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(RE)DEFINING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

María del Pino Montesdeoca Cubas,
guest-editor

INTRODUCTION

Since the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* started to publish special issues in November 1988, this is the first time that one of them is particularly devoted to contemporary British poetry. As a guest editor for this volume, I thought that this would be a timely opportunity to invite contributors to write under the title "(Re)Defining Contemporary British Poetry." The fact that it is published during the first decade of the 21st century seemed to lend itself nicely to a reflection about the status quo of poetry in Britain today. In accomplishing the edition of this issue, I have intended to provide room for as many different voices and positions in the field as possible. In this sense, the reader will initially encounter several articles dealing with Innovative Poetry, as it is the case with those written by Scott Thurston and also by Judy Kendall, both of them from the University of Salford.

Scott Thurston's essay has been included in the first place since it works as an extensive and comprehensive introduction to what, according to him and Robert Sheppard, Innovative Poetry is and means today. By discussing the role of little magazines and anthologies in the development of Innovative Poetry, particularly by quoting Caddel and Quartermain's tenets along his work, Thurston does indeed offer us a re-definition of contemporary British poetry. He exposes the great relevance that Innovative Poetry has resulting from poets who understand their writing in a different way to the "official" one. The three poets he chose to illustrate his tenets are most appropriate. Robert Sheppard's productive versatility exemplifies clearly the dissenting tradition he has inherited from Blake. Together with Sheppard's cultivated and critical view, Scott Thurston's choice of Caroline Bergvall's multilingual and hence multi-cultural perspective is also enriching. By linking her work with personal and national identity, body and space, Thurston is also tackling some of the issues most widely discussed and written about in contemporary British writing in general. Andrea Brady does also present Bergvall's international view together with Sheppard's concern for previous literature. Both the critical authors and the poets explored by Thurston do evidence that there is already a tradition of Innovative Poetry in Britain today connected to a "historical tradition of dissent."

Judy Kendall's essay does also belong to the trend of Innovative Poetry. As an academic, she exposes the most recent projects in experimental visual texts at the University of Salford, paying particular attention to what these innovative creative processes implied for her students and herself. As a poet, she acknowledges the need to explore her own writing. In doing so, she illustrates with her work certain challenges and difficulties that Experimental Formalism involves for the writer and also for the reader. Two of her poems, "Still life with quinces and lemons" and "what I learnt on my first long wall" are included at the end of her article. Acting as a scholar and literary critic by scrutinizing her methods of composition and the different influences in several of her poems, Kendall evidences that despite no recognized school of visual texts creation exists as yet in the UK, her writing is sowing the seeds for it be founded.

Our third contributor, Esther Sánchez-Pardo presents an article in which, by examining Denise Riley's work, she reflects upon how subjectivity can work in a dynamic tension with form. Riley's versatility as an academic and philosopher with feminist interests derive in a work in which lyric subjectivity explores questions of language and identity. She has also been labelled as an experimental poet, and Sánchez-Pardo analyses the movement of reflection in language in her work in relation to the subject, between subjectivity and exteriority in the context of Cambridge poetry. Central to the project of Riley is the necessity of developing a reading community that has some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority, and tradition, and of correcting a certain male focus within the broader reading community of experimental poetries.

Since there can be no poetry issue without poetry, we are including "Back in the New Routine," "Things Are Not What They Seem" and "To Conclude," three original poems by Jeffrey Wainwright, who very kindly sent them to us for the present volume. His work includes *Selected Poems* (1985), *The Red-Headed Pupil* (1994), *Out of the Air* (1999) and *Clarity or Death!* (2008), all of them published by Carcanet Press. Among translations of his work is his long poem "Thomas Müntzer" in Anthologie Bilingue de la Poesie Anglaise (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2005). He has translated plays by Péguy, Claudel, Corneille and Bernard-Marie Koltès. In addition, his book on the purposes and styles of poetry, *Poetry the Basics*, was published by Routledge in April 2004. Two years later, *Acceptable Words*: *Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, was published by Manchester University Press in 2006. Until recently he was Professor of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. He lives in Manchester and, for parts of the year, in Italy. We are deeply and sincerely grateful to Jeffrey Wainwright for his generous creative contribution.

The fourth article approaches the work of two mainstream poets from an interesting and renewing perspective. By considering the act of eating as a metaphor and trope in narrative and poetic texts, Angelica Michelis aims at arguing that it imbues a sense of ambiguity into textual proceedings and their readings and, as an effect, creates an atmosphere of ambivalence where pleasure dissolves into anxiety and vice versa. Hence, she initially chooses several poems from Carol Ann Duffy's Rapture and explores in detail how they can be read in relation to the complex issue of consuming love. In doing so Michelis relates Torok and Abraham's notion of

incorporation as a double act of cannibalism —first savagely ingesting the outside which, when incorporated, devours what is conceived of as inside— to the notion of love in Duffy's Rapture. Michelis also studies Michael Symmons Robert's collection Corpus explaining that it is the idea of the body in flux, in pieces and under construction that dominates the poetic framework of this collection. This appealing and illuminating approach on the part of Angelica Michelis bears witness to the fact that poetry literary criticism is walking in new directions, in accordance with the production of mainstream poets wishing to give their work a certain halo of fresh air. By relating the daily act of eating with the literary art of poetic writing, the author is undeniably providing us with food for thought.

The widening scope of the concept of mainstream in British poetry today is also to be read between the lines of Katharine Burkitt's article. She discusses the work of Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo, illustrating how both writers refuse to be labelled only as Black British poets, exposing and proposing other defining features which they considered more relevant for them than nation and race. In doing so, both poets claim that gender, sexuality and femininity are paramount in their identities. A regional determinism is crucial in the case of Jackie Kay as she defines herself as Scottish, thus exposing a tension between her Scottishness and the British label usually applied to her and her poetry. There is a similar debate in Evaristo's case. Katharine Burkitt's detailed analysis of the former's work shows the existence of the tension between Englishness and other identities. Interestingly enough, "Englishness, is constructed outside the national boundaries, the crossing of borders is coupled with the return to a history of Englishness and a recuperation of that history that allows room for interpretation." Therefore, both Kay and Evaristo are certainly "Breaking the Mould," not only by refusing to be categorized under a particular label, but also turning into mainstream gender, regional and sexual features considered as marginal not so long ago.

Ian Brinton's essay, "'Wisdom Joyned with Simplicitye': Landscapes of Charles Tomlinson," combines a thoroughly scholarly documented approach with a certain poetic style. This is reflected from the very title, which the author has explained by email contact: "The quotation (and hence the spelling!) comes from *Epigrams of Martial Book*, X, 47, translated by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey which is included in Tomlinson's edition of The *Oxford Book of Verse in Translation*. Brinton details several varied key influences in Tomlinson's work, and carefully describes how he inherits the sensibility of Latin, British and international authors from several periods. Brinton points out that Tomlinson's literary and emotional legacies are paramount in his production. Therefore, the poet dotes his writing with urbane and civilized values that he admires, showing respect and admiration for certain traditional tenets in his new forms. Ian Brinton has definitely reminded us that as a poet, editor and prolific translator, Charles Tomlinson's oeuvre is an essential ingredient in the renewing process of British poetry today, while looking back at the classics with respect, perspective and admiration.

In my article, I have considered several aspects related to the readership of contemporary British poetry. In doing so, I have taken into account the opinions and the work of the editor Michael Schmidt and the poet Michael Symmons Roberts,

who very kindly accepted to be interviewed for this issue. My experience as poetry university lecturer and the role of some British poetry magazines are also taken into account. Far from intending to be dogmatic, I have aimed at reflecting upon a few elements that are forging a wider poetry reading audience and on others that may also be supportive in that direction.

I hope that the present volume will encourage others to continue reflecting and debating about contemporary British poetry. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all contributors for their work, enthusiasm and patience. I wish to apologise to those who, willing to contribute, could not do so for different reasons. Special and warmest thanks to Michael Symmons Roberts for having accepted being interviewed, for his kindness and time. I am also much indebted to Jeffrey Wainwright for his poems and his generosity.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this volume to the loving memory of David Olive, who was for many years Senior Lecturer of English Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University and sadly passed away in February 2009. Due to our mutual jobs as Erasmus Coordinators, we had the chance to meet at MMU. He introduced me to Angelica Michelis, Jeffrey Wainwright and Michael Schmidt amongst others. Because of all his help, and because, together with his wife, he was a dear friend, may this work serve to pay my humble homage to him and his family.

María del Pino MONTESDEOCA CUBAS

ARTICLES

INNOVATIVE POETRY IN BRITAIN TODAY

Scott Thurston
University of Salford

ABSTRACT

Innovative Poetry in Britain has undergone considerable change in how it is published and read in recent years. This article examines Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's 1998 introduction to their anthology *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*, to derive concepts useful in surveying the field. These concepts include: the poetics of displacement, the politics of British identity, and the tradition of dissent. The article introduces the work of three innovative poets: Robert Sheppard (b. 1955), Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962) and Andrea Brady (b. 1974), in order to illustrate the dynamic range of this writing.

KEY WORDS: Andrea Brady, British poetry, Caroline Bergvall, Innovative Poetry, Richard Caddel, Peter Quartermain, Robert Sheppard, poetics.

RESUMEN

En los últimos años, la manera de publicar y de leer la poesía innovadora en el Reino Unido ha experimentado cambios considerables. Como punto de partida para examinar conceptos útiles en este campo, el presente artículo estudia la introducción de Richard Caddel y Peter Quartermain de 1988 a su antología *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*. Entre tales conceptos se incluyen: la poética del desplazamiento, políticas de identidad británica y la tradición de la disensión. El artículo presenta el trabajo de tres poetas innovadores con el fin de ilustrar el dinamismo y la variedad de esta poesía: Robert Sheppard (n. 1955), Caroline Bergvall (n. 1962) y Andrea Brady (n. 1974)

PALABRAS CLAVE: Andrea Brady, poesía británica, Caroline Bergvall, poesía innovadora, Richard Caddel, Peter Quartermain, Robert Sheppard, poética.

Innovative Poetry in Britain is changing. Over the last ten years, it has undergone a huge transformation in how it is published and received. By Innovative Poetry, I refer to the poetic writings which have appeared in Britain and Ireland under a host of guises: avant-garde, experimental, formally innovative, linguistically innovative, neo-modernist, non-mainstream, post-avant, postmodernist, and the parallel tradition.[1] Of these multiple epithets, "linguistically innovative" has been most widely used in recent criticism. It was first coined by the poet Gilbert Adair in *Pages* magazine in reference to Robert Sheppard's assertion that a new

poetry had emerged since 1977[2] (Adair 68) which was distinct from the period which poet and critic Eric Mottram had celebrated in his essay "The British Poetry Revival 1960-1975." The significance of 1977 partly derives from notorious events at the Poetry Society. For the six years preceding, the society and its journal *Poetry Review* were run by radical and experimental poets including Mottram, Bob Cobbing, Allen Fisher, Lee Harwood and Barry MacSweeney. However, at a General Council meeting on 26th March 1977 the avant-garde group walked out *en masse* in protest at interventions by the Arts Council. Peter Barry in his account of the events leading up to this event has argued that:

> The conflict at the Poetry Society was a key moment in the history of contemporary British Poetry, polarizing the rift between the "neo-modernists," who sought to continue the 1960s revival of the early twentieth-century's "modernist revolution," and the neo-conservatives, who sought to further the "anti-modernist counter-revolution" of the 1950s. (Barry 1)

The traces of this "rift" continue to be visible to the present day and, although I will not excavate this history pre-1977, I will examine Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain's 1998 introduction to their anthology *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970*, as a means of illustrating some of the ongoing issues at stake from the perspective of the innovative camp —the "neo-modernists" of Barry's account.

In setting up the first academic journal dedicated to this field in 2009, Robert Sheppard and myself decided to use "innovative," rather than "linguistically innovative," as a more economical way of pointing to the history of this writing. The earliest outlets for this poetry began in the eighties with little magazines like Sheppard's *Pages*, *Reality Studios* and *Angel Exhaust* followed by *First Offense*, *Fragmente* and *Parataxis*.[3] More recent magazines are predominately online such as *Shadow Train*, *Great Works*, *Terrible Work* and *Intercapillary Space*. Some of the key small presses publishing the innovative work throughout the period include: Writers Forum, Equipage, Object Permanence, Stride, Salt, Shearsman, Etruscan, Reality Street, Oystercatcher, Veer Books, West House, and Barque, all of which remain active.

Anthologies have also had a key role in establishing the field. The first to appear in the late eighties were *A Various Art* (1987), and *The New British Poetry* (1988), which were followed in the nineties by *Floating Capital* (1991), *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK*

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[1] A term used by poet-publisher Ken Edwards in his article "The Two Poetries," *Angelaki* 3.1 (April 2000): 25-36.

[2] Gilbert Adair began the letter: "Linguistically innovative poetry (for which we haven't yet a satisfactory name) has been operating since 1977" (Adair 68).

[3] Other notable magazines would include: *Object Permanence* (now operating as a small press publisher), *Quid*, *Shearsman*, *Oasis*, *Folded Sheets* and *And*.

(1996),[4] *Conductors of Chaos* (1996),[5] *OTHER: British and Irish Poetry since 1970* (1999), *Foil: Defining Poetry 1985-2000* (2000) and *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (2001). The most recent is *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems* (2004), which includes innovative poets from North America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well as the UK.

The developing critical literature on Innovative Poetry includes the Barry and Hampson edited collection *New British Poetries* (1993) and Barry's *Poetry Wars* (2007) alongside Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying* (2005). Other important works include Andrew Duncan's trilogy of books: *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (2003), *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* (2005) and *Origins of the Underground: British Poetry between Apocryphon and Incident Light, 1933-79* (2008); Tony Lopez's *Meaning Performance* (2006), Anthony Mellors' *Late Modernist Poetics* (2004) and Ian Davidson's *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (2007).

Many critical accounts of Innovative Poetry tend to construct it in opposition to "mainstream" or "official" poetry in the UK, or what Robert Sheppard has called the "Movement Orthodoxy."[6] In their introduction to *OTHER*, Richard Caddel and Peter Quartermain offer a view of British culture and society as "pluralistic, fragmenting and evolving" and yet containing within itself a "unitary, closed-system approach to culture, an insistence on a single 'great tradition'"(xv). Whilst this view might seem slightly contradictory, Caddel and Quartermain claim that it is not their intention to describe in detail the development of "this 'mainstream'" nor to "dismiss it as devoid of worth" (xv). Nevertheless, they do attempt to define it as a "narrow lineage of contemporary poets from Philip Larkin to Craig Raine and Simon Armitage" and their "attendant collectives (Movement, Martians, New Generation)" (xv).[7] Although Caddel and Quartermain qualify their argument again in the statement "generalisation about such (often nebulous) groups is fraught with difficulties," it does not prevent them from characterising the typical mainstream poem as "a closed, monolineal utterance, demanding little of the reader but passive consumption" (xv). They also argue that such work has been privileged by the "major publishing houses [...] reviewing journals, 'literaries" and other elements of

[4] The editor, poet Maggie O'Sullivan, uniquely who applied the term "linguistically innovative" both to British writers and the American writers associated with Language Poetry.

[5] Edited by poet and novelist Iain Sinclair, this anthology also rehabilitated some important Modernist precursors of the innovative work in sections devoted to Nicholas Moore, J.W. Hendry, C.H. Sisson and W.S. Graham.

[6] "The Movement Orthodoxy, or its norm, privileges a poetry of closure, narrative coherence and grammatical and syntactic cohesion. [...] Its poetry favours an empirical lyricism of discrete moments of experience. Its insistence upon tone, and the speaking voice, strives to maintain the effect of a stable ego" (Sheppard, *Poetry* 2).

[7] Some other contemporary mainstream poets are: Andrew Motion, Wendy Cope, Carol Ann Duffy, Tony Harrison and Don Paterson. This list includes the current and previous poet laureates (Duffy and Motion)—the most prestigious official post in British poetry.

the media," to which list might be added mainstream literary criticism, educational syllabi and major literary awards (xv).

Caddel and Quartermain make no explicit claims for innovation per se in their introduction but present the alternative or "other" poetry as a kind of counter-force: "oppositional to much of that mainstream" (xv). With the qualification that "there is no common politics of poetic form, nor is there of opposition," they extend their argument to encompass a poetics of national identity (xviii). Re-asserting their view of the plurality of contemporary British society, they argue that

> if an older experience of identity can no longer be affirmed, if an earlier distinctness of unified "culture" can no longer be asserted, then the artistic as well as linguistic, ethical, and religious traditions associated with them can no longer serve as indices of national identity and authenticity. (xix)

This state of affairs therefore starts to complicate the connotations of terms like "British," "English," or "Irish" so that they "transcend ethnic origin or significance" and their meaning becomes "local rather than 'cultural'" (xix). Caddel and Quartermain argue that identity has now become a matter of "personal necessity" and thus "conjectural, invented and inventive, not intrinsic" (xix). At this point they make a crucial identification between this poetics of identity and the poetics of the innovative work, arguing that this complex cultural situation calls for a "poetics of displacement" that takes multiple forms including "dislocated language and reading praxis" (xx). Such work may look fragmented and incomplete, and be "unsatisfying because it shuns reaching conclusions or adumbrating a wholeness of vision [...] It is a poetry of dislodgement" (xx). Ultimately they argue that the task of the poet is to

> tell it as it is, not so much claiming an identity for political reasons (though clearly the political has an important role) as positioning the self in a shifting world of continual change, of complex and intensely problematised hybridities and polyglossia, characterised by a kind of voluntary tribalisation that is suspicious of all external claims to authority or authenticity. (xx)

In a way comparable to the rhetorical strategies of the early phase of American Language Poetry, Caddel and Quartermain reiterate the political impulse underlying this poetics by identifying how

> the normative impulses of literary and linguistic tradition reinforce notions of intelligibility (and of syntax) that themselves constitute the intellectual legitimation of political rule, of the hegemony, whose very existence resides in and relies upon its moral and cultural legitimation by tradition. [...] They thus iron out diversity and multiplicity by dividing the world into such binaries as us and them, real and unreal, authentic and fake [etc.] (xx)

This analysis establishes the position of the innovative work as resisting the "centrality" of tradition and focusing instead on local dissent around the margins. Whilst there is a danger that this argument runs the risk of reproducing the binary oppositional view of the world that it attributes to the mainstream, it nevertheless

positions innovative poetics within a historical context of a tradition of dissent which stretches back to "Clare, Blake, Smart, and the two Vaughans, Henry and Thomas" (xvii) as well as the twentieth-century precursors of David Jones, Hugh MacDiarmid and Basil Bunting. This tradition is what in part licenses the conjectural, inventive and disruptive poetics that Caddel and Quartermain value as a way of negotiating the complexity of the current reality and of resisting hegemonic power structures.

I shall explore the work of three poets currently writing in the UK in order to illustrate the poetics of Caddel and Quartermain"s provocative manifesto: Robert Sheppard (b. 1955), whose work is anthologised in *OTHER*; Caroline Bergvall (b. 1962), whose name is mentioned in the introduction to *OTHER* but whose work is not included therein; and Andrea Brady (b. 1974), whose first published work did not appear until after the anthology was complete. Taken together however, these writers offer a representative sample of the dynamic range of Innovative Poetry today.

Robert Sheppard, as indicated earlier, is a key figure in the development of Innovative Poetry in the UK through his work as a poet, critic, editor, reviewer, publisher and lecturer. His critical study *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (2005) offers the most theoretically sophisticated account of the history of Innovative Poetry, including detailed examinations of the work of Roy Fisher, Bob Cobbing, Lee Harwood, Tom Raworth, Allen Fisher, Adrian Clarke, Ulli Freer and Maggie O'Sullivan.

In *The Poetry of Saying* (2005), Sheppard structures his analysis on three levels: the technical, the social and the ethical. The technical level concerns "techniques of indeterminacy and discontinuity, of collage and creative linkage, of poetic artifice and defamiliarization" (1), thus compatible with Caddel and Quartermain's interest in a poetics of displacement, although Sheppard's term "creative linkage" is, in a sense, a more positive term for accounting for discontinuity and one I will focus on later in relation to Sheppard's poetic writing. In terms of the social level of Sheppard's analysis, this concerns what he describes as, after Bakhtin and Vološinov, "the necessary dialogic nature of all utterance" and, on the ethical level, an "understanding of the varieties of openness to the other implied by the techniques and social orientation of the work" (1). The notion of the openness to the other derives from Emmanuel Levinas' concept of the distinction between "the saying and the said" and, in this way, Sheppard's interest in a social and ethical poetics seems responsive to Caddel and Quartermain's analysis of the state of contemporary British identity, albeit in a less overtly oppositional way.

Aside from his critical work, Sheppard has also been influential in the use of the term *poetics* in literary-critical work and the development of the pedagogy of creative writing teaching.[8] In his essay "The Poetics of Writing: The Writing of

[8] See, for example, "Supplementary Discourses in Creative Writing Teaching: An English Subject Centre Report," viewable at: <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/creative/creative2.php>.

