the local and the global, between the particularities of what a poem represents and the internationalism of the English language with which it is represented. Indeed, the same could be said for much of the vast range and multiplicity of Anglophone poetry from areas and nations that were once part of the British Empire, all of which is beyond the remit of this book, but all of which suggests the continuing importance of poetry for making sense of the world.

Beyond "Poetry"

We have focused in this book almost exclusively on poems set in more or less complete and grammatical sentences, made of more or less familiar words used in more or less expected ways. There are good reasons for this: such poems are what most readers think of when they hear the word "poetry." They make up the bulk of poems written, published, and read, and they often present sufficient difficulty and challenge to warrant discussion and guidance. Some very interesting work, however, has explored the possibilities for producing meaning even when it is made of collections of letters or sounds that do not form words found in any dictionary, or when the recognizable words are set on the page in ways that render them illegible, or when words from multiple languages are brought together but not into sentences whose grammar makes their relationships legible. What holds these diverse experiments together is a shared interest in questioning fundamental assumptions. As Andrew Duncan describes it, "rather than

writing a whole poem and judging it as a finished thing, you start with a blank sheet and interrogate every element of meaning which you allow in.... You question decisions like: a rectangular page, characters equally spaced and symmetrically aligned, typefaces of constant size, whiteness of paper” (Duncan 2003: 159). As this description suggests, much of this poetry operates at the border between literary and visual art. Some of it emphasizes the visual aspects of elements of language, the way a letter in a specific typeface looks, for example, or the way a block of text looks on the page. Other poetry of this sort calls attention to the space of the page itself, whether by scattering bits of language about it in unusual ways or by setting lines so that they intersect at angles rather than following each other in the expected progression down the left-hand margin. And some of it combines these questions and interests in a focus on how the means of the page’s production themselves might produce meaning in addition to, or instead of, meanings held in words and sentences.

Some specific examples will be more useful here than further generalization. We briefly discussed Bob Cobbing’s work in Chapter 3, and it perfectly exemplifies one important subset of this poetry beyond words. As the example we quoted there demonstrates, Cobbing is interested in sound as an aspect of language (in the way some painters are interested in color as an aspect of paint). A poet can communicate ideas through collections of sounds, but the poet can also combine sounds in ways that simply babble without any necessary or determinable meaning. Cobbing is also a poet of the page, one who courts various kinds of illegibility as he plays with what a typewriter can produce on the page, what a mimeograph machine or photocopier can do to lines and blocks of text.

The poet, cris cheek, once published a catalog of the experimental means explored by poets interested in these questions:

displacement of all characters from alignment with each other
putting lines on the page as if decorating it, with the page as undivided
visual field
an unpunctuated nonlineated infinite string
duplicated manuscript rather than print
random deletion of most of the characters in a text
diagonally composed lines
cutups of scientific papers
elimination of anything like a speaking voice or psychological mood.

(quoted in Duncan, 2003: 160)

All of this is on display in pretty much any collection of Cobbing's work. Opening to a random page in *A Peal in Air* (the third volume of Cobbing's collected poems and one whose title at once refers to sound with its evocation of bells pealing and performs sound effects with the homonym of "appeal"), we find a page that looks, at first, as though someone has been practicing typing individual letters. Groups of repeated letters are scattered across the page. Sometimes a letter is repeated not only horizontally but also vertically, so that a stream of b's or l's or e's seems to run down the page. Many of the letters are typed in a crowded fashion, as if the carriage has been manipulated so that the normal kerning (the spacing between letters) is missing. This manic typing practice might be (and probably was) the script for a performance of sound, though it is difficult to imagine a series of five c's or b's being spoken. It certainly calls our attention to the entirety of the page; the large area of white space we often associate with poetry is missing, filled here with the same density of type as any other spot. The eye is drawn in all directions and rests, from time to time, on clusters of letters that resolve into words. Amidst the repetitions along the top of the page, for example, we can read the phrase "emancipates the light," and along the bottom, "voluble water." Between the two, in the middle of the page, rising and falling groups of b's, u's, l's, and e's create numerous and interdependent "bubble"s. There are words here, and there is an implicit invitation to combine them and to parse the sense they might make. More than this, though, the page becomes a site of visual (and perhaps vocal) play.