Poetics" (1999), he produced over seventy definitions of poetics under the heading of "Metapoetics." Sheppard's foundational opening definition is:

> Poetics are the products of the process of reflection upon writings, and upon the act of writing, gathering from the past and from others, speculatively casting into the future. (99)

By poetics, Sheppard is referring to the history of "writings about writing" which might include, for example, the famous essays and prefaces of British Romanticism by Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. What is crucial for Sheppard throughout his manifold definitions is the importance of poetics as a "writer-centred discourse"—provisional and contingent—which lets writers "question what they think they know" and allows creative writing "dialogue with itself" (100). This awareness of the self-reflexive, constructive nature of literary poetics is comparable with Caddel and Quartermain's view of the "conjectural, invented and inventive" poetics of identity. Sheppard has not only written critically on poetics, but has also produced his own texts of poetics, some of which I will consider below.

Sheppard's major achievement as a poet is his long work *Twentieth Century Blues*, published in several volumes throughout the eighties and nineties and now collected as *Complete Twentieth Century Blues* (2008). Sheppard describes the project as a network or "net/(k)not-work(s)" of texts "interrelated by multilinear 'strands'" (389). These strands are indicated by a numbering system which appears at the opening of each text. For example, the poem "Re:Entries" is also titled: "Dialogue 10," "Entries 3," "For Patricia Farrell 4" and "Unwritings 6." (284). As Sheppard describes in an earlier poetics text, "Poetic Sequencing and the New" in *Far Language* (1999), written whilst *Twentieth Century Blues* was ongoing:

> I wanted a title that would allow me to order, re-order and disorder a text or a series of strands of texts in sequences, something that could be read in a number of ways. [...] *Twentieth Century Blues* is essentially not about anything; it is a form to hang things on, to weave things through, albeit knottily. (35-36)

Thus the network is a writer-centred structure, which has allowed Sheppard not only to proliferate texts, but to proliferate the links between them, a "schema organising continuities I've often sensed between texts of mine" (36). Strands can therefore be determined retrospectively *and* as parts of ongoing sequences, and can link works which are "stylistically dissimilar," thereby fostering "a difference born of identity (they use the same materials and share something of the same poetic focus)" (36).[9] However, Sheppard also anticipates this structuring affecting the reader's experience:

[9] The process of making strands extends even with this poetics work into another titled "The End of the Twentieth Century: A Text for Readers and Writers," which is subtitled "Poetic Sequencing and the New 2" and which appears in *Complete Twentieth Century Blues*, 331-350.

> The satisfaction of closure might be delayed as effectively as in an indeterminate text: the principle of discontinuity hangs between the texts not, necessarily, within them, though that's often still the practice. The aim, however, has not changed: to activate the reader into participation, into relating differences, to sabotage perceptual schema, to educate desire, not to fulfil it in a merely entertaining emptying of energy. To create, above all, new continuities. (37)

Sheppard's position here can be linked to Caddel and Quartermain's poetics of displacement and dislodgement to the extent that it is interested in a principle of discontinuity that works against the implied closure of the mainstream poem. He also extends this poetics to encompass a desired effect on the reader of encouraging his or her active participation in the process of making meaning, an alternative to the "passive consumption" that Caddel and Quartermain argue is the *raison d'être* of the mainstream poem. Sheppard's intention to create "new continuities" however, seems to go beyond the more negative poetics of Caddel and Quartermain and prepares the ground for his notion of "creative linkage," a principle, as he hints, that operates at the textual level as well as at the structural level in *Twentieth Century Blues*.

In another text of poetics entitled "Linking the Unlinkable," a response to the work of Jean-François Lyotard in "Discussions, or phrasing 'after Auschwitz'" and Jacques Derrida's reply to this lecture, Sheppard sketches a poetics of the "creative linkage" of phrases (as opposed to the "authority of the sentence"), as a model of ethical writing which argues with Adorno's notion that poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. As Sheppard quotes Derrida: "If there is somewhere a *One must* it must link up with a *one must make links with Auschwitz*" (Sheppard, *Far* 54). Creative linkage therefore is a means by which disparate materials may be yoked together. This is not the same as juxtaposition —the links must appear both more *and* less disruptive, so that they persuade by the new connections that form.

In Sheppard's poetry, the effect of creative linkage feels pervasive but is difficult to demonstrate precisely because of its subtlety. The effect lies in a simultaneous awareness of both similarity *and* difference within a text's development, both continuity *and* discontinuity. In Book 4 of the *The Lores*, for example, a narrative describing a sexually engaged couple is traversed by reconfigured political slogans and phrases discussing the poetics of the work underway:

> Investing in people damaged history a
> diversation to link to sketch to
> match perception her services surrendered she
> listens to Braxton, reads Adorno, judges
> the moment; the familiar breaks anew (Sheppard, *Complete* 181)

A few stanzas later, the phrases which argue the case for creative linkage in "Linking the Unlinkable" are themselves reconfigured and linked with other materials:

> To make links of contractual obligation
> ethically with her name walking puns
> off maps which absolutely refuse linkage—

no sin intervention bless'd in external
lores, virtual times Are a Terror. (Sheppard, *Complete* 82)

One can trace an almost continuous statement here of "To make links [...] ethically with her name [...] which absolutely refuse linkage" which might have come straight from "Linking the Unlinkable" but here is broken up and linked with other phrases such as "contractual obligation" and "walking puns / off maps." The legalistic overtones of "contractual obligation" and the linking of walking, language and mapping thus start to develop a more complex texture of association around the other phrases. The words "sin" and "bless'd" add a pinch of Christian discourse to the text, ambiguously suggesting that "intervention" is "bless'd in external / lores," where intervention might be, for example, military intervention or State or even religious control over sexual practices. In the concluding line the capitalised words "Are a Terror" suggest a phrase that has been torn from another context, to be linked together here with "virtual times." This latter phrase on its own might evoke the online version of the British newspaper *The Times*, yet creative linkage here reinforces the sense of "times" as epoch or age and yolks it to a more sinister conclusion —how information technology can facilitate terrorism.

The text "Variation and Themes"—a prose poem dedicated to the memory of William Burroughs—enables a kind of reading between the lines, where one is constantly being invited to create contexts which resolve discontinuities between the unfolding sentences:

> Grunting at her head resting on a copy of Blake's poems, the wrong proper noun was another affair altogether. Somewhere I hear the murmur of *book thirteen*, which skids the interpretations, this history of the last soaked stage. Particulars matter, fall invisible to earth, and blow in the sand: alter ego dust. The Other, invisible, was startled by the light pouring contaminated responsibility or its lack through the suddenly open door, erotic or thanatognomonic. (Sheppard, *Complete* 251)

In this extract, local contexts are rapidly set up and moved on from: a description of a domestic scene gives way to more abstract reflections and then statements which appear more theoretical. However, despite the differences, these modes of thought can be resolved into an integrity which makes the movement of the text capable of constituting new continuities. In such a reading the reference to Blake could connect to "*book thirteen*" as a unit of literature. Words such as "noun," "interpretations" and "history" all suggest a context of reading and thinking about literature and language. That "particulars matter" yet ultimately become "dust" might also be a reflection on the future of literary endeavours. The final sentence of this extract constitutes a significant shift in register to the psychological/medical, with terms like "The Other," "erotic" and "thanatognomonic," and yet frames this encounter through the "suddenly open door" which suggests a more concrete context for these abstractions being felt by a narrator.

Creative linkage might be said to have its roots in Burroughs' famous fold-in and cut-up techniques, or more persuasively, the non-sequiturs of the "new sentence" of Language Poetry, and yet, whilst it takes advantage of the parsimony

principle to invite the reader to make new connections, it is unlikely that a "good" reading will insist on constantly searching for ways in which to make the poem cohere despite its discontinuities. Instead, the reading process is likely to involve a kind of negative capability in which meaning is both made and undone in the movement of reading. Ideas and situations are created, linked and developed but the procedure is ultimately open-ended—we are not invited to draw any final conclusions. However, at the same time, we are also not encouraged to dismiss the poem as merely arbitrarily and perpetually open to interpretation—its ideas and images feel deliberately poised, calculated and argued: precise fragments of a world we can still recognise. The poem therefore forces us to confront and engage with our most fundamental approaches to making sense of the world at the same time as it urges us to attend to the images, situations and problems of that world.

Sheppard's work invites a link to the dissenting tradition that Caddel and Quartermain trace back through writers such as William Blake—a key influence for Sheppard—and a resulting shared suspicion of authority. Caroline Bergvall's work, whilst it can also be thought of as dissenting in various ways, can be compared to the radicalised poetics of (national) identity that Caddel and Quartermain describe, partly because Bergvall is of French-Norwegian nationalities and has been based in England since 1989. Bergvall works across what she calls "sited textwork" and "mixed-arts performances" as well as generating visual and written texts for the page. In one of her most comprehensive statements of poetics to date, "Social Engagement of Writing,"[10] Bergvall sums up the concerns of her practice as a poet in the first decade of the twenty-first century as "performativity/linguistic & bodily identities/ poetics" and goes on to list the questions that have motivated her work as:

> The question of multiple languages. [...]
> Use of multiple forms and spaces of inscription. [...]
> Body representation as a space. [...] Restrictions and actions of social readings of bodily space on what I call my own body. Or my bodies. My sex. My gender. My ethnicity. [...]
> Exploration of ephemerality traces/sites.
> Space itself becomes a field of work. (Bergvall, "Social" 4)

For Bergvall, questions of language, body and identity, and the space-times in which existence and the making of art take place are inseparable. Her 1996 work *Éclat*, which has since been republished as a digital chapbook, was originally presented as a "guided tour" around a house in London to be listened to on headphones, rather like many conventional art gallery exhibitions use. In the digital publication of the work, Bergvall has designed each page with a large square text box in order to stage, as it were, the actual spaces of the house in which the text was originally intended to be encountered. As the piece develops, text appears in each

[10] Originally delivered as a conference paper at the University of Arizona Poetry Center, 30 May 2008.

"room" with considerable variation in the size, style and arrangement of the words. Thus language appears in some way to be acting in space, as well as within the temporal arrangement of the sequence of room-pages. The third page for example, presents us with a text which almost fills the "room":

> WEL is an occupation COME to
> the foreign guided a short round
> of observations. Now yo. s... now
> y... don'. What not assumd... be
> not hr since forver pleased are
> we by and large to kindly be
> stuck to instructs or what kind
> of langu would we otherwise be
> left wit. (Bergvall, *Éclat* 7)

Notice how, even in transcribing this from the carefully-presented layout of the original, that the text forms a near regular square shape on the page. The capitalised words, spelling a fragmented "WEL [...] COME" also demonstrate how we are being invited to read in a non-linear fashion from the outset. This introduction gently parodies the conventions of the guided tour and even the magician's performance (now you see it, now you don't). There is also a hint that the tour is something which implies a kind of "foreign" "occupation," as if the speaker is acknowledging her own "foreignness" as she occupies this particular space for a "short round of observations." The extent to which vowels are dropped out of some words and others curtailed abruptly, most tellingly with the fragment "langu," constructs a slightly ironic narrator who commands "What not assumd ... be not hr" as if reinforcing the notion of a social and linguistic space that proceeds on shared but hidden assumptions that exclude others. The narrator also suggests that the collective "we" she speaks for are "pleased [...] by and large to kindly be stuck to instructs or what kind of langu would we othrwise be left wit"—somewhat archly implying a capitulation to instructions that might constitute the grammatical rules of a language or the social rules of a culture, as well as the instructions of a tour guide, whilst also simultaneously flouting these rules by the nonstandard orthography and knowing tone.

The "langu" that we are "left wit" throughout *Éclat* only becomes stranger and more disruptive of an implied linguistic decorum as the text develops. Language acts inside and outside the space delimited by the text box, and some pages carry exclusively visual interventions with no words at all. A fractured narrative concerned with sex and sexuality develops:

> She (how appears to be) says "yeah why not" who proceeds to suck out my interiors, skinning me softly with her, skinning me softly, then says "some things best not be thought in the dark", who stretches me across the room. (Bergvall, *Éclat* 13)

The piece might be thought of in Caddel and Quartermain's terms as offering a version of identity as "conjectural, invented and inventive, not intrinsic."

Each page of *Éclat* creates a new situation—simultaneously populating the rooms of the imagination as it constructs its addressee—and in this way foregrounds a question that it also asks itself: "Wonder about the long-term social arrangements of our reconstructed flesh?" (Bergvall, *Éclat* 14). To participate in making *Éclat* one has to be present in each "room" whilst also accepting how one is in turn made by the room and what is in it: "I'm beside myself," "the construction work on this here face took far longer than expected" (Bergvall, *Éclat* 31, 42). The question of identity for Bergvall is inevitably bound up with gender and sexual identity and, following a climactic sex scene, the poem concludes: "girls make a gorgeous margin [...] now that's what I'd call morphing"—again seeming to advocate a protean model of identity that sees marginalisation as potential rather than as restrictive (Bergvall, *Éclat* 55).

As a pluri-lingual speaker of French, Norwegian and English, and brought up as bilingual in French and Norwegian, the role of language in constructing identity has put Bergvall in a critical relationship to monolingualism. Citing Gayatri Spivak's "'you must clear your throat, clear your own space, spit out the mother tongue'" as a starting point, Bergvall glosses this statement as signifying "the refusal or impossibility of monoglossic possession by one naturalised language, one naturalised speaking body" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). Bergvall develops this analogy to describe how in French, one does not clear one's throat, but one "has a cat in the throat" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). She asks "what if I were to decide to talk with a cat in the throat? [...] Cat is my speech's accent" (Bergvall, "Social" 1). In an interview I conducted with Bergvall in 2008, she spoke of her concerns with the question of accent:

> How do you yourself assume a number of things in relation to identity, that you're supposed to speak like this, this idea of having an accent and that having an accent is going to place you always as this and that. (Bergvall and Thurston)

This registering of the role of accent in speech—something which makes one very much aware of the body's role in articulating language —is part of Bergvall's broader concern with "the examination of identity and of the frameworks in which power sits, also in and through language":

> One of the starting points is to investigate identity, its framework, its prison, as well as its potentially liberatory aspects. If you're gay, the liberatory aspect of identity is not so clear, on the contrary, it can seem more like an imposed framework. So I thought all that was really very important to my writing. Nothing is a given and yet I might be taken for granted. When we present ourselves we take it for granted somehow. (Bergvall and Thurston)

Many of these themes are explored most directly in Bergvall's recent book *Cropper* which in its first section "Croup" announces itself as:

> A sketch, a portrait-outline of myself as a bilingual, binational, dispersd, ssipated, French hyphen Norwegian writer. Someone bordering on, never settld, whos

> changed codes like countries in a free-to-roam White European fashion, not forcd to move by politics or social circumstance, this being debatable at a psychological level, must move on can't move in. (Bergvall, *Cropper* 2-3)

This restless movement is conveyed in a carefully qualified way that does not overtly celebrate this nomadism, nor judge it negatively. As in *Éclat*, Bergvall registers the otherness of her English accent by dropping out vowels, and, as she tells the story of her first engagements with French and speaks about her relationship with Norwegian, words from these languages appear, often exploiting cross-linguistic puns: "Voila she led me to the river, eau eau pressed me down," "a long brisk winter, en lang norsk vinter" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 3, 4). More revealingly, Bergvall's relationship with French is also bound up with sexual awakening and discovery and the trials of finding one's new-found identity immediately under threat: "to flesh out in one lettre then b torn to pieces by the next [...] Nono no body be languaged sexd in this way" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 4). It is however English which offers a language for the next stage of development: "it signs on easily, seems adaptiv, resonant," although the narrator is later more wary of the "somatic and cultural presumptions familiar to standard bearers of a language" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 5, 7). The final part of this section unfolds what reads like an account of various creative strategies in art and writing that Bergvall may have witnessed during this period: "serial or patternd work [...] rugged syntax [...] resist bear witness," although it is the language practice that "creases the bordrs, rules, boundaries, edges, limbos" which seems closest to Bergvall's own practice (Bergvall, *Cropper* 8).

The second section of the book, "Crop," dramatises the relationship between body, identity and language by offering a bilingual text in English and Norwegian, the Norwegian text printed in red:

> Some never had a body to call their own before it was taken away—
> som aldri hadde en kropp de kunne kale sin egen før den ble revet bort. (Bergvall, *Cropper* 10)

The sentences that follow use a parallel syntactic structure which evokes a series of ongoing challenges to the embodied self: "some never had a chance to feel a body as their own [...] some never had a chance to know their body [...] some were never free to speak their body" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 11). The sentences are in fact a series of answers to a question stated at the opening of the text: "how does one keep ones body as ones own [...] could I make sure that what I called my body would remain in the transit from other languages?" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 10). Thus embodiment, language and selfhood are utterly entangled with one another: "Some bodies like languages simply disappear-" and, if they disappear, they nevertheless may "arise in some or many of us" (Bergvall, *Cropper* 12). At this point the poem's telling may not be so much "claiming an identity for political reasons," as Caddel and Quartermain suggest, but certainly Bergvall's poetics in this book are very much engaged with trying to position the self in a "shifting world of continual change" in a way which seems fundamentally dissenting and anti-authoritarian in the stand it makes against oppression (and repression) in its many guises.

Andrea Brady is another internationalist who has made the UK her home—she was born in Philadelphia, USA. As an early Modern scholar she has worked on seventeenth-century English funerary elegy but her contribution to contemporary British poetry lies in her work with Keston Sutherland as co-publisher of Barque Press, and her directorship of the Archive of the Now, an online digital archive documenting audio recordings of innovative poets.[11] As a poet, Brady's work has mostly been published in pamphlet form by small presses such as Barque and Object Permanence and her work can also be read as very much belonging to the tradition of dissent that Caddel and Quartermain identify. As Brady said in an interview I conducted with her in 2009:

> I think the aim of my poetry and my scholarship is to excavate that plurality of discourses from the early modern period. [...] It offers the hope, for those of us working in very obscure ways in our small, not very brightly-lit, corners of British academia, that we are writing into the historical record some kinds of resistance and the envisioning of an alternative that might be excavated by future generations of readers and scholars. (Brady and Thurston)

For Brady, the plurality of discourses that she works on as a critic is both the subject of her poetry and one of its key formal devices. *Tracking Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination* is a long poem presented as an online text with highlighted passages hyperlinked to research material that informed its composition. In our interview, Brady introduced the poem as follows:

> *Wildfire* was really an attempt to focus on these issues [of obscurity, difficulty and transformation] [...], and to think about how metaphors of illumination, of brightness and enlightenment connect the ethereal world of intellectual and artistic endeavour with a much more violent and tortured history of incendiary devices. (Brady and Thurston)

Tracking Wildfire makes use of a very diverse range of sources, from Heraclitus to online blog entries quoting from declassified US Defense Department documents, alongside literary references from many different periods. A central image in the poem is Greek fire —an ancient incendiary weapon— which is linked to its modern counterpart White Phosphorous, used in Fallujah during the invasion of Iraq and also more recently in the bombing of the Gaza strip. Brady's argument in this poem therefore proceeds in a manner not unlike Sheppard's creative linkage, in which diverse materials combine and attention to historical material develops in parallel with images and ideas connected to the present. As the poem declares:

> Thumbs the hand bearing
> its light into darkest English, of history

[11] Viewable at: <www.archiveofthenow.com>.

in decay, to unlock the manufacturing
process and reveal a simple thesis
distilled for strife: that the edges of
of history, past grill and lounger
are eating inward as fire. (Brady, "Pyrotechne," *Tracking*)

The phrase "light into darkest English" is hyperlinked to an account of what Brady describes as a Situationist "derive" she conducted in Bow and Old Ford in East London. This account, illustrated by photographs Brady made on her journey, describes the mistreatment of workers at the Bryant and May match factory in Old Ford, thus inserting the use of different kinds of phosphorous in the manufacture of matches into the ongoing set of connections with Greek fire and White Phosphorous. What also emerges in this process is Brady's awareness of "history in decay" —ambiguously posing that history may be observed in decay as much as it itself decays. That her intent in the poem is perhaps to "unlock the manufacturing/ process" not only of matches, but of poetry, is also ambivalent in that the consequent —albeit ironic— "simple thesis" is one that is "distilled for strife," rather than, as may be heard punningly, for life. Its conclusion that the "edges of history" eat inward, imagines history itself as a destructive, consuming process, like fire, which holds out little hope for the future.[12] In a note to the poem, Brady links "fire's tendency to spread and consume" to "the interconnection of violent innovation and the growth of capitalism," an image of which might be the "grill and lounger" in the above lines—suggesting a prosperous domestic scene of a garden barbecue in which fire is tamed in the grill whilst the subject relaxes—momentarily safe from destruction (Brady, "Creative Method," *Tracking*).

One of the most disturbing passages in the poem offers a list of descriptions of images with viewing figures appended to them, as if they are pictures or videos posted on the internet:

Eaten by dogs. viewed: 36, 560 times.
Eaten by dogs. viewed: 17, 809 times.
Person with disability: prosthetics above body.
Partially eaten by dogs. viewed: 32, 144 times.
Old man killed with daughters; family recognised. viewed 30, 411 times.
Man making "Shuhada" sign: there is
One God, because he knew he was
about to be shot. Viewed 18, 135 times. (Brady, "Chronic," *Tracking*)

The imagined or actual images described here suggest the atrocities and consequences of war. The inclusion of the Arabic word "shuhada" —which may be translated as "martyr" or "witness"— suggests the context of the invasion of Iraq, with which Brady links her research into White Phosphorous. The shock of these

[12] From the section "Meat": "fire makes itself through destruction."

lines is two-fold. Firstly they shock because, in offering the barest descriptions of an image—almost no more than a title, occasionally a comment—they allow the reader's imagination to generate a horrific picture. Secondly, an additional impact emerges with the large numbers of viewings of these images. We are left to speculate how many of the viewings are by the simply prurient and how many by people seeking to find and identify relations lost in conflict. Whilst one might recognise the human desire to witness and understand death in these figures, one also cannot escape the fact that modern technology allows this widespread, instantaneous and private consumption of the spectacle of death to occur on an unprecedented scale —a phenomenon which it is hard to feel comfortable with, and a potential illustration of Sheppard's "virtual times Are a Terror."

In its attempt to inscribe poetic activity into what Brady elsewhere in the interview calls the "material and political context which makes it possible," *Tracking Wildfire* is self-conscious about how it comes into being through an unresolved tension between illumination and obscurity that is perhaps a key historical trait of poetic writing (Brady and Thurston). At one point the poem acknowledges the "power of obscurity to bring it all / to life"—suggesting that, in attempting to reflect the actual obscurity and difficulty of the world, one is closer to the truth of life (Brady, "Alchemistry," *Tracking*). However, elsewhere it asks: "is obscurity a moral option now?" as if there are dangers in *only* presenting the obscure difficulty of reality without attempting to illuminate aspects of it (Brady, "In Law" *Tracking*). This argument also plays itself out in lines which evoke the project underway as an "experimental / poem dashed onto political density"—the word "dashed" suggesting that the poem is both imposed upon forms of political information and also wrecked by them (Brady, "Thrown Fire," *Tracking*). In the same section the narrator asks:

> have I scored a blinder, or run blind
> myself in all this vapour quickly spending
> its burn I think I'm seeing the future? (Brady, "Thrown Fire," *Tracking*)

These lines pun on the idiom "to score a blinder" which means to achieve something of "blinding" brilliance—which may resemble the poet's hopes for the work—but also evoke the possibility that this narrator is also blinded, as if in a cloud of White Phosphorous or Platonic fury,[13] not sure whether it is the future she sees before her, or something else. The pun on the word "spending" hints that the vapour that engulfs the poet, by consuming its own mass, is akin to economic relations under capitalism that use themselves up quickly—the "burn" suggestive again of the devouring processes of fire and history evoked earlier.

These three writers taken together as exemplars of a British Innovative Poetry certainly provide a challenge to the "Mainstream Orthodoxy," to the extent

[13] In the interview Brady explains Platonic fury as "a flame or fire that threatens to engulf the artistic persona."

that they all employ a poetics of displacement, or creative linkage, to build poetries that are open to the complexity of the "intensely problematised hybridities and polyglossia" that constitute British cultural and political life. Whilst it is Bergvall's work that is most overtly concerned with the way in which identity, in its entangled relations with the body and language, can be seen as "conjectural, invented and inventive," it is the political challenge that she poses that forms a continuity with Sheppard and Brady's work. Within this continuity one can trace a commitment to an historical tradition of dissent that is as crucial for understanding the poetics of Innovative Poetry as is a grasp of its diverse formal means.

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EXPLORATIONS IN EXPERIMENTAL FORMALISM

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ABSTRACT

Poets who write on the innovative, or experimental edge of their field and often outside of it, do not always know how to describe their writing and its products to others. This paper will be an attempt by Judy Kendall, who leads the English and Creative Writing BA Programme at Salford University, UK, to explore what it means to write under the title of Experimental Formalism as a poet and short fiction writer specialising in experimental visual text. The paper will present her understanding of what it is she does under the auspices of Experimental Formalism, and what she means by that term.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary poetry, experimental formalism, visual text, Judy Kendall, experimental poetry.

RESUMEN

Los poetas que escriben en el margen innovador o experimental de su campo y a menudo fuera de él, no siempre saben cómo describir su poesía y sus frutos a los demás. En el presente artículo, Judy Kendall, quien lidera el English and Creative Writing BA Programme de Salford University en el Reino Unido, se propone contribuir a esas explicaciones explorando qué significa escribir bajo el título de Experimental Formalism, como poeta y autora de historias cortas especializándose en el texto visual-experimental. El artículo presenta su visión de lo que hace bajo los auspicios del Experimental Formalism y de lo que ella quiere decir con ese término.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía contemporánea, formalismo experimental, texto visual, Judy Kendall, poesía experimental.

In the summer of 2008, myself and the American Terri Witek, both poets and both leaders of university creative writing courses, voluntarily retreated from the world for a month as Hawthornden fellows in the seventeenth-century Hawthornden Castle in a peaceful undisturbed setting in Scotland. In the long discussions on writing and poetry that ensued, we found that we shared a particular pressing concern: a difficulty in locating our work within the contemporary writing worlds in which we moved. We resolved to explore why this might be so by looking closely at what we write. As a result of these discussions, I set up a panel at the June 2009 Great Writing conference at Bangor University in the UK. Terri Witek, myself and

another experimental poet and fiction writer, Ursula Hurley, all presented papers. The panel was entitled "Exploring Experimental Formalism." This article is based on the paper I presented.

One of the poetry modules for the English and Creative Writing students at the University of Salford in the UK is entitled "Creating Visual Text." Students are asked to look at visual text in the past and present and to examine the techniques it uses and the effects it produces. Since this is a creative writing module, the students are also asked to produce their own work stemming from what they have studied. Texts referred to in the module are very varied. They consist of ekphrastic poetry and prose; illuminated text; calligrammes; concrete poetry; site specific text, from Ian Hamilton Finlay's sculpture and garden poems to Alec Finlay's skyline renga to anonymously sprayed creative graffiti; creative use of calligraphy, orthography and typography; texts as art object; artists' books from the Sir Kenneth Green Book Design collection at Manchester Metropolitan University; and kinetic text, whether it is embodied in hand-made Flicker books and or exists online as interactive digital work.

This module is relatively new, probably the only one of its kind in the UK. It is followed at Salford by a sister literary module which focuses on the graphic surface of the page, "Reading the Page." This second module is led by Glyn White, a key academic in this field. His *Reading the Graphic Surface* forms part of the backbone of the "Creating Visual Text" module, together with Joe Bray's *Ma(R)king the Text* to which White has contributed.

The importance of visual text as a topic in the study of literary and creative writing is evident. Visual text can be found everywhere in the accepted canons. Almost every category of visual text studied in "Creating Visual Text" draws examples in more than one time period. The module looks at illuminated manuscripts, the works of George Herbert, William Blake, Lewis Carroll, Apollinaire, Edwin Morgan, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Caryl Churchill, Alasdair Gray, *McSweeney Quarterly* writers, Jonathan Safran Foer, and also refers to contemporary Salford-university-based innovative writers. Visual text is not genre specific either. Prose and poetry feature almost equally. Theatre writing also makes an appearance, and a number of the texts are not categorized in this way, falling between genres.

Given the module's uniqueness, it is interesting to document my own and my students' initial concerns on its first run. These reveal areas in which the module challenges perceived and accepted ways of studying and creating literature. Both the students and myself were accustomed to writing or marking university assessments of screeds of printed text on the page. The students relished the new challenge of creating visual text, often choosing to spend hours and hours on their submissions with some excellent results. One, who had practically given up on her university education, said she had now discovered what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. However, the student experience of creating visual text for assessment purposes also highlighted their strong sense of the need for permission to work in this field: "We never knew it was ok to do something like this in class." Many asked whether this or that piece "will be allowed."

It soon became apparent that I, the lecturer and module convenor, shared this need for permission. Like the students, in the first run of this module I had fears about the legitimacy of visual text in a university context and was unsure of the extent to which boundaries could be pushed. Like my students, I was worried that they were not producing enough text for assessment purposes. I was concerned that other examiners would not be satisfied with texts consisting of only one word, albeit manipulated and contorted in clever visual ways. These concerns affected the pieces submitted for university assessment during the module's first run, although feedback from peers and myself made it clear that the work they were producing was valid, creative and stimulating.

One of the students had a long-term fascination with graffiti. He produced a piece that involved a trip to a European mountain peak and some thoughtful and interesting research. However, fears of its legitimacy as a module submission and also of prosecution for illegal graffiti resulted in a slightly botched attempt. In retrospect, I could have encouraged him more, but my own very similar fears interfered.

These fears were unfounded. The university system fully backed the module's outcomes. In fact, to some extent these fears resulted in stronger submissions since many students, encouraged by myself and their own concerns, expended more effort than usual in the reflective and analytical components of their submissions, arguing and supporting and providing evidence for the creative processes that lay behind their pieces.

Nevertheless, this experience, and mine and the students' reducing fears, helps explain why I feel the need to write an article like this: to explore what my writing "is." My reactions during the module's first run have alerted me to the fact that similar concerns affect the work I create for the public domain. Frequently, as a writer I do not feel I properly belong. I fear, like the "Creating Visual Text" students, that what I do is not "allowed." Indeed, my first poetry magazine feature was in the pages of a UK poetry journal, *Erbacce*, which focuses on "poetry submissions that are radical either in form or content," celebrating, in other words, poetry that might not fit elsewhere. As one of its editors, Alan Corkish, said of my work: "we were keen to use them because they were 'different'" (Corkish 4).

In May 2009 I read some of my work at the International Bury TEXT Festival in Greater Manchester in UK, alongside an installation artist who was working in film and a poet who was using audio tape. This festival focuses on experimentation with text, particularly visual text. I found myself in a peculiar but exciting position as a poetry performer, because when deciding what to read I noticed that I was searching through my work not for sufficiently conventional pieces to suit my perception of what my audiences would accept, but for the most experimental and visual. It was a liberating experience, and demonstrated to me the extent to which I tend to edit my work for presentation —even if this is simply because the usual method of presenting poetry is to read it from a book standing up to an audience sitting down, rather than, perhaps, to project it on a screen or to dance it. As a result, when I perform, my spoken voice immediately intrudes on a piece and on the audience's reception of it, even when that piece focuses not on sound but on visual effects. Philip Larkin has this to say about normal methods of poetry performance:

> Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, means you miss so much —the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end. Reading it on the page means you can go at your own pace, taking it in properly; hearing it means you're dragged along at the speaker's own rate, missing things, not taking it in, confusing "there" and "their" and things like that. And the speaker may interpose his own personality between you and the poem, for better or worse. (Larkin 61)

In cases where I read a visual text, the restrictions implicit in a regular poetry performance produce an even more bizarre state of affairs. One such piece is the poem, "Still Life with Quinces and Lemons"[1] (Kendall, *Drier* 64), which focuses on breaking boundaries. It stems from a visit to the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. Wandering through the galleries, I was soon mesmerised by the only Van Gogh that still has the original frame. Van Gogh uses the frame to continue the picture, painting the frame the same background colour, as if the picture does not end at the frame but extends into the gallery and beyond.

Another piece of mine, "On I Tow" (Kendall, *Drier* 32), also relies visual effects. A palindrome and very definitely shaped, it demands that the eye read vertically, horizontally, backwards and forwards.

"On I Tow"

on i tow on	no wot i no
av luv	vul va
yes i sey	yes i sey
may i av luv	vul va i yam
now on w no won	now on w no won
no way	yaw on

I have tried performing "Still life" and "On I Tow" at regular poetry readings but never successfully. I have not yet discovered a way to replicate, or replace, the power of the visual effects with my spoken voice.

Difficulties can also occur with visual representations on the page. Magazines and publishers sometimes reject visually complex work for practical technical reasons. One reason I am so satisfied with my current poetry publisher, Cinnamon Press, is because of their willingness to set and include pieces like this in my collections, although it is significant that I still felt the need to isolate "Still life," with the words "End-painting" on the contents page, as if I am fending off anticipated criticism by presenting it as something other than a piece of creative text.

It is curious, therefore, that "Still life" is the piece a musician selected to set to a choral setting when choosing from a sample of my work. This is particularly surprising since his initial indications were that he wanted a conventional ballad-

[1] The guest-editor has decided to include a copy of the poem at the end of the present article.

like poem consisting of particular rhythms, rhymes and of a prescribed length. I sent him several contenders, but included "Still life" as an ironic comment on his exacting demands. To my surprise, he rejected the more obvious possibilities and chose "Still life." Why? Does the focus on the visual in "Still life" and the consequent, automatic, focus on space, somehow help to highlight the way the poem should or could sound? Douglas Oliver suggests that it might. As he puts it in *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*: "The perceived pace of a poem is partly decided by the arrangement of voiced, unvoiced and silent stretches of the line" (Oliver IX).

With a poem like "Still life," the reader is obliged to act also as a viewer and so is made very aware of shape, of space, of "silent stretches" in lines as the words come in and out of bold at the end of the lines and also beyond the poem and its rectangular frame of words. The foregrounding of these "silent stretches" helps indicate not only rhythm or pace but also volume and intensity, all aspects of musical sound.

Performance, together with publication, is the usual means of dissemination of creative writing. In the case of poetry, the most effective way to sell collections is often at performed readings. So this raises an issue for text that is not designed to be heard. Work that crosses boundaries does not always suit the usual channels of dissemination and publication, and visual work does not always lend itself to performance as a spoken text. The fact that a piece is created using visual text therefore can have a considerable effect on where and how it is presented, read or sold. The students on the "Creating Visual Text" module were aware of this. At the end of its first run, some of them urgently asked how they could make money from creating visual text, as they loved doing it so much.

This need to look for new ways of presenting such work can lead to more creative and unusual methods of dissemination. My students discovered this when they were invited to show and sell their visual text pieces in a local venue as part of "Art Crawl," embedded in the Manchester International Festival "Not Part of Festival" fringe. It seems that by thinking "out of the box" they came across ways of presenting their "out of the box" creative work "out of the box" of the usual poetry reading/publishing circuit. Once one barrier or boundary is broken, others collapse more easily.

On a professional level, this has not always been my experience, and it is useful to question why. Perhaps I have tried too hard to stick within the regular boundaries, to position myself within perceived schools of experimentation, even when my work does not comply with their constraints. The experimental American poet, Carrie Etter, referred in a 2002 email exchange to her negotiation of the tricky business of "doubleness" in the poetry worlds of haiku, mainstream lyrics and experimental poetry.[2] She employed the term "schizophrenic poet" to describe her position within these many camps.

[2] Email exchange with author, 9 December 2002.

One reason why dissemination through exhibition offered itself so readily to my students when it had previously eluded me is because of the difference in our situations. My students' work has been validated: by their peers, by me, by the external examiner, and by the fact that it is now contributing to their degree, in some cases very considerably. They also have several innovative writer-lecturers at Salford as mentors and role models. To a great extent they do not know how experimental they are. Their confidence in the kind of work they are attempting reaps its own dividends.

However, such confidence can also result in unpleasant surprises. In the Salford university context, they feel secure in their position as creators of visual text, surrounded by professional academics and practitioners in that field, and accompanied by several like-minded peers. In the wider world, such proximity is rare, and their work becomes, not part of an integral effort to explore and push the boundaries of the textual and visual, but odd, peculiar and often apparently transgressive. In some creative circles, it seems that "innovative" is equivalent to "unacceptable." One student only discovered how very "innovative" in this sense her poetry was when presenting it at a conventional poetry symposium to negative and hostile criticism from mature published poets.

My situation, more established as a writer and lecturer, is different from that of my students'. Although I have my own mentors, as the long list of texts used in "Creating Visual Text" proclaim, I do not share that comfortable feeling of enclosure and belonging that they enjoy within the university. There is no named and recognized school of visual text creation. What would be the effect on me if there was? And what kind of school would it be, what disciplines would it ally to? If I could singlehandedly form such a school, where would it be established, what kind of work would it include, and who would its most friendly partners be? Perhaps the best way forward is to look more closely at my methods of composition and at what these suggest about a possible grouping of work.

The Drier the Brighter is filled with poems of shape and space and silence. Many have been involved in collaborative projects. Some of the pieces, like "On I Tow," are digitalized in collaboration with Steven Earnshaw in his *flash art* gallery, <http://teaching.shu.ac.uk/ds/sle/earnshaw/gallery/>. Others have benefited from collaboration with artists after publication. Yet others have been improvised musically. Particularly strong links have emerged between these pieces and digital and musical work, offering the potential to explore creative ideas further using sound, kinetic movement and interactivity.

"Still life," "On I Tow" and "leaving" all come from my collection, *The Drier the Brighter*, written shortly after my return from seven years in Japan where I was steeped in the aesthetics of silence and space, particularly as regards the world of the haiku and tanka forms. This shows in the collection, and is a useful pointer to why they offer themselves so readily to collaborative development.

Douglas Finch of London's Trinity College of Music, pianist, composer, improvisor and instigator of the London Improvisation festival, exchanges emails with me after performing an improvisational musical piece using piano and song with several of my poems at a 2009 Trinity Laban conference on new technologies for music and dance:

> The idea of gaps and ellipses sounds fascinating. That was the first thing that struck me about "leaving." The gaps are a kind of timing—waiting—that is to me very similar in music when a sense of expectation and fulfilment is created.[3]

The piece he names, "leaving" (Kendall, *Drier* 51), is written in Japanese tanka form, a form that encourages exploitation of gaps and silence, both key concerns in Japanese aesthetics. The piece runs:

> leaving.
>
> not one stick of furniture
> in the room.
> in the heart,
>
> no tears.

Does the visual, the exploratory, the poetry that does not quite fit where it should, allow more room for other disciplines to edge in? Douglas Finch focuses on the gaps in my work as a link between our two disciplines. Gaps suggest a lack of fit. In addition, Finch indicates that the gaps, the outside, the frame and what lies beyond it, of my textual piece, seem to connect with the equivalent uses of silence in music, and to allow in that "gap" for a bridge between the two disciplines. Collaboration involves acts of boundary-breaking, between artists, between disciplines. Gaps and silence, both often used as framing or boundary indicators seem to encourage breaking of those boundaries. Is it the fact that this work breaks boundaries which makes it so accessible across disciplines?

My next collection, *Joy Change* consists of poems written in and about Japan. These exhibit a strong haiku-like minimalist influence, and the use of silence is even more evident. One poem, *Yaki Imo* (Kendall, *Joy*), plays very much on what is not said and on echoes and silences:

> *Yaki Imo*
>
> Ringing out—the roasted sweet potato seller's call
> (these days recorded)
>
> *Y A K I I M O O O O O*
>
> the traffic an accompaniment
> in this carpet-covered room.
>
> Maybe I'll make a curry today
> for one,

[3] Email exchange with author, 10 September 2009.

a carrot, an onion.
A motorbike is buzzing in the distance.

My friend left me a pitta bread
inside the fridge.
Tears fall before I start to chop and
I bless all those who do not look.
It is a cold I have,
red-eyed,
a cold.

Still the same old *yaki imo* call
(tape faded)
the traffic quite loud still.

YAKI IMOOOOO[4]

In these poems the gap becomes prime. The words act as frames for the gaps. The poetry, the emotion, in "Yaki Imo" happens in the gaps. The gaps make the poem.

This relates to my situation as composer of much of this work. I was living as an expatriate in Japan, far from home, struggling with a difficult language in which I was barely literate and a very different culture and aesthetic. I felt like I was floating and had a keen sense of separation from my home base. My life felt full of gaps. The gaps in the poetry replicate that feeling, and the concept of gaps became key to my understanding of my composing processes. Asked to define this process in an *Erbacce* interview, I say that "poetry is painting with gaps, filling in the pauses with a few words here and then."

This approach has strong resonances in musical traditions. The jazz musician, Harry Harris, explains in a workshop:

> I never think of piece as notes on a page. It's the gaps between the notes. If you repeat those gaps wherever you start it will work. Intervals between the notes constitute the tune. Once you start thinking harmonically about tune and chords it gets much easier. [5]

Eric Taylor echoes Harris's words. In *The AB Guide to Music Theory: Part 1*, firmly giving silence a position equivalent in music to sound: "Music does not consist only of sounds: it includes silences too. Notation has to show how long each silence lasts, just as it shows how long each sound lasts" (Taylor 15).

In my more current work, the importance of shape, space and silence continues. After writing *Joy Change*, I began to feel very dissatisfied with the neatness of

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[4] Also published in *Erbacce* 15.

[5] Author's notes from Harry Harris's Improvisation workshop, Chetham's International Piano Summer School, Manchester, 15-22 August 2009.

this Japanese-inspired work. I wanted to become messier and less considered—more English perhaps. This has affected the composing process of the pieces in my current rock climbing collection. I decided to write the first draft of each of them within twenty-four hours of a rock climb. It is clear that at this stage the immediacy of the writing process had now become highly important to me. It is not hard to see why. As I argue in the universities' issue of *NAWE: Writing in Education*, an article that even in its title suggests proximity of creative work to immediate physical activity, "The Poem and the Body: Creativity and Physical Movement," the environment in which a writer composes has a crucial effect on the resultant poetic work. Through practical experience I have found that the following statements can also be true of pieces written or created in other genres:

> A number of decision-making processes [...] are removed from the writer and placed within the physical environment in which the poem is created. This physical environment includes the writer's body. It is the bodily sensations, in fact, that appear to drive the composition process. (Kendall, "Poem" 33-35)

It is no coincidence therefore that my rock climbing poetry begins when I move up from the South to the proverbially more friendly, open and hillier North West of England, replete with opportunities to partake of the very physical activity of rock climbing.