Even more difficult to pronounce or to imagine in terms of a script for vocal performance are the pages of Maggie O'Sullivan's *From the Handbook of That & Furriery* (collected in *Body of Work*). These gather fragments of musical notation and bits of writing in multiple languages and alphabets in collages that are compelling even as they remain illegible. On one page, two curved musical staves form something of a parenthesis in the upper left corner, embracing a fragment of Asian calligraphy cut so that no character is present in its entirety. Beneath these, part of a page of staff paper (its lines filled not only with musical notes but also with hand-drawn lemniscate symbols and the phrase "2 Minuten") is collaged over a fragment cut from a page in the Irish language, the latter turned on its side (O'Sullivan 2006). This in turn is juxtaposed to an upside-down part of a page of Russian (or another Slavic language) transliterated into the Roman alphabet, itself dramatically, even violently, interrupted by more music (a busy passage of sixteenth notes) and a pointed shard of calligraphy. At

issue here, clearly, is the idea of signification through writing, though what any of these fragments signifies through *its* writing, and what the relationships might be among those significations, is impossible to determine. The page is a space in which ideas of writing as script, writing as art, and the dynamics of collision, interruption, and obscurity are performed.

O'Sullivan's pages resemble – in the means and their themes alike – the pages of Allen Fisher's *South Thames Studies*, an artist's book project in which fragments of text in different alphabets are juxtaposed (though typically in a more blocky and less whimsical manner than O'Sullivan's) and then painted over with lines and swathes and, sometimes, washes of ink. On one page, fragments of Hebrew fight fragments of an English text about Semitic and Amharic scripts, a grid of Cyrillic characters dominates a few lines of English prose about the Russian alphabet, and the whole is obscured behind strong horizontal brushstrokes of ink, with an emphatic set of four short diagonals at the bottom. Here, again, questions of text and textuality are graphically posed as the boundary between literary and visual art is troubled beyond definition.

These boundaries seem even more porous when the poem occurs in a space other than that of the printed page. In 1966, the Scottish concrete poet Ian Hamilton Finlay moved with his family to a disused farm in southern Scotland. Christening the site Little Sparta, he began work on a garden in which benches, obelisks, and other sculptural pieces were inscribed with text: poems on objects and objects as poems. On the bank of a pond, partially shaded by the heavy limbs of a nearby tree, a granite obelisk stands upon a cubic base. The top of the base is carved with a pediment on each side, and beneath the pediment on the side facing the viewer is inscribed the phrase "IL RIPOSO/DECI AUDIO." "The rest," says the first line, and the second seems to respond: "a sound decision." The monument seems at once to invite and to comment upon the repose for which its site is suitable; the text interacts with and is inextricable from both its setting and its medium. The restful atmosphere of the pond's bank and the funereal associations of the tomb-like obelisk combine to suggest specific and richly interweaving meanings in the inscription, and the fact of inscription itself, the incising of the letters into stone instead of their printing on a page, conveys meaning. Where in his concrete poems Finlay focused on the physical properties of language printed on the page, in the complex set of texts at Little Sparta, he brought text into physical interaction with stone, wood, and the planned and ornamented landscape more broadly. With such object poems, Finlay liberated poetry from the page.

He has not been alone in this endeavor, and the last fifty years or so have seen (and heard) British and Irish poets (among others around the world) pushing the boundaries of poetry off the page into the spaces of performance and the “spaces” of software. (Remember Patience Agbabi’s poem published only as a tattoo?) A number of these poets have experimented with poetry intended for performance rather than the page, and these projects have taken a variety of forms.

The poetry reading has a long history in the mainstream institutions of postwar poetry. In his history of the poetry reading, Peter Middleton locates its twentieth-century roots in the cultures of elocution and verse speaking, especially in schools during the first half of the century (Middleton 2005: 87–92). By the end of the 1940s, a fairly standard format had solidified and is to this day the typical sort of event we mean when we refer to a poetry reading. Middleton describes this quite well (if in an intentionally estranging way):

A person stands alone in front of an audience, holding a text and speaking in an odd voice, too regular to be conversation, too intimate and too lacking in orotundity to be a speech or a lecture, too rough and personal to be theatre. The speaker is making no attempt to conceal the text. Signs of auditory effort in the audience are momentarily lost in occasional laughter, tense silences, sighs, and even cries of encouragement. Sometimes the reader uses a different, more public voice, and refers to what is being read, or to some other information of apparent interest. No one talks to the reader. No one proposes a second take.

(2005: 25)

If you are reading this book, then it is quite likely that you have witnessed such a reading. Perhaps you have even given one. From the widely acclaimed and enormously popular readings of Dylan Thomas through the innumerable readings offered by poets of all sorts in galleries, university lecture halls, pubs, coffee houses, and living rooms, the poetry reading has been an ancillary, auxiliary, or augmenting kind of publication throughout the postwar decades. Readings are so ubiquitous and expected that, as Middleton writes, “the live poetry performance has become integral to the writing and reading of poetry” (2005: xiv).