Two aspects of composition become particularly important for me in the rock climbing poetry. The first is the immediacy of the writing. The process becomes stirred by and also places emphasis upon the feeling and the rhythm of a particular climb. I describe this process in *Erbacce* as:

> painting the picture with feeling rather than logic, story, sense or words. And to do that ideally I need almost to write before I have articulated the thought/emotion into words, well I can't bypass that process, but if I write in the moment that I articulate, or am somehow able to get back to that moment, then I bypass the editing process that is so developed in all our brains. (Corkish 4)

I tended to dash down the first draft of a climbing piece. Sometimes it would be in the few moments drinking coffee after a climb, or it might be late at night or blurry-eyed in the early morning when I would suddenly remember I had forgotten to note anything down about a particular climb. Often, there would be a sense of transcription, writing without thinking, being dictated to. This means that although I am still using words to write the poems, I am focusing more on space and shape, and, because of that almost violent up and down movement involved in climbing, on rhythm. This focus on rhythm is no surprise when one considers J.S. Bach's observations on the importance of rhythm, "the right time" in musical creativity and performance: "There is nothing to it. You only have to hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself" (Geiringer 145).

Bach insists there is nothing to the process of achieving this rhythm. However, that "nothing," that non-interference with the process of creation, is very hard to achieve, as Modernist writer Gertrude Stein found in early experiments in auto-

matic writing under the auspices of William James, Henry James' illustrious brother. After a series of self-tests, Stein, working with fellow student Leon Solomons, discovered that

> there is a general tendency to movement from purely sensory stimuli, independent of any conscious motor impulse or volition. This tendency is ordinarily inhibited by the will, but comes out as soon as the attention of the subject is removed. This tendency to stop automatic movements and bring them under the control of the will is very strong. Nothing is more difficult than to allow a movement of which we are conscious to go on of itself. (Solomons and Stein 496)

The "tendency to movement" that occurs if the "attention of the subject is removed" explains why rhythm is an important aspect of my rock climbing poems, composed as they were by removing the attention as far as possible from the process of writing. By rhythm I mean "the rhythm of a certain deep feeling" (Corkish 5). This is manifested in the various pieces in different ways. It might refer to the exhilaration of first climbing a wall. It could capture the numb shock of news of a bereavement. It may reflect and embody the fury of a woman scorned. These feelings, whatever they may be, are combined with and articulated through the strong focus on physical movement required in rock climbing, a focus that resonates in my body for several hours after a climb, and so will be experienced as I write the first draft of each poem, provided I keep to that strict principle of initially writing within twenty-four hours.

The poem "what I learnt on my first long wall"[6] (Kendall, *Erbacce 15* 7) is a simple exposition of this. It includes the buzz of the vertical drive to struggle up to the top, then expresses the shock of looking down and also visualises the smooth drop downwards. It reflects the physicality of rock climbing in its shape. In fact, it was first conceived as a three-dimensional version of a rock wall, the paper to be folded in two as a pyramid with each line folded again to form a series of steps in either half, each meeting at the top, where the poem, and the reader, looks down.

Another of these poems, "On Hearing the Death of My Father" (Kendall, *Erbacce 15* 18), plays with the building of a rhythm. This drive of this rhythm, created through repetition and continual movement, informs and makes the poem. This is clearly a poem written to be read aloud, and is perhaps more effective in performance than on the page, Alan Corkish refers to it as "different" in terms of its content: "one of the most moving poems I've read for a long time." He also says "I have no problems seeing these writings as high-quality poetry, but some people would disagree with me perhaps" (Corkish 4):

> wanting to do the red again
> I lean on the rope

[6] The guest-editor has decided to include the copy of this poem provided by the author at the end of the present article.

and reach for the chalk ball
but how much harder it seems
as I slip clammy-handed away from the wall
my patience thinning from off the rock
just inches away from a heart-sinking drop
and so just so at this precise time
my father lets slip his safety line

oh my oh my
just so just so
take good care girl
mind how you go
in that final whirl
to the top of the cliff
no man lies ahead now
this is it this is it

oh my my my just so just so
as I belay jeff up the spotted black
up the blue-on-white and up the jack
onthebeanstalk-bulging green
as he rocks his body
in loops round the wall
as I crane upwards
in case he falls
as my neck twists in a belaying crick
as my heart mounts each time that he doesn't slip

oh my oh my
take good care girl
in that final whirl
to the top of the cliff
no man lies ahead now
this is it this is it oh my oh my is it after he's gone

that I learn for myself on the bouldering track
how I need to push my right foot back
shifting to Egyptian princess pose
for a sprawl in mid air to reach the last hold

oh my my my
take good care girl
in that final whirl
to the top of the cliff
no man lies ahead now
this is it this is it

when between climbing and choir I phone home
my mum's in a blur saying please don't come down

though it would be good if I happened along
to the funeral like some stranger guest and
in choir jeff says take good care of yourself girl and
ursula takes the time to describe
the dignified way her young brother died and
my arms in the great hall of ordsall spread out
thrown behind me like ballast as I open my mouth
to sing to the ghosts of the hall and the heights
who gather round beaming to hold onto me tight
bearing me up to sing to the night

oh my my my
the top of the cliff
no man lies ahead now

this is it

"On hearing of the death of my father" is almost a song, as is indicated by the way it demands performance. There is a link here too with the environment in which the original impetus for the piece occurred. The indoor rock climbing centre in which this particular climb was performed plays music. I have noticed that certain songs have a positive effect on my rock climbing, while others are detrimental. If a new song starts halfway through a climb, my climbing performance may also change, and after some experience of this I found that I was often aware of how my climbing might change as soon as I heard the first bars of the new song. Of course this then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, but since I experienced this right from my start as a climber, it suggests that there is also a strong relation between the music played and the climbing. These songs also inform the creative pieces that were produced, in some cases very clearly so, dictating their rhythm. Here, again, is another instance of the strong influence of conditions of writing on poetry composition.

Another rock climbing poem, written about an outdoor climb, has a different effect. It works with space —the space of the rock, wind and shock of exposure. The climb was on Windgather Rocks, it was rainy and windy, and it was my very first experience of rope-climbing outside. This poem seems different from the indoor climbing poems. The paper is filled with space, right down to the choice of one line stanzas, and in performance the piece almost literally lifts off the page and demands physical movement from the performer, re-enacting to some extent the moments of the climb. The poem works best when performed without paper, so that I can mime the movements described in the poem, taking the audience almost up onto the rock, and recreating the sense of emptiness and confrontation of worlds that the poem expresses, physically inhabiting it:

parallel universes

me hanging

on the rock

ellie fixing

rope on top

shining faces

creeping close

same height

different universe[7]

My rock climbing pieces stem from attempts to capture a certain rhythm, a sense of space, as far as possible without forethought, the immediacy of the writing. In the case of The immediacy of writing feeds into an immediacy of performing, suggesting that to explore fully the experimental formalism within which I perhaps work, investigations of rhythm, space and visual effects need to accompany an examination of performance.

I have reached the end of this article and am perhaps only little nearer to defining my position and my particular writing world, but the exploration has thrown up fascinating questions about creative collaboration and creative composition, to be compounded here by a final note. Among the other rock-climbing creative pieces, there are other surprises. Several pieces of short fiction. These were not planned. I initially attempted to write them as poems, but they would not "go" into that form. This phenomenon seems to have a connection with the conditions in which I was climbing and in particular with the partners with whom I climbed. Some produced poetry. Some produced prose. I note to Corkish "I would love to speculate on why" (Corkish 3-4).

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STILL LIFE WITH QUINCES AND LEMONS
QUINCESANDLEMONS
LEMONSWITHQUINCESANDLEM
LEMONSSTILLLIFEWIT.
ORANGE
B B B BROWN OCHRE ORANGE FAWN N N N.
OCHREE
FAWNSTILLLIFEWITHQUINCESANDLE
NSORANGEOCHREFAWNSTILLLIFEWITHQ
UINCESANDLEMONSSPILLFROMTHEPEEL
LLIFEWITHQUINCESANDORANGEPEELFROMT
STILLLIFEWITHLEMONSANDPEELFROMTHECL
OTHTHEFRAMESPILLFROMTHEPEELTHECLOT
SPILL FROM THE PEEL THE CLOTH THE FRAME
AS IF THE PICTURE DOESNT END

woah

what I learnt on my first long wall

choose the easy grade gritty hold
wall scrabbling firm to the hand
scuffing my shoes against the
up? racing for hold smearing
like spiderman which way
pulls tight not going to fall
in reverse I am jeff's rope
to the wall stopping plan
in different angles close
hands ease off weigh
into it thrusting the
the rhythm leaning
merging the legs
the top again
so quickly
the top

wow... jeffsfacesotinydownthere

the top
so quickly ↓ an
the top again ↓ da
merging the legs ↓ sb
the rhythm leaning ↓ eil
into it thrusting the ↓ ing
hands ease off weigh ↓ do
in different angles close ↓ wn
to the wall stopping plan ↓ isf
in reverse I am jeff's rope ↓ unn
pulls tight not going to fall ↓ ots
like spiderman which way ↓ ca
up? racing for hold smearing ↓ re
scuffing my shoes against the ↓ ya
wall scrabbling firm to the hand ↓ ta
choose the easy grade gritty hold ll

what I learnt on my first long wall

wow...

AVATARS OF THE SPEAKING "I": DENISE RILEY'S MEDITATIONS ON POETRY AND IDENTITY[*]*

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes as its point of departure the importance and even urgency of addressing issues of identity and the lyric "I" within contemporary poetry in the UK, which have been matters of concern for a new generation of poets. In Denise Riley's work, the dialectic between the "I" and the "other," between poet and community remains largely unresolved. Her poems strive to create a space that shows some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority and tradition. Throughout this paper, we will try to address the status of the speaking subject, largely a philosophical question that gravitates around the status of the self, and the unfinished conversation between the "I" and its "others," in a reading of Riley's important collection *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*, and her *Selected Poems* (2000) among other works.

KEY WORDS: Cambridge poetry, Denise Riley, lyric "I", identity.

RESUMEN

Este artículo parte de la necesidad, e incluso la urgencia, de abordar las cuestiones de la identidad y del "yo" lírico dentro de la poesía contemporánea del Reino Unido, cuestiones éstas que han merecido la atención de una nueva generación de poetas. En la obra de Denise Riley, la dialéctica entre el "yo" y el "otro", entre el poeta y la comunidad, está en gran medida por resolver. Sus poemas intentan crear un espacio cohesionado en relación a la aprehensión de la importancia del género en la práctica poética y su imbricación con la autoridad y la tradicion. A lo largo del artículo intentaremos abordar la situación del sujeto hablante, una cuestión principalmente filosófica que gravita alrededor de la situación del yo, y de la conversación inacabada entre el "yo" y sus "otros", en una lectura de la importante colección de Riley *Mop Mop Georgette: New and Selected Poems 1986-1993*, y sus *Selected Poems* (2000), entre otras obras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía de Cambridge, Denise Riley, "yo" lírico, identidad.

This
Representing yourself, desperate to get it right,
As if you could, is that the aim of writing?
"A Shortened Set." *Mop, Mop Georgette*, 22

I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either.
There's no democracy in beauty,
"Knowing in the Real World." (*Mop* 34)

INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN CAMBRIDGE AND LONDON

In the past three decades, strong divisions have surfaced among critics and poets around claims for and against subjectivity and formal completion in British poetry. A critical commonplace notes the striking differences between poets in London and poets in Cambridge. Though such groupings are always somewhat inadequate, Keith Tuma deftly articulates a widespread perception, "One stereotype has it that the poets of London are more prourban, outward looking, engaged with everyday life, while Cambridge poets are more self-consciously literary, more sentimental and romantic, more reflective, their urbanity poised against the London group's rudeness, their radical pastorial utopianism against a nonviolent anarchism" (203). Tuma then points to a crucial distinction in the Cambridge poets' "regard for the artifactual status of the poem as a resolved and 'finished' object" (205). If Cambridge poets emphasize the finished quality of a poem, then London poets stress the fluid indeterminacy of perception in their poetry. The point is at the heart of a debate between Cambridge poet Drew Milne and London poet Allen Fisher published in the journal *Parataxis* in 1994. In a public letter to Fisher, Milne complains: "The patterning and sequencing implicit in the titles and wider projects makes me feel that the relation to the whole is too fragmented. At the same time, I find too many of your poems have an unfinished quality, albeit deliberately" (29). In his response, Fisher speaks, sharply,

> [B]oth terms "coherence" and "finished" are continuous with a regressive civic production that you would appear to oppose, the issues of "finish" and "completeness" were critiqued by Gustave Courbet and Charles Baudelaire in the mid-1800s, and subsequently by the later watercolors of Paul Cézanne, since the late nineteenth century the issues of 'coherence and focus' have been critiqued by many physicists concerned with acuity and more recently by Bela Julesz regarding texture. Oliver Braddick on spatial frequency analysis in vision and K.W. Yao and others researching the effect of ions on light-sensitive current in retinal rods. (30)

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Among other things, what emerges from this response is that Fisher's understanding of perception demands a poetry that is as fragmented and incomplete as perception itself. Milne, in contrast, believes that poetry needs to achieve a moment of reflection from the perceptual flux: "In short, poetry needs to be able to reflect on the power of its refusal to be more, or less, than play" (36). Poetry comes to such reflection through the workings of subjectivity immanent in the poem. The poetic subject does not need to be an objectifying force, which controls perception, but it must be indicative of a way of being that differentiates human experience from sheer flux. Following Adorno, Milne contends that reflection of this order makes art something other than ordinary things in the world. When a poem achieves reflection and steps out the disorder of perception, it is capable of asserting its own formal coherence, something Fisher says it is contrary to the nature of perception and, accordingly, to the nature of human experience.

These competing claims cannot be easily resolved, and they are at the core of basic disagreements in contemporary poetry. In this paper, I do not attempt to settle the score but rather to provide a context that demonstrates how subjectivity can work in tension with form.

Geoffrey Hill's famous inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds in 1977, "Poetry as Menace and Atonement," argues that the subject as manifested in the poem is a "menace" and thereby threatens the coherence of the poem's form. Hill, however, creates too wide a gulf, to such an extent that the only kind of subjectivity that is permissible within a structure of formal completion lacks a fundamental openness to experience. In contrast, Basil Bunting's *Briggflats* (1966) shows that an experiential subjectivity exists only through formal wholeness. Examining Bunting's commitment to both subjectivity and form in the light of Hill's depiction of their tension, we could probably understand better Milne's defence of a poem's finished quality, which is a hallmark of Cambridge poetry. What is remarkable about Bunting's example, as seen through the lens of aesthetics, is that it demonstrates that formal completion does not need to curtail the dynamic and open subjectivity Fisher demands. This reading of Bunting provides a crucial —and overlooked— background for a definitive strain in Cambridge poetry in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The Cambridge poets' understanding of lyric subjectivity presents a subject as exposed to experience. Their current work clearly shows that subjective poetry no longer plays the old music of confessional comment draped in figurative language, it rather explores expressive potentialities in a dynamics in which the dialectics inside/outside remains yet to be addressed from different angles.

DENISE RILEY AND CAMBRIDGE POETRY

In the work of the Cambridge group of poets, the subject in lyric poetry is not in retreat from the world but rather interacts with it. Their work constitutes an intervention in debates in current European thought between subjectivity, language and ethics. The poets I have in mind when I refer to "Cambridge poetry" are J.H.

Prynne (1936-), Douglas Oliver (1937-2000), Peter Riley (1940-), Andrew Crozier (1943-), and Denise Riley (1948-). Prynne is the oldest and best known of the group. He graduated from Jesus College, Cambridge University in 1960 and has since taught and worked as librarian at Gonville and Caius College.

Experience is central to these poets' conception of subjectivity. Denise Riley's work is a case in point. A Cambridge poet who started writing in the late 1960s under the sign of the New York School—and in collaboration with John James and Wendy Mulford—she has been much impressed by American feminist voices such as that of Diane Wakoski, both for her speech-based rhythmic flexibility and her concerns and ironic stance on the social. Riley also owes much to Frank O'Hara, to his programmatics in his "Personism: A Manifesto" and to his poetic practice. They both share an interest in poems that exhibit a multiplicity in tone and address, and frequently borrow painterly and art-historical concerns from art history and theory.[1]

Riley's academic work—on theories of the mother and child, *War in the Nursery* (1983), and on feminist self-representations, *Am I That Name?* (1988)—has taken a Marxist sociologist's line, the latter theorizing on "reflexivity" and on the prompt political appropriation of dominant definitions of womanhood. As a leftist poet and intellectual and as a woman bringing up three children alone, she was in a strong position to understand the difficulties of working women's predicament. In her poetry she has managed to negotiate these stresses with a mixture of lyricism and a fine irony which enabled her to write from some common female experience and establish a distance from the myths of motherhood, acting as a participant-observer on the double burden of women as workers and carers. Throughout her career as a published poet she has been reflecting upon those domestic collisions of "love and economies" that were her starting point. She writes:

> Mothers who were always a set of equipment and a fragile balance
> Mothers who looked over a gulf through the cloud of an act &
> At times speechlessly saw it
> Inside a designation there are people permanently startled to
> Bear it, the not-me against sociology
> Inside the kitchens there is realising of tightropes
> Milk, ... (*Dry* 27)

Denise Riley's work insists that lyric subjectivity understood as a threshold between interiority and exteriority can help women negotiate the demands for self-identity and identity-as-woman. She is certainly one of the best known of the British women poets variously labelled "experimental" or "postmodern." She came to be widely recognized upon the publication of her *Mop Mop Georgette* (1993), a collection in which her best-known poems are represented. Among them, the much anthologised "A Misremembered Lyric," is an elegant sonnet about listening to old

[1] This shows in the rich surface of many of Riley's poems. As Frank O'Hara used to do, Riley borrows a series of elements from painting, such as color and technique.

pop songs on the radio and wondering if one is a good mother.[2] Poems such as "Wherever You Are, Be Somewhere Else," and "Poem Beginning with a Line from Proverbs" can be read for their dark humour and irony on daily life situations.

To read Riley is to be drawn into meditations on language and identity in which the expression of "authenticity" constantly founders and recommences anew. It seems it all starts from a sense that writing poetry involves failure and necessarily engages in a precarious process of re/deconstruction. As it has been argued, Riley constantly questions her voice and reinterprets the speaking "I" and related issues of "interiority and emotional inwardness" within the pressures of mass media and culture (Wills 50). In her poem "Dark Looks," the opening line "Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work" satirises how the speaking 'I' is always read as a real self no matter how much the poet attests otherwise. By the end of the poem, the poet finds herself at a loss, puzzled by the ruses of language,

> Who anyone is or I am is nothing to the work. The writer
> properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think about
> yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, grateful, mortally
> Embarrassed
> and especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering If, if only
> I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline!
> (...)
> What forces the lyric person to put itself on trial though it must stay rigorously
> uninteresting?/ Does it count on its dullness to seem human and strongly lovable;
> a veil for he monomania/ which likes to feel itself helpless and touching at times?
> Or else it backs off to get sassy/ since arch isn't far from desperate. So take me or
> leave me. No, wait, I didn't mean leave/ me, wait, just don't—or don't flick and
> skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go— (*Mop* 55)

These lines question the possibility of the lyric by "translating it" into discursive language. The passage shows how Riley's poems interrogate the unstable and precarious status of the lyric "I" to reconstruct and rearticulate it anew. "Dark Looks" addresses contemporary theories of subjectivity and writing through a consideration of textuality, gender and power. The opening lines contain a downright dismissal of the author and the poem moves gradually on to evoke a dilemma which is gender-inflected:

> The writer
> Properly should be the last person that the reader or the listener need think about
> Yet the poet with her signature stands up trembling, gratefully, mortally

[2] In "A Misremembered Lyric," Riley writes, "Do shrimps make good mothers? Yes they do./There is no beauty out of loss; can't do it —/and once the falling rain starts on the upturned/ leaves, and I listen to the rhythm of unhappy pleasure/what I hear is bossy death telling me which way to/go, what I see is a pool with an eye in it. Still let/me know. Looking for a brand-new start. Oh and never/notice yourself ever. As in life you don't." (*Mop* 32)

Embarrassed
And especially embarrassing to herself, patting her hair and twittering. If, if only
I need not have a physical appearance! To be sheer air, and mousseline! (55)

The final lines of the poem go back to the first line's categorical assertion of the author's disappearance from the text by pleading to restore the "I" in a certain way: "So take me or leave me. No wait, I didn't mean leave/ me, wait, just don't—or don't flick and skim to the foot of a page and then get up to go—" (55). The speaker is confused as to whether the "I" is in the text or outside the text, yet the text operates as mediation between that "I" and the reader.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis reads this conflicted lyricism as part of an "interior debating between subjectivities," in which the "social subject" is in "dialogue with the blandishments and pleasures of the singular, lyric "I" and its investiture in diction (65). The issue of the lyric person has been central to discussions of Riley's poetry, including her response to Romana Huk's question of why she does not, "despite its current renouncement as a traditional vehicle for the 'private voice', abandon it altogether." Riley answered, "I don't have the choice of 'abandon' it. You get formed in a certain way" (Riley, "Conversation" 19). Her poetic elaboration of the lyric has elicited criticism as being "at best politically retrogressive and at worst positively narcissistic," comments Huk in regard to the Keery-Wilkinson debate over Riley's use of the "I" (Riley, "Conversation" 20). Keery objects her ubiquituous "self-consciousness" (Riley, "Conversation" 23). Wilkinson finds her "log of reflexiveness" a narcissistic "writer's looking-glass" (61; 69). And in Nigel Wheale's view, her writing "dislocates" the subject through an alertness to the "responsibilities of the pronoun which creates the identity and the agency in writing," thus opening the poems, "to include the reader's subject position" (73-74). DuPlessis sees Riley announcing "a serious and forceful resistance to the lyric" (65); Willis finds "a practice of deviant reading" in which "Riley appropriates the lyric, puts it to her own use, by cutting it up and deforming it" (45); Michael Haslam celebrates the possibility that Riley's work will "vindicate the deep high lyric; and this from a higher or deeper peak or hollow of circumspect awareness of matters of, say, I, who also try for lyric flight, would dare... She desires lyric. She questions the conditions for lyric" (100).

In her poem "A Shortened Set," Riley deftly identifies the lyric's cultural embedding in a social system pre-existing and shaping the "I" when she writes, "I'd thought/ to ask around, what's lyric poetry?/It's bee noise starts before I can:/You do that; love me; die alone" (*Mop* 22). Along the same line, in her appropriately titled poem "Lyric," the "I" answers back to traditional forms of the lyric "I was already knotted in," feeling attracted to the generic conventions (its "sweet music") while also fighting with "whatever motors it swells/to hammer itself out on me" (*Mop* 36). Riley's struggles with the question "What's lyric poetry?" and her responses come from a rich background of intellectual and political activism.

Riley was born in 1948 in Carlisle and adopted by a working-class couple who raised her in Gloucester. She studied moral sciences and fine arts at Cambridge during the late 60s and early 70s, and went on to receive a PhD in philosophy at

Sussex University. Labelling herself a "socialist feminist," she embarked in her "countereducation of reading Marx and Hegel, Engels, Althusser, Freud—among great many other European socialists and theorists of society." She read a good number of poststructuralist philosophers, among whom we should probably singe out Michel Foucault—his theorization on discourses and discursivity—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for isolating "the inevitable ambiguity between collectivity and individuality," and Ludwig Wittgenstein for describing "the intelligibility of words as depending on their positioning," philosophical concerns that circulate through her poetry. This "countereducation" also included readings in developmental psychology and psychoanalysis which were instrumental in the elaboration of her feminist-materialist study of childcare and the state, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983). Her work on historical discursivity crystallized in her well-known, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women"* (1988). In the latter, theorizing on the issue of identity, Riley disclaims a collective identity for women, critiquing identity politics and its supporters, "the question of the politics of identity could be rephrased as a question of rhetoric. Not so much of whether there was for a particular moment any thruthful underlying rendition of 'women' or not, but of what the proliferations of addresses, descriptions, and attributions were doing" (Riley, "Short" 122).

As professor, researcher, historian and philosopher, Riley's "various pointed contributions to many debts over social history and policy, gender and identity, and the definition and development of feminist studies in academic discourse" (Wheale 74) give rise to a cross-disciplinary intertextuality within her poetry.

EXPERIENCE IN CAMBRIDGE POETRY

Experience is central to the Cambridge poets' conception of subjectivity, because, implicit in the notion of experience is an element that thwarts conceptual certainty. In his essay "Thrills and Frills: Poetry as Figures of Empirical Lyricism" (1983), Andrew Crozier argues that the poets associated with the Movement of the 1950s—notably Philip Larkin and Kingsley Amis—developed a style that brings together a speaking subject and external reality. The poems characteristic of the Movement aesthetic, Crozier writes:

> Are discrete... in the way they wrap around their author-subject. Their occasions are for the most part treated with scepticism, and the texts distort and buckle as a consequence of inner tension. Traditional forms are invoked not so much for the freedom they can confer as for support. They define the space in which the self can act with poetic authority, while at the same time in the absence of assurances provided by conventionally felt poetic experience, they secure the status of the text. (206)

Traditional forms and, he later says, figurative language effectively supplant the need for subject to experience anything in a poem. Figures that don't quite hold up to scrutiny drive his poetry: "the energy of the figures, the rewriting of

the world as it is, is made to guarantee the authenticity of the person, the subject" (220).

Crozier argues that Larkin and other Movement poets put so much stress on the persona that holds together the poem's language, because they were reacting against a tendency of the poetry of the 1940s that freed language from the control of a speaking subject. Crozier has in mind poets influenced by Dylan Thomas, like J.F. Hendry and W.S. Graham. He prefers the 1940s poetry to the staid poetry of the 1950's in part because it places subjectivity in a dynamic relationship with an unstable language. For Crozier, this option proves truer to experience:

> The poet does not constitute at one and the same time the poem's protagonist and boundary. No surrogate enactment of the poet's intelligence is provided as part of the poem's interior, and instead the poem claims to represent the whole person. Through such a mode the things referred to in the poem participate actively in what is imagined, they are not mere figurative devices, and the poet is acted upon as well as acting ...an experiencing creature rather than a mastering intelligence. (228)

Crozier is not merely concerned with the technique of a few poets in the 1940s; rather he is describing what the best poetry since the 1940s has attempted. This poetry responds to the singularity of material things in the world without subsuming them into abstract figures. Further, the poet cannot stand at a distance from what he or she is writing, instead, the poet needs to be open to the vicissitudes of experience. The poem then records a human subject's experience with otherness, that is, with language, things, and people in their own irreducible, non-figurative way. This understanding of poetry motivates the Cambridge poets to write poetry attentive to such singularity through a mode of subjective reflection.

The Cambridge poets have been writing in an intellectual environment where the status of subjectivity was very much in question. In the shadow of Larkin's presence, they inquired into how a poetic subject might be something other than the voice of a carefully constructed persona. From their perspective, a stable persona is impossible to present when they write of the disarming experience of the subject's relation to exteriority. Contemporary European philosophers have been working out how best to articulate the kind of experience that effectively turns a subject inside-out. From the 1940s onwards, Emmanuel Levinas has argued that the subject is fundamentally exposed to claims of exteriority. Otherness always already defines the subject and therefore precludes all attempts the subject may take to objectify it. Therefore, the subject lives in relation to exteriority through sensibility and not through cognition. Levinas uses the term "ethical" to describe the condition in which a subject comes into being as responsive to experience with singular otherness. In this way, it is possible to think of subjectivity in a way that isn't beholden to the objectifying tendencies of representational consciousness.

The Cambridge poets attempt to present this kind of subjectivity in their work. They achieve this end by enacting a moment of reflection in their language. Traditionally, reflection serves epistemology to match things with concepts. But,

can poetry, language at its most resistant to conceptualization, do the work of reflection and serve a thoroughly exposed subject? The "unfolding" of language which, from existential philosophy we know runs counter to cognition and is best exemplified in poetry, takes place in reflection. How exactly this happens in the poetry varies considerably, but we could claim that this movement of reflection in language, which supports a responsive, sensible subject, is definitive of Cambridge poetry.

Levinas holds that subjectivity is possible only through sensibility, which takes place "on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves" (15). This is exactly where Peter Riley locates writing. In *Lines on the Liver* (1981), he writes that love is "at the edge of the person, which is where writing, among other things, takes place" (11). My argument is that this is where the writing of the Cambridge poets takes place, namely on the cusp between subjectivity and exteriority. It is a dangerous place, since it is free of all concepts that might set straight once and for all who exactly we are. Instead, writing —is the very act of using singular, poetic language— places the subject at some distance from certitude in the face of experience, which invariably is an experience with the non-identical, or with that which upsets all efforts to get a cognitive hold of it. Nevertheless, the poets treat this as a hopeful experience, because it highlights the variety of human experience and reminds us of the patience and fortitude needed in coming to some understanding, albeit provisional, of other people and other things.

RILEY, THE 1990S POETIC CLIMATE AND HER CRITICS

In recent years the role of poetry as social and cultural critique underpins many of the essays that have focused on women's writing as cultural intervention. The emphasis that the work of contemporary women poets and critics placed upon naming the past and present in terms of female creativity and productivity becomes a necessary context for registering and revising the "I" or "self" within a theoretically informed writing and reading community skeptical of the self.

In many works by women of the 1980s, writing without a sense of a reading community of poets and critics open to the assertion of a gendered "I" in experimental terms has produced what Linda Kinnahan perceives as, "[T]hat 'I' is accompanied by a sense of fearing accusations of self-expression, of emotionalism, and of self-absorption that historically have been figured as female in our culture. Putting forth the 'I' becomes risky within the experimental community if that name and that I are marked female: the feared consequences range from erasure to condemnation" (*Feminist* 277).

Denise Riley produced a large body of work through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1993 her *Mop, Mop Georgette* appeared, which is the last substantial collection of new work she has published to date. Central to the project of Riley is the necessity of developing a reading community that has some cohesion in terms of its apprehension of gender's centrality to modes of poetic practice, authority, and tradition,

and of correcting a certain male focus within the broader reading community of linguistically innovative poetries.

Back in 1996 critic Linda Kinnahan opened one of her essays as follows, "'The work is/ e.g. to write 'she'...'" These words from the British poet Denise Riley (*Dry* 7) direct us to consider the multifaceted feminist project of contemporary women's poetry, while pointing toward a commonly polarized debate concerning language and its role" (Kinnahan, *Experimental* 620). At that time, Kinnahan made us aware that there was a group of women poets that aimed at communicating women's experiences in women's voices, using an accessible language that enhances self-expressivity. That corpus of poetry informed a politically valuable work accomplished by women who, under the initial impetus of the women's movement of the sixties and seventies, insisted upon the importance of women's perspectives, experiences and expressive modes for poetry. On the other hand, for those poets interested in the materiality of language as mediation, the idea to write "she" entails questioning the notions of authenticity and expressivity. Language as a superstructure becomes a site for investigation of whether poetry and the poetic put the authentic self under question. In this sense, "she" can only be found within quotation marks, as mediated by the cultural and linguistic codes at hand. This is the poetic and political task of experimental women poets, investigating the operation of such codes, rather than expressing true womanhood, an endeavour supported by contemporary theories of language and subjectivity.

Through our discussion of the work of Riley we will end up situating her work as one that engages in experiments with form and language at the crossroads of a strain of innovative poetry published mostly by small presses and little magazines in Britain, and her participation in an experimental poetics informed by feminist politics. Denise Riley's work exemplifies what Mulford describes as the questioning of individual voice typifying much work by women writers. Claire Wills argues this has to do with a reinterpretation of the speaking "I" and related questions of "interiority and emotional inwardness" within the historically specific pressures of mass media and culture (50). In Wills's view, Riley's work represents an investigation of the problem of articulating inwardness and emotion, and of gauging the "authenticity" of feeling, mediating on the purpose of the lyric. Riley's poetry, has been recognized by Wills and Rachel Blau DuPlessis as a textual engagement with the lyric. In her 1993 *Mop Mop Georgette*, Riley investigates the linguistic and discursive constructedness of self that searches for a means of expressivity of the genderd "I." One of her poems queries, "I'd thought/to ask around, what's lyric poetry?/ Its bee noise starts before I can./You do that, love me, die alone" *(Mop* 22). The poems in this volume which insistently proclaim an "I" while examining the discursive determinations of subjectivity, interact with questions of female subjectivity that have been present in Riley's intellectual background and work, including her theorization of the politics and genealogy of feminine identity in her well-known book, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (1988).

The treatment of the "I" in her poetry has been the subject of harsh critique since female subjectivity has been linked to feminized aspects of privacy, emotion and interiority. Romana Huk, in an interview with Riley, observes, "It may be

because you are considered by experimental poets to be experimental that your intense focus on the throes of the personal voice incurs such criticism." (Riley, "Conversation" 20). The debate occurs over the course of essays by Nigel Wheale (1993), James Keery (1994) and Jon Wilkinson (1994), and takes shape under the history of negatively gendered associations of women's expressions of (and experiments with) a lyric self. In her poem "A Shortened Set," she writes:

> I'd thought
> To ask around, what's lyric poetry?
> Its bee noise starts before I can:
> You do that; love me, die alone (*Mop* 22)

Riley strives against any attempt to separate the linguistic from its material context. In her poem "Disintegrate Me" (*Mop* 62-63), she experiments with a dissemination of self in language and then reflects back upon that operation. The poem is part of a series of seven poems in the sequence "Seven Strangely Exciting Lies," and opens with a self that acts as a transcriber and vehicle for external voices —"radio voices" perceived from "my post as zealous secretary, as/transmitter of messages from the dead." The speaker in the poem is in search for an alternative to this subjectivity and queries whether agency can be developed under such circumstances: "all the while a slow hot cut spreads/ to baste me now with questions of my own complicity in harm."[3] The first image in the poem reads as follows:

> There was such brilliance lifting off the sea, its aquamarine strip
> blocked in behind white-dashed mimosas, that it stung my eyes
> all morning as I stood in the old playground, pushing the swing
> steadily, looking out across the water and longing to do without
> these radio voices.(*Mop* 63)

A few lines later, the poem's "I" shifts from the self inhabited by other voices into an almost solipsistic discourse which facilitates a leeway out the dilemmas of agency:

> Could I believe instead in drained
> Abandon, in mild drift out over some creamy acre studded with
> Brick reds, to be lifted, eased above great sienna fields and born
> Onward to be an opened stem or a standing hollow (*Mop* 63)

The poem ends with an open question as to whether this dissolution of self, understood as a denial of responsibility, brings about a denial of agency ("if I un-

[3] Claire Wills suggests that the poem opening image epitomizes the "technologized body": "Even when most turned in on the self, the poet is most subjected to invasion by technology. This, 'It's hard to own perceptions,' since ownership would imply coherence and consistency of the self" (47; 49).

derstood/my own extent of blame then that would prove me agent"), or with an acknowledgement of the "likely truth of helplessness... the humiliating lack of much control."

> No single word of this
> is any more than decoration of an old self-magnifying wish
> to throw the self away so violently and widely that interrogation
> has to pause since its chief suspect's sloped off to be cloud, to be
> wavery colour bands: no "release from service to a hard master" (*Mop* 64)

In one of her recent poems, "Outside from the Start" (2000), she raises crucial questions about the viability of a political speech in its inception, on the threshold of becoming, but soon aborted:

> And then my ears get full of someone's teeth again
> As someone's tongue
> As brown and flexible as a young giraffe's
> Rasps all round someone else's story—
> A glow of light that wavers and collapses
> In a phttt of forgiving what's indifferent to it...

To conclude, Riley's poetry seems to be constantly interrogating the classical topoi of poetry and poetics: issues of language, experimentation, readership, engagement with the world, ideology and poetic form. Her work deals with perceptual multiplicity through experiential reflection, which allows her in her poetry to assert subjective identity, and to proclaim a willingness to meet the challenges to stable lyric form and self-identity. Riley's poetry contributes effectively to understand the discursive constitution of human beings and meditates upon the subject and the social processes of subjectification and coercion. Her deconstructive endeavours lead her to scrutinize the complex alliances between language experimentation, forms of address and an urgent reconsideration of the role and the avatars of the speaking "I" in the post-identitarian climate of our times.

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RHYMING HUNGER: POETRY, LOVE AND CANNIBALISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper wants to explore how poetic texts often draw on the body in a very self-aware manner, and by doing so accomplish what could be called a self-referential corporeality. By looking at a selection of love poems by Carol Ann Duffy (mainly from the volume *Rapture*, 2005) and at two poem sequences from Michael Symmons Roberts collection *Corpus* (2004), I want to investigate the relationship between the poetic and corporeal acts of internalisation and externalisation. I will be particularly interested in the link between love and the concept of consumption by reading the latter in its specific relationship to eating and the process of digestion. By drawing on the theoretical work of Freud, Derrida and Kristeva, I want to suggest that the poetic processing of words shows some significant and illuminating connections to the processing of food and by doing so allows us to look at poetic imaginations of love and the body in new ways.

KEY WORDS: Self-referential corporeality, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Symmons Roberts.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende explorar cómo los textos poéticos a menudo se aproximan al cuerpo de manera muy consciente, y al hacerlo llevan a cabo lo que se podría denominar una corporalidad autorreferencial. Mediante el análisis de una selección de poemas de amor de Carol Ann Duffy (principalmente de su colección *Rapture* de 2005) y de dos secuencias de poemas de la colección de Michael Symmons Roberts, *Corpus* (2004), me propongo investigar la relación entre actos poéticos y corpóreos de interiorización y exteriorización. Me centraré principalmente en la relación entre el amor y el concepto de consumo mediante la lectura de éste en su relación específica con el comer y con el proceso digestivo. A la luz de los postulados teóricos de Freud, Derrida y Kristeva, quiero sugerir que el procesamiento poético de las palabras muestra conexiones significativas y esclarecedoras con el procesamiento de la comida y que, al hacerlo, nos permite nuevas perspectivas hacia las imaginaciones poéticas del amor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: corporalidad autorreferencial, Carol Ann Duffy, Michael Symmons Roberts.

"Digestion is a kind of fleshy poetry, for metaphor begins in the body's transubstantiations of itself, while food is the thesaurus of all moods and sensations." (Ellmann, *Hunger* 112).

Art thou the thing I wanted?
Begone —my Tooth has grown—
Supply the minor Palate
That has not starved so long—
I tell thee wile I waited
The mystery of Food
Increased till I abjured it
And dine without like God (Dickenson 560)

EATING LOVE

When in Maurice Sendak's bestselling children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* little Max, after behaving particularly mischievously, is called "wild thing" by his mother, he retorts in childish anger: "I'll eat you up" (Sendak 5). His mother sends him to bed without dinner and, suddenly, his room transforms into a magical and poetical forest and his journey into the land where the wild things are begins. "We'll eat you up —we love you so" (Sendak 27), threaten the monsters when Max prepares to sail back home to his room where he is greeted by the delicious smell of dinner, which is still hot! Although not a poetic text as such, Sendak's tale of love, anger, and monstrous cannibalism is written in short, rhythmic sentences which teem with metaphors and images. Max's childhood home and the carnivalesque realm of the wild things, feelings of love and furious anger, are melted into a dream-like, in-between state where monsters and mothers resemble each other uncannily.

Desire, food and the monstrous are also major constituents of another poetic tale aimed at children: Christina Rossetti's infamous long poem "Goblin Market," composed by the poet in 1859. In this tale of love, temptation, rage and sacrifice, food and eating not only represent the connection (and, at the same time, the blurring of lines) between the monstrosity of the goblins and the childish innocence of Laura and Lizzie, they also provide the matrix from which emanate imaginations of love, desire, abjection and corporeality, in short: imaginations of ourselves/our selves. In "Goblin Market" the act of eating is developed as a polysemic trope that signifies temptation, the threat of death, rape and transgression on the one hand, and (sexual) love, transubstantiation, sacrifice, resurrection and salvation of the other. When Laura succumbs to the Goblins' fruit she

...sucked their fruit globes fair or red:
Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flowed that juice;
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore,
She sucked until her lips were sore; (Rossetti 8)

However rather than satisfaction, this first taste of the forbidden fruit leaves Laura in the painful realm of never-ending desire and it is only Lizzie's act of self-sacrifice that will lead her back into 'normality'. Lizzie comes back from the Goblins, covered in their juices and offers herself to her sister:

She cried "Laura," up the garden,
"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me:
For your sake I have braved the glen
And had to do with goblin merchant men." (Rossetti 17)

Eating is both, transgression and salvation, it simultaneously threatens death and promises life. Operating as a major signifying trope of the poem, it swamps the text with meaning and, at the same time, strangely drains it of it, since eating always refers to something else and is never meaningful as simply the intake of food.[1] As a metaphor and trope in narrative and poetic texts, I would like to argue the act of eating imbues a sense of ambiguity into textual proceedings and their readings and, as an effect, creates an atmosphere of ambivalence where pleasure dissolves into anxiety and *vice versa*. Max's angry retort to his mother—"I'll eat you up"—signifies his fury about dependence and is, at the same time a declaration of love for her (even if tinged with desperation), and echoed later on in the text by the wild things: "We'll eat you up, we'll love you so!" In the following, I want to explore some contemporary poetic texts that imagine and, at times, struggle with, love as an act of devouring and being devoured. By looking at a selection of love poems by Carol Ann Duffy (from the volume *Rapture*, 2005) and at two poem sequences on embodiment from Michael Symmons Robert's collection *Corpus* (2004), I want to investigate the relationship between the poetic and corporeal acts of internalisation and externalisation. I will be particularly interested in the link between love and the concept of consumption by reading the latter in its specific relationship to eating and the process of digestion. By drawing on the theoretical work of Freud, Derrida and Kristeva, I want to suggest that the poetic processing of words shows some

[1] Food as a metaphor in "Goblin Market" and other examples of poetry is discussed in more detail in my essay, "Eat My Words: Poetry as Transgression."

significant and illuminating connections to the processing of food and by doing so opens up new perspectives on poetic imaginations of love and bodies in love.