There is as great a range of opinion of these events as there is a range of styles within it. Many poets and listeners value the ways a poet’s presence and performance enhance or complicate both the meanings of individual poems and questions of poetic location (is the real poem the one on the

page from which the poet reads or the one that sounds and echoes as she reads it out?). Referring to a paradigmatic example, Allen Ginsberg's famous reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in 1955, Middleton suggests a list of the transformative possibilities the poetry reading offers. The reading can expand "the semantic repertoire of the written text"; it adds sound to the moment of reading; it calls attention to the specificity of *this* (as opposed to any other) experience of the text and to the location and time of this particular performance; it creates an "intersubjective drama" in which readers and listeners are enmeshed in a collective act of meaning making (2005: 64). Some others agree with the critic Hank Lazer, who has argued that the standard-issue poetry reading "reinforces a narrow conception of poetic accomplishment" (Lazer 1996: 52). With its predictable format and scripted set of poet-audience interactions, "the poetry reading, with a few notable exceptions, exists in complicity with the dominance of the carefully crafted voice-lyric" (1996: 52).

We are taking no position here (and, to be clear, neither does Middleton, who is, instead, interested in the theoretical attention to sound that the reading should provoke). Rather, we want to indicate the range of poetry conceived with performance as its primary mode of reception, poetry intended to exist as the performance, with a print version simply a residue or record. A number of the poets we have discussed elsewhere in this book have created such poetry alongside (and, in some cases, before) their print work. While he has not slowed his production of poems for the page during the last ten years, Paul Muldoon has diversified, writing lyrics and performing as rhythm guitarist with his rock band, Rackett. Bob Cobbing and Maggie O'Sullivan often took their concrete experiments from the page to the stage (Cobbing's collaborative projects were even sometimes performed by his group, *Konkrete Canticle*). At the same time as he wrote the poems for his 1975 book, *Dread Beat An' Blood*, Linton Kwesi Johnson was writing the performance pieces (some of these are made of the same words) for the 1978 album that came to be called *Dread Beat An' Blood* as well. Johnson's record label, LKJ Records, has also produced recordings of dub poetry performance by Jean "Binta" Breeze, while Grace Nichols has for twenty years performed as a highly regarded dub poet. Anthony Joseph is at least as dedicated to performance as to publication; he has released six CDs with his Spasm Band, and his discography appears before his bibliography on his website.

A great deal of this performance poetry has its origins in protest traditions reaching back through mass declamations at strikes in the

1920s and 1930s to the collective recital and singing of verse among Chartists and others in the nineteenth century. As Cornelia Gräbner has written, Johnson not only began writing poetry out of political rather than aesthetic concerns (urgent anger over racism in Britain) but also turned to performance rather than the page for the same reasons. “Sonic, visual, theatrical and social devices,” she writes, “were not introduced because poets thought they would be entertaining or valuable *in themselves*, but in order to “validate specific poetic and cultural traditions which provided poets with both the foundation and means to express their political visions and demands” (2007: 80). This direct line is harder to draw in the case of someone like Manchester performer John Cooper Clarke or Jegsy Dodd or the Liverpool poets (Adrian Henri, Roger McGough, and Brian Patten), but the politics of protest and identity clearly drive much of the poetry performed at slams and festivals, work by poets as diverse as Muslim Belal, Lemn Sissay, and Luke Wright.

Whether they derive from protest traditions or cultural identities or not, most performance poems are still composed of words, phrases, and sentences. A related genre of contemporary poetry (though with a much smaller profile than performance work) consists of poems made of sound that is not words, phrases, or sentences. As Adalaide Morris writes in the introduction to *Sound States*, a collection of essays about the effects of acoustical technologies on poetic innovation, “poet-performers deploy language less for its segments of meaning – its lexemes, morphemes, and phonemes – than for a buzz or hum that can be heard” (9). Sometimes there is a referent that grounds the sound in an explanatory context; the combinations of vowels and consonants in Scottish poet Edwin Morgan’s “Loch Ness Monster’s Song,” for example, can be read as a transcript of the mythical creature’s calls and grunts and wails. In his note on the poem, Morgan sanctions precisely this kind of reading:

I imagine the creature coming to the surface of the water, looking round at the world, expressing his or her views, and sinking back into the loch at the end. I wanted to have a mixture of the bubbling, gurgling, plopping sounds of water and the deep gruff throaty sounds that a large aquatic monster might be expected to make. (This note can be found at the Morgan archive’s website and a recording of Morgan performing it is at the Poetry Archive website)

Even with such a title and reference, though, the poem's "language" is not intended to communicate. Instead, it calls attention to the effects of volume, the physiology of pronunciation, the "buzz or hum" that Morris describes. Even as he locates the poem's sound in the imagined body of the Loch Ness monster and even as he suggests that it conveys the creature's "views," Morgan concludes his note by leaving the reader to answer the question, "How much meaning comes through the sounds?"