RAPTURE: CONSUMING LOVE/CONSUMED BY LOVE

Carol Ann Duffy's collection of love poems *Rapture* documents and dissects the course of a love affair, from its euphoric beginnings to the bitter end when the "garden's sudden scent's an open grave" and the speaker has to endure "the death of love" (Duffy 62). The various poems in the volume are thematically and emotionally held together by a desperate attempt to understand and make sense of the experience of love and, at the same time, come across as a delirious celebration of the very fact that falling in love, being in love and being "over" love is forever nonsensical and out of one's control. The title "Rapture" already reverberates with the ambiguities and complexities that will be addressed in the various poems which themselves form a book-length love poem. Etymologically the term "rapture" resonates with a wide range of meanings which link together: the transport of believers to heaven at the second coming of Christ; to be delightedly enthusiastic; the act of seizing and carrying prey; a state of passion, paroxysm, fit; rape sexual violation, ravishing; the act of conveying a person from one place to another; the action or an act of carrying off a woman by force, abduction, to name just the most relevant here. Adding to the etymological jigsaw, there is also a connection between ravenous and ravish when both refer to an act of violence and a taking of things by force.[2] In its various meanings, from the original to more current ones, ravenous suggests a link between predatory, violent and ferocious behavior and feelings of hunger and (gluttonous) appetite.[3] As a title for a collection of love poetry, the meanings of rapture configurate the spectrum of love as a semantic, as well as an emotional space where feelings of delighted enthusiasm reside next to the terrors of sexual violence and predatory hunger. In her groundbreaking study on hunger and metaphors of eating in general Maud Ellmann props up this link between amorous desire and the threat of being devoured by pointing out the "traces of infantile cannibalism" that "resurface in our language," especially in the language of love: 'the object of desire, for example, is commonly described as "appetizing," "dishy," "sweet," or even "good enough to eat"' (Ellmann 40). "*All eating is force-feeding*; and it is through the wound of feeding that the other is instated at the very center of the

[2] The Oxford English Dictionary refers, amongst others to the following meanings: Ravish: "To plunder, rob, steal from (a place, building, race or class of people, etc.); to devastate, lay waste to (a country)." Ravenous: "Given to plundering, or taking things by force; extremely rapacious." <http:www.oed.com>.

[3] Originally: (of an animal) given to seizing other animals as prey; predatory; ferocious. Later: (of an animal or person; also of the appetite, hunger, etc.) voracious, gluttonous. Also *fig.* and in extended use. <http:www.oed.com/>.

self" (Ellmann 36), argues Ellmann further on, which suggests that any discourse of/on food and eating as well as any of/on the self will always be at the mercy of something other, something alien and uncanny. Furthermore, one could argue here that discourses of food and eating are inhabited by the uncanny and its tendency to disturb a straightforward differentiation between inside and outside. As Nicholas Royle puts it so poignantly when discussing the uncanny:

> But it [the uncanny] is not 'out there', in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality... its meaning or significance may have to do, most of all, with what is not oneself, with others, with the word 'itself'. It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself, even the experience of oneself *as* foreign body, ...It would appear to be indissociably bound up with a sense of repetition or 'coming back' —the return of the repressed, the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat (Royle 2).

There is a range of poems in *Rapture* that bring to mind such uncanny processes of transformation and the sense that the self is forcefully invaded by something that is, initially, exterior and alien to it. The first poem in the collection, 'You' sets the scene for the drama that will unfold over the following pages:

> YOU
>
> Uninvited, the thought of you stayed too late in my head.
> so I went to bed, dreaming you hard, hard, woke with your name,
> like tears, soft, salt, on my lips, the sound of its bright syllables
> like a charm, like a spell.
>
> Falling in love
> is glamorous hell: the crouched, parched heart
> like a tiger, ready to kill; a flame's fierce licks under the skin.
> into my life, larger than life, you strolled in.
>
> I hid in my ordinary days, in the long grass of routine,
> in my camouflage rooms. You sprawled in my gaze,
> staring back from anyone's face, from the shape of a cloud,
> from the pining, earth-struck moon which gapes at me
>
> as I open the bedroom door. The curtains stir. There you are
> on the bed, like gift, like a touchable dream. (Duffy 1)

The poem is divided into three quatrains and a final couplet and thus directly reminiscent of the sonnet form which itself is, of course, inextricably linked with the theme and discourse of love. Furthermore, the sonnet can also be described as a rather protean form, a poetic "shapeshifter," that has created its own generic identity via the transformative processes of voracious mimicry (inclusion) and an often determined desire for innovative originality (exclusion). Thematically "You"

reiterates this gesture by developing the poem in images that connote a threat of invasion ("uninvited"; "stayed... in my head"; "Into my life, larger than life, beautiful, you strolled in"), transformation ("dreaming you hard, hard woke with your name,/like tears, soft, salt on my lips,"; "staring back from anyone's face...") and a desire to possess/devour the other: "the crouched, parched heart/like a tiger ready to kill;" "There you are/ on the bed, like a gift, like a touchable dream."). By articulating feelings of love and desire in the poetic format of the sonnet, a normative genre that has shaped and structured the discourse of love by simultaneously defining and breaking the conventions of the ways in which these emotions can be expressed and discussed, the poem sets the scene for an atmosphere of ambiguity and contradiction. The "glamorous hell" of being in love is evoked via the tensions between the desire of being devoured and annihilated by the lover and, at the same time, the very fear of becoming the prey of "a tiger ready to kill." Being invaded by the other and thus becoming the other promises excitement, but stepping out of "the long grass of routine" and leaving "the camouflage room" exposes the self to the danger of being ravished by a predatory other. The poem is called "You" but what it actually articulates are desires and fears of the persona about being cannibalistically devoured by the lover. If one is eaten up by the other, one becomes one with the other but it also designates the other as a site of mourning of and for the self.

Love as "glamorous hell" is something we have been rehearsing since infancy according to psychoanalytic theories and their critical imaginations of ego development and subject formation. In the works of Sigmund Freud and Melanie cannibalism is employed as a central trope when they refer to anxieties of the infant. Freud, and even more so Klein, incorporate the image and act of cannibalism as fundamental explanatory models when it comes to the representation of fears of and love for the maternal figure and its corporeal imaginations. As Ellman summarises Klein's theory of ingestion so eloquently:

> She argues that the infant devours all the objects of his outer world in order to install them in his world of fantasy. Since the mouth is where he has imbibed his mother's milk, it is mainly through this orifice that he partakes of his imaginary banquet. But his whole body, with all its senses and functions, participates in his incorporation of the cosmos: he drinks it with his eyes, eats it with his ears, and sucks it through his very fingertips. (Ellmann 40)

Cannibalising the (m)other via processes of incorporation and introjection is regarded in Kleinian theory as fundamental to any notion of identity as produced by a separation between inside and outside. However, cannibalistic hunger does not end here. Devouring whatever is perceived as outside, and by doing so, creating the sense of interiority (the idea of an inner self), triggers off a dynamics of "self-consuming" action with the ingested objects themselves now eating away at the inner self. Theorised and discussed in the various psychoanalytic models of melancholia and mourning, especially the ones by Freud, Klein and Kristeva, this volatile relationship between creation and destruction is the closest we come to a sense of identity. Karl Abraham and Maria Torok problematised this intricate cannibalistic

core by proposing the term 'encryptment' when describing the process of transforming exterior objects into internal space.[4] Incorporation for Torok is foremost a spectral act, its haunting quality underlined by her use of the term 'phantom' when explaining the extent to which the process has to be understood in relation to the death instinct:

> While incorporation, which behaves like a post-hypnotic suggestion, may recede before appropriate forms of classical analysis, the phantom remains beyond the reach of the tools of classical analysis. The phantom will vanish only when its radically heterogeneous nature with respect to the subject is recognized, a subject to whom it at no time has any direct reference. In no way can the subject relate to the phantom as his or her own repressed experience, not even as an experience within incorporation. *The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other*. (Torok et al. 53-4)

Whereas the term incorporation at first reading suggests a seamless amalgamating of outside into inside, Torok and Abraham's notion of the phantom as remaining radically foreign to the ego sees at the core of the self something that cannot be digested and, furthermore, devours cannibalistically the host that *in*vited it in the first place. This notion of incorporation as a double act of cannibalism —first savagely ingesting the outside which, when incorporated, devours what is conceived of as inside seems to me what underlies, or more precisely, haunts the notion of love in Duffy's *Rapture*.

Love, as it is articulated and problematised, in various poems in this volume always seems to be already inhabited by its failure, a theme which is also present when the poetic texts address the complicated issue of expressing emotions in poetry. Much of the history of poetry as a genre is inextricably interlinked with the desire to put into words how love and disappointed love feels. This, in turn, is often tinged with the frustration that goes along with this process, since there always seems to exist an incongruence between words and feelings. In the poem 'Text', for example, the very medium that transmits emotions between the two lovers (the text-function on a mobile phone) also distorts the message:

> The codes we send
> Arrive with a broken cord.
>
> I try to picture your hands,
> Their image is blurred.
>
> Nothing my thumbs press
> Will ever be heard (Duffy 2).

[4] Encryptment is discussed in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's works *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy* and *The Shell and the Kernel*.

The poem is organised in seven couplets which mirrors the communication (or, should that be the impossibility of communication?) between the couple. The "significant words" of the third couplet lose their certainty of meaning when they are "re-read" again and again with the effect that they become distorted audibly ("broken chord"), visibly ("I try to picture your hands/ their image is blurred") and finally unable to be communicated ("Nothing my thumbs press/ will ever be heard.") It is as if the text, in its double meaning as a feature of mobile phone communication and as the poetic text itself, feeds on and eats up the very meaning it is presumed to produce and transmit. Furthermore, the poem already hints at the disaster of love which, by continuously rehearsing the anxiety-ridden relationship between infant and mother figure, is imagined as feeling that simultaneously props up and threatens the sense of being *one*self.[5] When discussing Melanie Klein's account of the mother-child dyad in early infancy Jacqueline Rose, for example, refers to the conflict between the desire for closeness and the threat of annihilation that underlie this relationship: "Against the idyll of early fusion with the mother, Klein offers proximity as something which devours." (Rose 139-40). Maud Ellmann re-formulates the contradictions underlying the development of a sense of self in a more general way when pointing out: "The ego is established as excluding what is not itself, and by devouring whatever it is striving to become. But this means that the ego can sustain its perilous existence only through the ceaseless purgation of itself" (Ellmann 40). Furthermore, eating and language are, in her opinion, both acts that construct identity in and with the other:

> It is through the act of eating that the ego establishes its own domain, distinguishing its inside from its outside. But it is also in this act that the frontiers of subjectivity are most precarious. Food, like language, is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful that one speaks—or chews. From the beginning one eats for the other, from the other, with the other: and for this reason eating comes to represent the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food the prototype of every object of exchange. (Ellmann 53).

The poems in Duffy's *Rapture*, it seems to me, refract the relationship between the lovers through feelings of a painful *jouissance* in which togetherness and the desire to become one is poetically enacted as a celebration and, at the same time, as a tragedy of loss. In "Name" the lover is consumed erotically and linguistically, his/her identity (name) deconstructed into sounds: "Its consonants/brushing my mouth/like a kiss," ".../rhyming, rhyming/ rhyming with everything." (Duffy 3). Whereas the poems at the beginning of the volume often just give a taste of the trauma that defines the experience of love (such as, "Hour" and "Haworth"), the aptly names "Absence" introduces a change of tone by putting the emphasis more

[5] This article cannot elaborate in greater detail on psychoanalytic accounts of the relationship between infants and the maternal figure, but Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis in particular regard any feelings of love and desire as directly rooted in this dyad.

clearly on fragmentation and the feeling of being lost. The poem is, similar to "Text," written in two-liners, however now, rather than giving both lines equal length, the first line is always longer than the second one. In addition, the rhythm is staccato-like and repetitive, producing a language that sticks in the throat like a bone. Every two-liner (I do not think one can refer to them as couplets) evolves as one particular image or metaphor and rather than creating a whole (becoming one), the poem is "in bits":

> Then the birds stitching the dawn with their song
> have patterned your name.
>
> Then the green bowl of the garden filling with light
> is your gaze.
>
> Then a sudden scatter of summer rain
> is your tongue.
>
> Then a butterfly paused on a trembling leaf
> is your breath. (Duffy 10-11)

Everything becomes the lover but, at the same time, the lover disappears consumed by the desire of the persona to ex-corporate her/him. In addition, the harder the poem attempts to capture its object of desire in metaphors and metonymies, the more elusive it becomes. Only if something is absent is it in need of re-presentation, thus rather than the poem lamenting the absence of the lover, it *requires* it so it can express desire. The lover is consumed by and, simultaneously, given existence by the poetic discourse of love poetry.

There are many more examples in *Rapture* which can be read in relation to the complex issue of consuming love as they have been discussed in the previous paragraphs,[6] but for now I would like to move on to Michael Symmons Robert's poem sequences in *Corpus* in order to shift the focus on religious and spiritual love and they way in which they address and are articulated by the alimentary.

CORPUS: EATING BODIES

Corpus, Michael Symmons Roberts' fourth collection of poetry received the 2004 Whitbread Poetry Award and is, as its title suggests, above all concerned with the body and embodiment. Symmons Roberts has been referred to as a religious poet in a secular age, and the poems gathered in *Corpus* are to a great extent

[6] Further examples are: "Rapture," "Elegy," "Betrothal," "Love," "Give," "Finding the Words," "Syntax," "The Love Poem."

informed by themes that invoke faith and spiritual love. There is, however, a further subject that connects the different poems in this volume: food and eating. Paradoxically, at first sight, it could be argued that the poetic texts are held together by the same issues that separate them from each other: on the one hand we encounter bodies that eat, drink, feast and are in need of sustenance, on the other the spiritual body reigns supreme, in particular in the Christian myth of Christ's risen body. But, 'corpus' also has a specific meaning in relation to writing when it refers to a collection of texts. In that respect the title of Symmons Roberts' volume displays an additional self-referential quality since every thematic pointing towards bodies will automatically include the textual corpus in which these themes are formulated. Hence, instead of being confronted with stable and fixed bodies, it is the idea of the body in flux, in pieces and under construction that dominates the poetic framework of this collection. Many of the poems in *Corpus* utilize images of food and eating when elaborating their poetic subject, but it is especially two sequences of poems, entitled "Food for Risen Bodies" and "Carnivorous," that explore the culinary in a more explicit manner.

The subject matter of "Food for Risen Bodies" is developed in six parts and, as indicated by the title, can be read as a direct reference to the Christian narrative of Christ's resurrection from the dead. However, Christ or Jesus is never present via his name. Some of the poems refer to a male persona, but any kind of body we might imagine is always the product of textual constructions, never the result of a direct naming. What kind of bodies can be inhabited, the different poems seem to ask, and by doing so introduce a multifarious corporeality which questions the idea that there is such a thing as "a body." The different bodies that are explored in the poems are distinguished by food and eating: when they eat, what kind of food they eat, and so on. In "Food for Risen Bodies–I" there is no named persona and no indication of gender, subjectivity is invoked only by terms such as "those," "who" and "them":

> A rare dish is right for those who
> Have lain bandaged in a tomb for weeks:
>
> quince and quail to demonstrate
> that fruit and birds still grow on trees,
>
> eels to show that fish still needle streams.
> Rarer still, some blind white crabs,
>
> not bleached but blank, from such
> a depth of ocean that the sun would drown
>
> if it approached them. Two-thirds
> of the earth is sea; and two thirds of that sea
>
> —away from currents, coasts and reefs—
> is lifeless, colourless, pure white (Symmons Roberts 3)

It is only the cultural knowledge of the Christian narrative that allows us to read the poem as Christ's resurrection, thus rather than the poem being 'about' religion, the latter emerges as its subject and literally haunts the poetic structure like the eerie image of the body that has "lain bandaged in a tomb for weeks." Representing the undead body as a body that eats reinforces the moment of the spectral and spectacular even further, since it places the body in an in-between state, neither dead nor alive. This is further emphasised by the image of the "blind white crabs,/ not bleached but blank," itself reminiscent of the corpse in its white bandages. Eating the crabs (the word is phonetically haunted by "corpse") is equivalent to partaking of the dead body which thus introduces a kind of self-cannibalisation, another way of reading the idea of the self-sacrifice and the part it plays in the Christian narrative. Crudely speaking, the act of Holy Communion is nothing else but an act of cannibalism, its abjection only transformed into the sacred by the context of religion. Furthermore, by turning "quail," "eel" and "crabs" into the rare dish that will be enjoyed by the risen bodies (in plural!), life transforms into death and then into food, the latter serving as sustenance for the newly alive body that is still tainted by death. The poem struggles to contain the different transformations that are running through it and which open it up in many different directions: life and death reverberate and flow into each other; food and eating create bodies that live and die; the materiality of the earth is "lifeless, colourless, pure weight" like the future of the body in its decaying state as a corpse. What is consumed by the risen body also consumes corporeality itself and, furthermore, the very textuality of the poem. It seems, paradoxically, that the poem comes into being by a process of self-digestion.

"Food for Risen Bodies–II" introduces a temporality divided into a past and present and a persona furnished with a masculine pronoun:

> On that final night, his meal was formal:
> lamb with bitter leaves of endive, chervil,
> bread with olive oil and jars of wine.
>
> Now on Tiberias' shores he grills
> A carp and catfish breakfast on a charcoal fire.
> This is not hunger, this is resurrection:
>
> he eats because he can, and wants to
> taste the scales, the moist flakes of the sea,
> to rub the salt into his wounds. (Symmons Roberts 11)

Structurally as consistent as the first part of the sequence, the poem develops its theme over three stanzas, each made up of three lines. The concept of trinity is one of the most fundamental elements of Christianity, the divine is unified but also divided into Godfather, Son and Holy Spirit. Thematically, the poem can be situated in Christian mythology, evoking the last supper as the formal meal on "that final night." The lamb, one of the most enduring icons of the Christian faith, refers to Jesus' sacrifice, its abhorrent circumstances emphasised by the image of the

"bitter leaves" that accompany his final meal. The formal meal and the foreboding atmosphere it creates is then contrasted with the breakfast of grilled carp and catfish at the shore of the sea of Galilee where Jesus walked on water and healed crowds. The first meal of a new day is full of new beginnings as much as the term "final night" of the previous stanza resonates with endings and death. The line "This is not hunger, this is resurrection" mirrors in its parallel structure similarity and dualism at the same time: dinner and breakfast are both meals, but they mean something completely different and thus force the reader to reflect on the very binarity that is invoked structurally as well as thematically. This is not just a juxtaposition of light and dark: the chiaroscuro of the charcoal fire that provides the means for a meal that offers hope and new beginnings is also eerily foreboding of a future Church that will burn its adversaries on stakes, thus privileging dogma rather than democracy. The promise of the new dawn can never completely wash away the taste of bitterness of that final meal. The last stanza also resonates with ambiguity when the delicate food is transformed into torment that rubs "the salt into his wounds." The stigmata, the wounds that never heal, signify the body of Christ as one in constant transgression: it is indicative of a corporeality that at the moment of its emergence vanishes into spirituality, but also remains as a painful reminder inscribed and rubbed in the orifices and thresholds of the body.

The next part of the sequence leaves out a concrete persona and has a more narrative than lyrical feel to it. "Generations back, a hoard of peaches,/ apricots and plums was laid down/ for the day of resurrection;..."(Symmons Roberts 14). By utilizing the storing of food as an image in which the past can ripen into future ("Each is now a dark, sweet/ twist of gum, as sharp as scent"), the poem is haunted by a messianism that invokes the moment of waiting as never ending ("In the sheds, each fruit still lies/ cocooned, in careful shrouds of vine-leaves,/ tissue moss"). Although cocoons will develop into something different, this process will leave something behind, transformation is always tinged by death ("shrouds"), the line seems to imply. The final two lines of the poem, "Mosquitoes cloud,/ as if they sense a storm" take up again this ambiguity and the violent image of the storm evoking images from the Old Testament as well as indicating the possibility of something radically new.

The final three parts of "Food for Risen Bodies" replay many of the themes discussed above: in part four the mouth is seen in its multifarious references to the erotic, language and eating:

> The men they silenced
> —now heads of tables—
> slit their stitched lips free
> as if to kiss and bless
> the dinner knives.
> They whisper grace
> through open wounds. (Symmons Roberts 43)

By likening the mouth, which is already doubled as the orifice that ingests food and expels language, to an open wound, all three —eating, language and

wound— are directly inscribed into a body defined by the proximity between pain and *jouissance*. Bodies are foremost oscillating bodies, the scarcity of words defining the materiality of the poem's body is transformed into diversity and ambiguity of meaning, The structure of the poem is held together by, and simultaneously strains against, the polarities that construct its framework: silence in the first line grates against whispering "grace / through open wounds" at the end of the poem, the constrained "stitched lips" are set free by a violent gesture. The dinner knives and their function in the act of eating are also present as weapons, which puts further emphasis on the ambiguity of eating as an act always on a knife's edge, as something that holds our bodies to ransom in those precarious moments when the mouth is always on the verge of turning into a wound.

The image of the mouth as an open wound not only refers back to the body of Christ and the stigmata as enunciative of the Christian message, it also signifies the polysemia of the mouth and the way it links language and food, both to be purchased by acts of loss, both deeply steeped into the processes of the oral.

Whereas part five again refers to a singular, masculine figure who "gaunt and stubbled/ by the shrinkage of his skin" turns down the food to go "straight for the cigarettes" (Symmons Roberts 48), the final poem, also the longest, presents a group of diners after they finished their food. Again, there is a feeling of some new beginnings when

> No longer ravenous, they smoke
> and sip. Some carry tables out
>
> to get a feel for the sun on skin again.
> More words are coming back,
>
> So there's a lot of naming.
> Old ones still hold good —*oak,*
>
> *Brook, crab, sycamore*—but more
> are needed now. They mull
>
> potential titles for these new
> white bees, as sharp as stars
>
> against the ivories of cherry
> or magnolia... (Symmons Roberts 61)

Organised in rhythmically regular two-line stanzas, the final part of the sequence seems to refer back to what happened before, in terms of themes as well as from the point of view of temporal structure. We are in present tense now, an effect of the pasts and futures emanating out of the previous parts. But, past and future are also left behind since it is necessary to learn a new language, defined by a new grammar and syntax. Whereas food has been swallowed, words now come tumbling out like bees: "Word gets round// the bees were new creations/ made in hon-

our of a poet,/so they wait for him to choose" (Symmons Roberts 61). The bees and the mentioning of the poet refer back to the epigraph of the poem *Abeja blanca zumbas —ebria de miel— en mi alma*, a line from a poem by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Neruda's poetry played an important part in the resistance against the dictatorship of General Pinochet, notorious for the brutal torture of its adversaries, many of them poets and artists. In Neruda's poem the bee functions as a signifier for the tension between absence and presence, the bee is memorised in a humming that resonates through the body and is thus always reminiscent of absence by the very need to re-present it. Symmons Roberts' poem links itself with Neruda's text via the moment of memory as corporeal: "Although these bodies were not//theirs before, there are resemblances/ and flesh retains a memory//even beyond death, so every/lover's touch, each blow or cut//is rendered into echo on the hand,/the lips, the neck. Some fall silent//while their own phenomenology/ is mapped across them" (Symmons Roberts 61-62). Bodies, rather than as stable entities, are here imagined as sensory networks, interwoven in and with time and thus without beginning and end. This experience of corporeality means "No pain,//but a record nonetheless, a history/ of love and war in blank tattoos" (Symmons Roberts 62).

Food and eating as part of this sequence of poems not only introject the body into time and spatial structures, they also process the body, or produce a body-in-process, when food is ingested. Corporeality, rather than presented as existing in the solidity of a body, is here imagined as always "in the coming," but as never really arriving at a final state of being. The religious, in particular Christian, meaning of the poems is more than evident, but there is also something that strains against such a narrow framework of interpretation, something that eats itself into the poetic texts. When food and eating are utilized in poetic texts as they are here, they often seem to work in a performative manner, meaning that in the same manner as eating is productive of the ways we experience corporeality, it is also productive of, and as, the ways in which we consume it via readings. Food and its ingestion roots bodies in materiality but also dissolves them because of its effect on the relationship between inside and outside. "Food for Risen Bodies" as a body of poetic texts inhabits *Corpus* as fragments; the sequence is executed chronologically by numbering it from one to six, but is also constantly interrupted in its chronology when it is interspersed rather randomly throughout the volume. We ingest the different parts and compare their tastes as our bodies as readers are rising when partaking of this diet of poetry. The sequence plays dualisms against each other: materiality against spirituality; life against death; hungry against satiated; beginnings against endings; the religious against the secular only to find the one always already steeped in its other, eating away at the (poetical) body under construction. The body of Christ in its religious symbolism becomes this self-consuming body under construction by offering itself for consumption in order to create the body of Christianity. Faith and monstrosity are linked in a foundational manner as Derrida argues in *The Gift of Death*, and maybe their link becomes particularly evident in cannibalism at, and as, the heart of spirituality.

Corpus contains another sequence of poems, "Carnivorous," consisting of five parts. In contrast to "Food for Risen Bodies" all five poetic texts show the same

structure of seven lines divided into two stanzas of two and five lines. Again, the only obvious chronology that orders the sequence is provided by the numbering, the poems themselves seem to be placed randomly throughout the volume. Meaning literally the feeding on flesh, the poetic sequence "Carnivorous" composes a poetic narrative of feasting, feeding, and fasting:

> The cook said: *"Let there be a feast*
> *For those who hungered all their lives."*
> So the skinny ones stripped the sow,
> And found stretched out inside her
> —like her soul, like her self— a lamb,
> with its head in the place of her heart
> with its hind legs tucked to leap. (Symmons Roberts 13)

Moving into the interior like a spiral, the poem explores layer after layer, but even when apparently reaching what is traditionally regarded as our innermost sanctum—the soul, the self—there is more to come. The soul/self is represented as a lamb, its head substituting the heart of the sow, thus connecting the two animals in a grotesque manner. This is flesh feasting on flesh that is its own but also part of something other. The poem is performed by a process that refers mimetically to the act of eating itself and the way it comes into being as a constant transformation of self into other and vice versa. The second part further develops this carnivalesque scene in which nothing is what is seems:

> The cook said: "*This lamb is for*
> Those who gave their lives for others."
>
> So the martyrs took the lamb.
> It tasted rich, steeped in essence
> of anchovy. They picked it clean
> and found within, a goose, its pink
> beak in the lamb's mouth like a tongue. (Symmons Roberts 21)

Transgression and transformation take centre stage here when the lamb is turned into a symbol; but even its symbolic value cannot be sustained, since it is already devoured by something else: a goose, itself again intertwined with the other animal when its beak acts metaphorically as the lamb's tongue. Performative of the process of eating, the poem enacts constructions of a self that is never self-sufficient so to speak, it is always already engaged with something other, precisely at the moment when the idea of the self seems to emerge. Although a religious and spiritual reading seems to offer itself as the essence of the poem (the lamb as the symbol of Christ and his sacrifice), there is always more to come. It thus provides a cogent commentary on symbolism itself, as something that is always in need of a reference point that will take it "outside itself" by planting another at its centre. Self-alienation, the poem seems to suggest, is the closest we get to self-knowledge. The following part offers the goose to those who are alienated and exiled from their homes:

"They turned it upside-down/ to pluck the soft meat from its breast/and found a salmon coiled inside,/ sealed in a crust of salt" (Symmons Roberts 24). The carnival of meaning turns increasingly topsy-turvy, what was upside goes down, sow turns into lamb which turns into poultry which turns into fish: the more the poem develops chronologically forward, the more it regresses from an evolutionary point of view. The salty crust concealing the salmon is turned into the "*salt of tears*" and offered by the cook to "those who knew that taste too well" and they

> unwound the salmon's curl
> and stripped the lukewarm flesh.
> Stuck in the throat they found
> A shell-less snail, fattened on milk. (Symmons Roberts 31)

The enigmatic figure of the cook—to what extent is s/he in control of what goes into the food and what it is transformed to?— matches food to eaters, but the taste of what will be eaten is already known to those who will partake of it. Taste is presented here as something that is anticipated mnemonically when it intertwines past with the future. The invitation by the cook "*Come and eat*" (Symmons Roberts 31), as well as the parable-like narrative structure of the sequence, is again reminiscent of a Christ figure and brings to mind the many examples in the New Testament of Jesus feeding the hungry and needy. On the other hand, precisely because of its underlying meaning as a parable, there is always a need to translate and transform it into something other, and similar to the food stuffed with more food, its essence can only ever lie in continuous deferral. In the final part, the table seems finally cleared:

> "*Has anyone here never hungered,*
> *Never run, never lost, never cried?"*
>
> The cook held the snail on a fork.
> No-one replied, so he swallowed it.
> Later, rumours spread that one man
> Slipped away, out into the driving rain,
> Leaving a clean plate in his place. (Symmons Roberts 38)

Whereas each previous poem in the sequence opens with the words "The cook said," in this final part the first two lines have swallowed the cook only to spit him out at the beginning of the second stanza. Ingested by the poem, the persona of the cook, the one who seemed to be in discursive control of the poem and the food, then swallows the shell-less snail and disappears. Only rumours linger —is the cook the man who got away? The slipping and sliding prevails and leaves us only with a clean plate in place of something else. Is the clean plate to be understood as a substitute for the one who ate its contents? Is the plate clean because no food was ever served on it? Or has whatever was on the plate now replaced the diner, has what was outside been transformed into interiority and otherness shifted into the self, forming its eccentric core? The poem folds finally into itself, feeding

on its own stuffing and emptiness, the latter never being nothing, but always in place of something else/other.

Michael Symmons Roberts' poetry sequences "Food for Risen Bodies" and "Carnivorous" are not so much poems *about* food and eating, they are rather *performed* by the processes of ingestion and digestion. If they are to be read in relation to religion and Christianity, then, I would suggest, they are meaningful above all as an absorption of the specific link between the carnal and spiritual that is constitutive of the figure of Jesus. Julia Kristeva describes the sublimated body of Christ as

> The vanishing point of all fantasies and thus a universal object of faith, everyone is allowed to aspire to Christic sublimation and by the same token know that his sins can be remitted. "Your sins will be forgiven," Jesus keeps telling them, thus accomplishing, in the future this time, a final raising into spirituality of a nevertheless inexorable carnal reminder. (Kristeva 120)

However, as I suggested before, religion and Christianity are not the ultimate *sine qua non* of these poems, by situating them in the realm of eating and cooking the poematic experience that emerges and that can be understood as their very condition, is the effect poetic language and the culinary have on each other. In "Che cos' è la poesia?" Derrida remarks that we should "call a poem from now on a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion." Poetry, and in particular poetry that engages specifically with food and its ingestion, I would suggest, is at its heart self-consuming, which is an image as strange as the lamb's head that is placed as the sow's heart in "Carnivorous."

EATING POETRY

When asking "Che cos' è la poesia?" Jacques Derrida rather than providing a definition, offers a culinary feast when he refers to the "poematic experience" (Derrida 231) as something that, rather than affording its august celebration as a unified whole and a coherent form, feeds and infects us with love. The poetic, Derrida suggests, "would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other and under dictation, by heart" (Derrida 227). Rather than utilizing a discourse of separation which regards poetry as something that needs to be sectioned off in order to be recognised as such, for Derrida it is its very disappearance as something that "is" when he regards it as something that 'does'. He defines the experience of poetry in the following way: "I call a poem that very thing that teaches the heart, invents the heart" (Derrida 231). And, furthermore, instead of making it contingent on separation, what he calls learning by heart is inscribed in a continuous processing of identity, "the *I* is only at the coming of this desire" (Derrida 237). Rather than distancing itself, the poem wants to be consumed: "Eat, drink, swallow my letter, carry it, transport it in you" (Derrida 229) and then, rather than being kept intact, it wants to be transformed by the digestive juices of the poematic. The essence of poetry, to put it oxymoronically, is transgression and transformation, the

poem "does not hold still within names, nor even within words" (Derrida 229), it is "a certain passion of the singular mark, the signature that repeats its dispersion" (Derrida 235). Instead of defining its generic identity as the ability to keep its orifices closed off to the world, Derrida revels in a feast of digestion and a lack of boundaries when he wants to "set fire to the library of poetics. The unicity of the poem depends on this condition. You must celebrate, you have to commemorate amnesia, savagery" (Derrida 253). Indicated in the performative nature of 'Che cos' è la poesia?', poetry is here reflected on as a living, intermingling, eating and digesting body that is constantly in the process of 'doing' rather than secluded off in a state of 'being'. By paying attention to the process of eating and the ways in which it consumes and is productive of literal as well as of textual bodies, Max's childish declaration "I'll eat you up" rather than the angry retort of a little boy suddenly transforms into a poetic statement of love. Or as Maud Ellmann puts it: "Digestion is a kind of fleshy poetry, for metaphor begins in the body's transubstantiations of itself, while food is the thesaurus of all moods and sensations" (Ellmann 112).

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POEMS

Jeffrey Wainwright

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

Things are not what they seem.
This is the big idea of the detective story,
as of Plato. What is really happening
as I study his palm is that the conjuror
has taken my braces and my watch.
There is always a second world
and it is not even out there,
we're just watching the wrong thing.

But in the worst of mysteries there are no clues,
or, if you must believe in them, then they cannot be read.
Who took my braces, my watch, the lost children may,
the authorities say, never be known,
save in the parallel and smug universe of crimes.

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BACK IN THE NEW ROUTINE

I am always on the lookout for routines,
and perhaps I can make one out of what I'm doing now.
I have woken early and stayed put.
Behind the shutters it is dark so what we call the day
is beginning only in noises: bird-song obviously,
which is at present an eight-call sequence
gargling in a pigeon's throat, other note-rows are
too fast to count. There are trees in a light wind,
a thousand leaves perhaps, and I realise
I have never thought to wonder how many leaves
a given tree might carry on a given day—
that will not be routine. A car starts and idles
as the driver checks her bag for tissues and for keys,
and further off—light is coming in now—a dull then whining pitch
resolves itself into a wood-saw. Whoever works it,
already stripped to the waist, is properly guarded I hope,
and alert. And little of this, really, is what I hear,
and what would the routine accomplish? Haphazard
attention? Provide exercise for the inner eye?
Be itself (reason enough for routines, but for this one?)
A wasp is buzzing by the wall.
There are, I'm sure, surrounding worlds.

TO CONCLUDE

He had been waiting for a taxi, Pamuk says.
He had got home at last, and just as he put his key in the lock
he concluded that any meaning anyone found in the world
he found by chance.

I'm not happy with this.
Must it not mean that if the only meaning comes by chance
chance is the only meaning?
But understanding taxis and understanding birds,
earth-worms or foxgloves,
following the methods each for each,
might reveal the same algorithm eventually,
and each algorithm slot into the next,
ever outwards until we have some such triumphal cry as
it is *l'amor che muove il sole e l'altre stelle!*
and, before you laugh, if one thing is to move
heaven and earth might it not best be love?
There is a voracity for laws which I know I feel,
just like the man approaching his own front door,
I would conclude, conclude.

BREAKING THE MOULD: ESCAPING THE TERM "BLACK BRITISH" IN THE POETRY OF BERNARDINE EVARISTO AND JACKIE KAY

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss the work of Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay in the context of "black British" poetry. I will argue that in both poets' work the discussion of identities which are hybrid, complex and conflicted in terms of race and nation are further complicated as the exploration of gender and sexuality focuses on the personal and disrupts all classifications that are collective. Focussing on poems from Jackie Kay's *Darling: New and Selected Poems* (2007) and Bernardine Evaristo's verse-novels *Lara* (1997) and *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) I will argue that as gender, sexuality, family relationships and motherhood, linguistic, cultural and poetic differences replace discussion of race and nation these writers present a post-racial and transnational understanding of the UK in the context of which easy labels, like "Black British" poetry are always up for debate. Furthermore, I will also suggest that Kay and Evaristo adapt poetic forms and push at their boundaries in order to accommodate their anomalous standpoints. Therefore just as "Black" and "British" become uncertain terms, so "Poetry" is also debated.

KEY WORDS: Black British poetry, race, nation, regional identity, transnationalism, poetic form.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analizará la obra de Bernardine Evaristo y de Jackie Kay en el contexto de la poesía negra británica. Argumentaré que en la obra de ambas poetas el debate sobre identidades híbridas, complejas y en conflicto se complica a medida que la exploración del género y la sexualidad se centra en lo personal y altera todas las clasificaciones colectivas. Centrándome en poemas de *Darling: New and Selected Poems* (2007) de Jackie Kay y en las novelas en verso, *Lara* (1997) y *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) de Bernardine Evaristo, sostendré que a medida que el género, la sexualidad, las relaciones familiares y la maternidad, y las diferencias lingüísticas, culturales y poéticas sustituyen el debate sobre raza y nación estas escritoras presentan una visión post-racial y transnacional del Reino Unido en cuyo contexto etiquetas fáciles como "poesía negra británica" siempre se prestan a debate. Además, sugeriré también que Kay y Evaristo adaptan formas poéticas y desplazan sus márgenes para adaptarlos a sus puntos de vista. Por lo tanto, de la misma manera que "negra" y "británica" se convierten en términos inciertos, también "poesía" queda en entredicho.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía negra británica, raza, nación, identidad regional, transnacionalismo, forma poética.

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This article will explore the ways in which the poetry of Bernardine Evaristo and Jackie Kay repeatedly questions the label "black British" by revealing the inherent restrictions of the term and both writers seek alternative ways of envisaging nation and race as they explore experiences of diaspora and social difference. Both are contemporary female writers and Evaristo and Kay engage with similar themes including femininity, sexual identities, and the commodification identity in the contemporary world. They are both successful poets, writers and performers; although different from each other in terms of poetic vision and literary production. However, Kay and Evaristo have each vociferously objected to what they perceive as the restrictive label of "black British" poetry and their work also challenges this term which sets limits to their discussions of race and nationhood. As Jackie Kay suggests, this matter of personal experience makes her acutely aware of the limitations and expectations with which the black female poet is regarded. She demonstrates the problems that are involved in determining your own identity as she draws attention to the shifts of power that are involved in the definition of identity:

> It's liberating to define yourself if you're the one that's doing the defining but when other people are constantly doing the defining and when all they ever do is define the Other in society, the black person, the gay person, the woman, then they assume the white heterosexual man is the norm and everybody else deviates from that. You don't get the likes of Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion being described as white, male, middle class and heterosexual. And if every time they were written about they had to face these terms it would be a pain in the arse for them, so why should I have to put up with it? (Kay, "Jackie" 238)

Here, Kay makes explicit the empowerment of "doing the defining," and foregrounds the ways in which this is a process that is normally undertaken from an external position. She also demonstrates the way in which the entire process is built upon an understanding of "norms," which she identifies as "male, middle class and heterosexual." In this case, for Kay, and anyone who can not be easily located within this category, "doing the defining" is a process of identifying difference. Kay draws attention to racial categorisation here but does not mention regionality or nationality in this quotation. However, it is notable that both Ted Hughes and Andrew Motion are English poets, whilst she, herself is resolutely Scottish in her linguistic identification and poetic tone. In line with this, I will explore the ways in which Jackie Kay's poetry draws attention to the problematic of nationality and race in a way which mirrors her discussion above. Rather than abandoning these forms of categorisation completely, she insists on discussion of "the Other in society." Therefore, whilst the Scottish voice of her poems complicates straightforward British identity, so the discussion of femininity, sexuality and racial heritage confounds easy notions of blackness. I will tie this reading to a discussion of the early poetry of Bernardine Evaristo and will focus on *Lara* (1997) and *Island of Abraham* (1994). In a way which mirrors Kay's interrogation of the term "black British" poetry, I will argue that Evaristo's work also disrupts easy notions of race and nationality. Likewise, in her work racial identities are often featured as part of a wider notion of social otherness and her construction of Britishness is inherently transnational. As

such, and in line with Kay, she questions the aptness of literary categorisation and refutes easy ways of "doing the defining":

> I think that what happens in this country is that people can't see beyond race. If you are a black writer you are deemed to be writing about black subjects and that is generally perceived to be for a black audience. (Evaristo, "Bernardine" 287)

Evaristo highlights the prejudices that she faces as a "black writer" in the mainstream, and again foregrounds the perception that this kind of writing is linked to a single experience of Britain and Britishness. Furthermore, when used in a populist way, the terms of its reference are limited to people of African descent, thus circumscribing its context even further. Although both Kay and Evaristo are of African descent—their fathers are Nigerian—they themselves have identities that are much more complex and hybrid than the term "black British" can adequately reflect. Evaristo's first verse-novel, *Lara*, explores the reverberations of post-war racism on the mixed-race child of the nineteen-seventies. Lara, and her Nigerian father, Taiwo, are both racially abused and Evaristo does not shy away from describing the effects of this discrimination as they are both referred to in demotic racial terms, including "nigger-man" (32) and "nignog" (67). The inclusion of this vocabulary highlights the racism to which Lara is subjected and which contributes to her own sense of being socially and culturally different to the British context in which she grows up. In *Lara,* and her other work, these dynamics of race and racism are crucial to Evaristo's portrayal of late twentieth-century London and impact directly on Lara's sense of personal and national belonging. Nevertheless, there are moments in Evaristo's work when the subject of race is marginalised by discussions of femininity, sexuality, gender and other more personally specific identities. Therefore, I will explore the ways in which the poetry of Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo complicates notions of race and nation. In the work of both writers this is a critique of the term "black British" as a way of defining both their work and themselves. In their interrogation and rejection of the term, they both question the standpoint of those critics who use it unproblematically and demonstrate the manifold problems that being categorised in terms set by others brings.

WHAT IS "BLACK" BRITISH POETRY?

In accordance with this, I will foreground the contrasts between Evaristo and Kay's understanding of the term "black British" and the way in which it has been presented as an enabling and subversive form of writing in academic circles. This is in line with Kay's discussion of the power dynamics of definition and self-definition that I foregrounded earlier, and also demonstrates the tacit differences between the academic and more general understandings of the term. I will highlight the ways in which although the term "black British" poetry is often used to describe a dynamic and disruptive form of writing, the fixity of the term potentially undercuts the subversive nature of the work. I suggest that this is overtly notable in

the work of Kay and Evaristo and so it is a term that they both seek to escape. Rather than settling for the externally imposed racial definition of "black" both writers articulate a more hybrid and productive form of racial identity.