During the last twenty years, the ephemeral space of the stage or club has been joined by the "non-space" of the Internet, as poets have drawn on the creative possibilities of computer technology to produce a variety of digital poetry projects. As the critic Talan Memmott writes, the "actualities of practice in the digital environment are too diverse to permit a comprehensive or coherent taxonomy," so the "only feasible definition" of the term "digital poetry" is a "minimal one" (2006: 293). Memmott's minimal definition is essentially "that the object in question be 'digital,' mediated by digital technology, and that it be called 'poetry' by its author or by a critical reader" (2006: 293). Digital technology enables an enormous variety of effects which, in combination, produce works along a set of continuums, from the less to the more interactive, from the more to the less narrative or dramatic, those with more visual and auditory effects as opposed to less, and so on. John Cayley (to whose digital poetry projects we will turn momentarily) suggests yet another continuum on the basis of the role computer code plays in a given project. At one end of this continuum are those works in which the computer code is not the text but is the hidden enabler of the experienced text (and the experience of the text), while at the other end are those projects "that bring the traces of an interior archive of code into the open" (308). The couple of projects we touch on here fall toward the former end; they are works in which, as Cayley writes, "the code, in fact, reconcals itself by generating a complex surface 'over' itself" (Cayley 2006: 308).

Memmott locates at the "passive or *played* effect" end of the continuum works like *Xylo* and *Ugly* by the British poet Peter Howard. Raised in Nottingham, educated at Oxford, and now living and working outside Cambridge, Howard is probably best known as the author of a column on Internet poetry that appeared for several years in *Poetry Review*. His digital poetry projects are usually animations in which words and phrases appear, disappear, recur, combine, and hover in and across a visual field (with the accompaniment of nonverbal sound) or images appear, disappear, recur, etc., accompanied by verbal (though not necessarily semantically significant) sound. *Xylo* is of the first type. When played (the user simply clicks

on the word “Play”), the piece presents the viewer with a white field around which a figure like a rifle site moves. In the upper left quadrant, a series of red-hued words (among them “man,” “shiver,” “rice,” “change”) appear and disappear too quickly to be taken in. Another set of words, in green instead of red, similarly cycles nearby. After a few seconds, phrases appear and linger in the lower right quadrant: “it was so still/all you could hear was birdsong.” Throughout, the rifle site moves randomly around the screen and an electronic dance-beat soundtrack plays. More words appear in new places, some quickly cycling through (a series of mythological names), others forming lines and lingering, until the four quadrants of the screen are filled with static and moving bits of language. Connections are possible, especially among the lines that stay to be read and reread but also among and including the rapidly appearing and disappearing words, and the experience of trying to make sense, always losing the sense made available as words disappear and are replaced, is clearly part of the text’s meaning. It is certainly an important aspect of its experience.

The work of John Cayley, who is also a prominent writer *about* digital poetry and poetics, explores the complex intersections of word, image, sound, and time in a variety of ways. A professor in the Literary Arts program at Brown University, Cayley is a restless experimenter whose projects exploit various aspects of digital environments and computer poetry production. In his 2001 *Windsound*, Cayley animates the “transliterate morphing” of “nodal texts,” so that a paragraph beginning “windsound taut winds about the hostel.../zhang shuts the door and listens” becomes, as individual letters are replaced, first a collection of “words” that have no legible significance and then, eventually, a new text in which Zhang and a Japanese match and Beijing have become Christopher, an English lighter, and Zurich. The visible transliterate morphing occurs while a computer-generated voice pronounces the text. This text, too, endures its dissolution, and when the voice whispers lines like “oanaqaeuam not it oaifahm n u u o/hy/dtsladznadtfwo ozh a ild qoo r at tre mau,” an illusion of sense, of reference, and of narrative and affect persists. This process repeats with new “nodal” texts; over the course of twenty-three minutes, the viewer/reader follows, in fragments, two parallel narratives. Visually, *Windsound* is simpler than Howard’s *Xylo*; white letters appear on a black screen and the shifts are easy to notice, to follow, and to read through (though how to pronounce the clusters of letters is a question best left to the voice-over). The later project, *Riversound* (2007), is more interactive, allowing the reader to navigate the QuickTime movie that combines

words and moving images and even to interrupt the movie with others that are embedded in the package of files the reader downloads (from Cayley's website (<http://programmatology.shadoof.net/>)).

These projects, and others, have joined, and been joined by, a lively and always changing online presence for British, Irish, and other poetry. New poems appear daily in an enormous variety of styles and voices and in a wide range of publications online, from the web presence of print magazines to the web-only literary magazines and to the informal blogs of poets and writers. Commentary on poetry, whether print or digital, also appears in its own variety of Internet sites. The borders of nations in the archipelago, the borders that demarcate poetry, are increasingly and excitingly difficult to maintain, to draw, or even to see. We leave, however, the task of tracing what becomes of poetry in the future to other readers and other books.

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