However, it is notable that this approach is broadly in line with the way in which some critics, including Mark Stein, understand the term black British literature: "*black British literature* does not necessarily claim to represent a singular experience" (Stein 17). For Stein, black British literature is not the limited and limiting category that is so problematic for Evaristo and Kay. This is down to the explicit differences in the ways in which they conceive of the term: Stein foregrounds a broad understanding of the term that includes the myriad experiences of people living in the black diaspora in the UK, whereas for Kay and Evaristo it is inherently limited. Although the focus in their work mirrors Stein's understanding of term, for them there is no straightforward or single appellation to include those experiences and their generalisation is inherently reductive. Kay's poem, "Race, Racist, Racism" first published in *Off Colour* (1998), draws attention to this. It is a poem which explores the effect of race on personal identity and highlights the problem of self-definition in that context, as it demonstrates the marginalisation that racism produces and explores the definition of self at those margins:[1]

> There is no such thing as black, said he.
> A pot is black, the earth, a shoe,
> But not I, said he, not I.
> I am not black, said he.
> ...
>
> I will be oak or hazelnut or coffee.
> I will be toffee. I will be donkey.
> But I will not be black, said he.
> So you will be donkey, said I. (129)

Kay's poem highlights the effect of racist comment on the definition of black British identity as the poetic voice is both guilt-ridden and resentful of the implication that racism is "down to me./ Entirely" (128). In this poem "black" becomes a term of racist abuse and is revealed to be wholly inaccurate in the categorisation of racial identity, as it is a suitable description of objects like, "a pot," "the earth," "a shoe," but not of human skin colour. As the poem foregrounds the problems that occur when the terms of identification are set by others, it also demonstrates the inadequacy of language to articulate experience and identity. The concurrent denial and repetition of being "black" draws attention to the limits and unsuitability of the term. However, the subject's repeated rejection of his own blackness is not a straightforward denunciation of terms, but also generates his search for

[1] All references to Jackie Kay's work come from *Darling: New and Selected Poems*. However, the original volume in which they were initially published is also detailed in the text.

new ones: "I will be oak or hazelnut or coffee." This line demonstrates the way in which skin-colour becomes an identity. Kay's use of nouns rather than adjectives highlights the absolute, but vaguely incongruous, nature of these terms, and reiterates it with the repeated, "or," that suggests identity is singular and a matter of choice. Although, perhaps more descriptively accurate of the skin colours that are easily labelled black, these terms set by the subject himself are still revealed to be inherently problematic. This is most notable as the term "donkey" is introduced and reified in the line which is repeated by the poem's narrator. The paradoxical identity, "donkey," is explicitly chosen to concur with physical racial determinates, however, it also has other semantic associations which include animalism and the slang for foolishness. As such, even terms set by oneself, are revealed to be inherently problematic, and language is represented as both unreliable and limiting.

In this sense, the term "black British" is tense with its plethora of meanings and their potentially contradictory nature. Like Mark Stein, James Procter also has a similar understanding of the term "black British": "One of the reasons I think black British is worth persisting with is precisely because it seems to disrupt rather than enshrine certain canonical orthodoxies associated with transnational postcolonialism" (Procter 44). For Procter, like Stein, the term indicates a category of British writers who complicate and undermine the traditional divisions of race, nation and question important notions like "postcolonial transnationalism" —and Kay and Evaristo's work fits into this category. However, as Evaristo has repeatedly discussed, the term is much less enabling when it is being applied to your work. She highlights the ways in which, "racial labelling "ghettoizes you" (Evaristo "Bernardine" 287), and is, explicit in her discussion of the limitations and limiting effect of the imposition of literary labels. For her, to be racially determined as a writer also has implications for her subject matter and her readership. Furthermore, the contention that this "ghettoizes you," suggests that this mode of identification is not only limiting, but actually marginalising as "black British" becomes a separate and singular identity, independent of the racial and national determinates that the term implies. Evaristo explores this in more detail in *Lara*, a text which investigates the construction of racial identity in the context of nineteen-seventies and eighties Britain, and in which her protagonist, the teenage Lara, is repeatedly faced with the difficulties of defining her identity:

> 'I want a word! What's so funny about being black?'
> Lara smirked, 'I'm not black, I'm half-caste, actually.'
> 'Oh but you're very mistaken, lovey. Ask me how I know?'
> Lara tittered, shrugged, went to leave but Beatrice's voice
> charged past her, abrasive, abrupt, 'Stop right there!'
> Lara exhaled a bored, amplified sigh, sneered, sat down.
> 'I dunno. How do you know, Miss Beatrice?'
> 'Experience, lovey, that's how and don't be so cheeky.
> It's time you woke up to the facts or the facts will wake
> you up with a slap. The only half you are is half asleep.
> Come up to Toxteth, then you'll know what time of day
> it is. We stick together up there, not like you Southerners

with your wishy-washy ways. They don't care whether
your mother's white, green or orange with purple spots,
you're a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as I like to say.' (74)

Like Kay's poem, this passage draws attention to the tensions at play within the term "black" and the problem of self-definition when your identity is fixed by others. It follows an incident in which Lara and her siblings identify mangoes as "black food" (73) and in so doing disassociate themselves from any form of black identity, mimicking the racism with which they themselves are faced. As Lara is questioned by her cousin Beatrice, it becomes clear that the label "black" whatever its political context, is insufficient to articulate Lara's "half-caste" identity. This highlights the tacit differences in their understandings of the term "black"; as Lara rejects the term as too limited to articulate her own sense of difference, for Beatrice the politics of black identity are subversive and revolutionary. It is ironic, however, that these politics are not necessarily racially determined, as they "don't care whether/ your mother's white, green or orange with purple spots." Although this sense of collectivity draws attention to the similar experiences of racial discrimination which face diasporic people in the UK, Beatrice's politicised standpoint is represented as being as naive as Lara's casual racism. In addition, her dismissal of Lara's Irish mother is represented as a form of racism in itself. As Beatrice concludes her tirade with "you're a nigger to them, lovey, or a nigra as I like to say" she unwittingly demonstrates the eradication of difference that is implicit within any form of collective labelling. This is further reiterated as Evaristo parodies her essentialist notion of blackness through the word "nigra" which recalls an Africanness which is inauthentic to Beatrice's twentieth-century Liverpool, and which tells only a part of Lara's story.

Therefore, even though, for critics like Stein and Procter, the term "black British" literature might refer to subversive and hybrid writing, in the work of these poets, the tag and any form of labelling is always reductive and restrictive. There is a clear difference in the ways in which the term is understood, and the tension between the problems of self-definition for the contemporary writers and the labels appended by critics remains uppermost —and not just limited to discussions of race. In a parallel move, the work of Evaristo and Kay also interrogates the fixed category of British identity. Kay's poetic voice is resolutely Scottish and Evaristo's sense of nation extends far beyond its boundaries, so both writers question the limits and inclusions that are involved in the construction of Britishness and thereby problematise the label "black British" even further.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BRITISHNESS

In the work of Evaristo and Kay both race and nationality are brought into question, and those labels which are appended to them are revealed to be, in various ways, entirely insufficient. The subversion of these categories in the work of Kay and Evaristo is not just a conceptual concern, but also translates into their own sense of self, as Jackie Kay discusses:

> I suppose I consider myself a Scottish writer, in the sense that I am, and I consider myself a black writer, in the sense that I am, and a woman writer, in the sense that I am. All these I am and I wouldn't deny being. I am wary of labels, though, because they tend to give people certain expectations and then people will assume that the themes in your work —or your interests— are actually of another spectrum than they are. (Kay "Interview")

Here Kay reiterates the tension between her own identity and the "labels" with which she is associated. In order to do this, she, perhaps paradoxically, explicitly identifies herself in terms of nationality, race and gender, however, this is undercut when she suggests that these categories "tend to give people certain expectations and then people will assume that the themes in your work —or your interests— are actually of another spectrum than they are." Like Evaristo's discussion of the way in which racial labelling "ghettoizes" writers, Kay demonstrates that for the writer, and their work, these terms are potentially restrictive in their singularity, allowing no debate as to the definition of race, nationhood or subject matter or poetry. Therefore, when Kay refers to herself as a "Scottish" writer she complicates the discussion of her Britishness by focussing on a regional identity that is also national, and is entirely incompatible with the more inclusive and less distinct label 'British'.

The tension between Britishness and Scottishness is prevalent in most of Kay's work through a clear regional narrative voice, which confuses the racial determinates of her work as race and national identity vacillate and compete. This is explicit in "My English Cousin comes to Scotland," in which Kay draws attention to the tensions within the notion of British as a national identity:

> See when my English cousin comes
> It's so embarrassing, so it is, so it is,
> I have to explain everything
> I mean Every Thing, so I do, so I do.
>
> [...]
>
> I says, 'I'm going to have to learn you
> what's what.' And at that the wee git
> cheers up; the wee toffee knows says,
> 'Not learn you, teach you' like she's scored. (203)

The narrative voice of this poem is humorous and naive, as it brings the tense relationship between the Scottish and English down to childish bickering. However, the language of the poem's narrator also demonstrates the clear linguistic split between English and regional Scottish English. In this context, the English cousin becomes an embarrassment on account of her lack of knowledge: "I have to explain everything," and the Scottish narrator is empowered. This childhood tension is a gentle mockery of the differences between the English and the Scots; however, the point goes further. In Kay's identification and characterisation of the two nations, she reveals the impossibility of their union and so questions the notion of Britishness. The linguistic tone of the poem roots it squarely within the Scottish

context and the text is littered with colloquialisms and departures from standardised English, suggesting that life in Scotland produces an alternative vocabulary to the English model. When the Scottish narrator announces, "I'm going to have to learn you/ what's what," it is a triumphant conquest of the alienated English cousin who is revealed to be out of place in the poem's decidedly Scottish tone. Therefore, although when the narrator's English is corrected by her cousin it is a reassertion of English dominance, it is notable that this linguistc correctness is also a sign of its own difference. The narrator's defiant "like she's scored" returns to her Scottish dialect and reinforces this colloquialism as the norm. "My English Cousin comes to Scotland" does not allow standard English to be prevalent, and as such, roots its consciousness firmly within the Scottish context. In so doing, the divisions that characterise inter-national relationships in the UK are uppermost and a single notion of British identity is always out of reach.

The focus on the Scottish voice is an important element in Kay's poetry, and, in effect, not only destabilises and questions the notion of standardised English, but, always problematises the notion of coherent British identity in her work. Language is a signifier of the divided sense of nationalities on the island of Great Britain and the authenticity of this standardised English is repeatedly called into question. Furthermore, in poems like "Brendon Gallacher" from *Two's Company* (1992) the production of a regionalised Scottish identity is uppermost, leaving Kay's poetry notably devoid of a black presence. The child's voice which narrates "Brendon Gallacher" is nostalgic and rooted in a specifically Scottish sense of home. However, it does not obscure social difference, but in this poem, otherness is not only figured in terms of race or regional identity, but through the narrator's imaginary friend, Brendon Gallacher, whose "mother drank and his daddy was a cat burglar" (109). There is a dual understanding of social difference in this text, as Brendon's parents represent both the realism of the alcoholic mother and the glamorous and lawless father, the "cat burglar." Interestingly, both are characterised by their positions of social exclusion and marginality, thus imbuing Brendon with an otherness that is not constructed in terms of race, nationality or gender, but is still prevalent. It is this complicated sense of manifold differences within a liminal identity that charcaterises Kay's work. This is figured in many ways and but demonstrates explicitly the limitations of the term "black British" poetry as a description of her work. Particularly as, even when her poems do deal with race and nation, they are characterised by a more general awareness of the various ways in which people are excluded and defined by their own difference.

In a satirical move, she explores this explicitly in her engagement with "The Broons," a cartoon strip published in the weekly *The Sunday Post*. "The Broon's Bairn's Black *(a skipping rhyme)*" first published in *Off Colour* (1998) foregrounds this tension:[2]

[2] More details of *The Sunday Post* and "The Broons" can be found at: <http://www.dcthomson.co.uk/MAGS/POST/>.

Scotland is having a heart attack
Scotland is having a heart attack
Scotland is having a heart attack
The Broon's Bairn's Black. (159)

In a way which complicates poems, like "Brendon Gallacher," that abandon a racial identity in favour of Scottishness, in this poem Kay explicitly highlights the problem of race in the Scottish context. The child's "skipping rhyme," the simplicity of the poem and particularly the repeated line "Scotland is having a heart attack" emphasises the tension between traditional Scottish identity and those of black diaspora communities in Scotland. This is disrupted in Kay's poem by the presence of the "Broon's Bairn" who is both alien and a composite part of recognisable of Scottish tradition. The bairn acts as an unstable signifier for a racially integrated Scotland, whilst also calling into question the security of Ma and Pa Broon as symbols of a reliable and fixed sense of Scottishness. As such the nuanced realities of contemporary Scottish life are critiqued within the banal securities of the weekly cartoon strip. This insistence on a Scottish identity that is both inclusive and regional again complicates notions of Britishness. Furthermore, as Kay engages with and overturns a cultural identity which is inherently Scottish she consciously excludes Englishness and other forms of British identity.

In a similar way, Bernardine Evaristo's understanding of the term British is nuanced, complicated and operates to disrupt the boundaries of a purely national notion of British identity. John McLeod has discussed this in relation to *Lara*: "In following in the footsteps of black British writing, strictly national canons cannot bear adequate witness to the transnational pathways which, like Evaristo's heroine Lara, ultimately cross water" (McLeod, "Fantasy" 99). He demonstrates the limitations of the term British for those writers whose histories extend beyond the boundaries of Britain, and in Evaristo's work this is figured through the recurrent motif of the sea and water. What McLeod has called the "transnationality" of Evaristo's vision elsewhere is notable even from her earliest collection of poems, *Island of Abraham* (McLeod, "Problems" 58). In this text, and her work more generally, she seeks to contextualise Britain within wider global networks of history, literature, myth and points towards those interconnections that span across worlds and genealogies. This is perhaps most notable in *The Emperor's Babe* (2001) a text which refigures Britishness through the lens of Roman Londinium, which she represents London as a colonised town, "way out in the wild west" (26). This complication of national identity is further affected by the ethnic tensions within the British Isles and Evaristo also presents the city as a space which is characterised by social and racial diversity. Therefore, Evaristo's Britain is conceivable only in a transnational context, and this has an impact on its representation of the past, and a reflection onto the present. *Island of Abraham* too presents a series of poetic voyages which locate late twentieth-century Britain and the poems narrators in terms of international experiences including histories and myths. In "Father, My Father," this is figured through the narrator's exploration of her father's, and implicitly, her own, Yoruba heritage:

Your secrets loom like the discovery
of rare old gems. My inheritance of
principles, struggle and a story
to be unravelled like gossamer.

Daddy, I cannot read your eyes
those brown orbs of Yoruba history, but
I can study your step, recoup years lost, and search
into your past with belated enquiry. (15)

This poem, and the volume more generally, juxtaposes the ordinariness of British identity with the wealth of history that lies outside the nation, but has a bearing on it. Like the "rare old gems" of the narrator's family history, this is represented as both an enrichment and a complication of contemporary British identity. In this poem, international history is figured in terms of the narrator's personal response. There is a faint echo of Sylvia Plath's seminal poem "Daddy" here, although the tone of Evaristo's poem is rather different (Plath 222). However, "I cannot read your eyes" still articulates the divisions in family relationships that here become a more general signifier of the division between the narrator and the "Yoruba history" that is her heritage. As such, the "story" of her identity cannot be fully comprehended until is it "unravelled like gossamer" in a reworking of her own genealogy that is constructed upon a very specific sense on race and nation, both of which push the limits of the term "black British" in many ways.

The complication of this "black British" identity through the engagement with histories that occur outside the nation is an important facet of Evaristo's work. She demonstrates the interlocutions between histories and reveals the pasts of British people, particularly those living in a diaspora community, to be constructed discursively with histories that are international in scope. In *Lara*, she makes it clear that this is a reciprocal relationship, not merely characterised by migrants settling in Britain, but also by the histories of voyaging out from Britain. These voyages signify the colonial encounter as the root of Lara's diasporic identity, and are reinscribed by her, in a quest to find a viable history and identity. This, in some ways, paradoxical move reinforces the importance of Englishness for Lara, and ensures that whilst the text may extend beyond the national borders; those borders are of utmost importance. English identity is thus figured as a framework for Lara, one which is problematic and only usable through transformation, but which remains a contingent part of her sense of self-identification:

Expeditions in books borrowed from the library
Liberated her from the environs of Arundel Road,
for when fog vapourised her dark lamplit street,
Lara became the beautiful Maisie in 'The Orphan Girl'
a story she made up, like Dickens. There she was:
poor, pale, parentless, persecuted, pitiful, plebeian,
puny, pongy, poxy, proud, pensive, polioed, placid,
powerless, pathetic, piss-wet and shivering outside
the mansions of 'them rich 'oose Christmas trees

dripped diamonds and 'oose turkeys glittered gold'.
When snow transformed Lara's hilly vista, she escaped
first light, donned duffel coat, balaclava, mittens,
struggled out through the basement's frozen lock
into the spellbinding Antarctic, to become Captain Scott,
A brave lone figure conquering the vast desolate white.
Ceremoniously, she stuck a stick in the snow —for England. (59)

This passage deals with the construction of Lara's identity in terms of a history of English literature and colonialism. It is notable that, in a way that is reminiscent of the Scottish tradition in Kay's work, that she makes associations with historical figures and literary traditions that are specified as English. Lara is figured as adjunct to any sense of collective nationality, as "a brave lone figure," a social outsider whose childhood is recalled in relation to her imagination, rather than her friends or siblings. As a mixed-race girl in London in the nineteen-seventies, she has no obvious role-model, and so her references are notably white, male and stalwarts of English identity. For instance, she proposes Dickens' hackneyed charcaterisations of Victorian womanhood in "the beautiful Maisie" —the stereotypical nature of which is highlighted by the alliterated "p"— and imagines herself as an ironic "Captain Scott" in the urban Woolwich in which this part of the text is set. In many ways, these are reductive and inappropriate modes of categorisation for the young Lara. However, in Evaristo's text, Lara's incongruous engagement with two stalwarts of white English masculinity not only draws attention to the fact that she has no other terms within which to imagine herself, but is also somewhat subversive in itself. As Lara invokes the Dickensian, "The Orphan Girl," she may plunge into nineteenth-century clichés of womanhood; however, she also detaches herself from her own contemporary, racial identity and conceives herself in very different terms to those in which she is externally characterised. There is a further irony in Evaristo's linguistic play: Lara as Captain Scott conquers "the vast desolate white" and sticks a stick in the snow "for England." Lara's explorations are not Antarctic, but very clearly fixed within the context of twentieth-century London, and her conquering of "the vast desolate white" is a sociological affair. Therefore she is using those reductive role models in a transformative way: they are the same old figures of Englishness but in Lara's subversive reading they take on a new significance. In her intertextual play with Dickens, Evaristo demonstrates that the structures he posits might be utilised for Lara's own purposes and suggests that although Lara's identity is narrated within already fixed terms of femininity and nationality, she always subverts the conventions set out by Dickens. In this sense, the text foregrounds the tension between Englishness and other identities to refute any sense of fixity or coherence. Furthermore, it is notable that here, Britishness is entirely absent, in favour of a national identity that is rooted within English convention, but is always orientated externally. As *Lara* demonstrates the ways in which Britishness, or more specifically, Englishness, is constructed outside the national boundaries, the crossing of borders is coupled with the return to a history of Englishness and a recuperation of that history that allows room for interpretation. In a

similar but somewhat different key, in Kay's work, the only authentic British identity is regional and is always located on the margins and she also demonstrates the inherent hybridity of the position whilst insisting upon recognition of diaspora communities in Scotland.

The work of Kay and Evaristo does not just question the stability of the term "black British" poetry, but goes further to demonstrate the ways in which the restricted nature of the label actually problematises itself. Likewise, Mike Philips suggests the emerging genre to explore, "the phenomenon of migration, movement and mobility, the renegotiation of selfhood, the historicising of new identities and the reconstitution of a dominant culture to reflect [...] new identities" (Philips 30). In the same way that Kay and Evaristo present versions of contemporary racial and national identities that are inherently complex and layered, Philips' understanding of the term draws attention to the way in which it subverts simplistic understandings of those categories. Thus the work of these writers draws attention to the limits and problems that arise in relation to any form of literary, or other, categorisation. Both Kay and Evaristo demonstrate the problems and dangers of identifying yourself in terms of racial difference and critique the ways in which it is always limiting, even when narrating a collective and empowered identity. Likewise, easy notions of the British nation are rejected for those which are both more specific and more transnational. The term British is all but completely abandoned, particularly in Kay's work as Scottishness provides a more authentic voice in her poetry, in a related way, Evaristo retains the framework of English identity, which remains far less distinct than Kay's Scottish standpoint. However, hers is a greatly transformed sense of Englishness that is retained, but transformed in Evaristo's work by a standpoint which is always orientated outwards from strictly national notions of England. As such, the work of both Jackie Kay and Bernardine Evaristo can never be strictly categorised by racial and national monikers such as 'black British'. These are revealed to be not just inappropriate, but insufficient to articulate their complex engagements with those histories, memories and narratives characterised by a multitude of voices that question the easy categories of "black" and "British" by foregrounding gender, sexuality, regionality, and the impact of transnational diaspora communities.

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"WISDOM JOYNED WITH SIMPLICITYE": LANDSCAPES OF CHARLES TOMLINSON

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ABSTRACT

Starting with an account of his 1994 review of the new Loeb translation of the Latin poet Martial, this article examines how Tomlinson "incorporates" the qualities of the Latin poet's style and content in his own poetry. The importance of Ben Jonson's debt to Martial's sense of hospitality and grace is felt throughout Tomlinson's poetry and this article examines in detail the way in which poems from the 1963 volume *A Peopled Landscape* reveal the clarity of the Augustans as cadenced through Tomlinson's reading of William Carlos Williams. Reflections on Tomlinson's more recent poetry focus on courtesy, liberality and the landscape which is an emblem of those qualities of ease and friendship the poet most admires.

KEY WORDS: Charles Tomlinson, contemporary British poetry, landscape.

RESUMEN

Tomando como punto de partida su reseña de 1994 de la nueva traducción de Loeb del poeta latino Marcial, el presente artículo examina cómo Tomlinson "incorpora" las cualidades del estilo y del contenido de este poeta clásico a su propia poesía. En la poesía de Tomlinson se aprecia la importancia de la deuda de Ben Jonson con el sentido de la hospitalidad y la gracia de Marcial. Este artículo examina detalladamente cómo en algunos poemas de *A Peopled Landscape* (1963) se revela la claridad de los Augustans a través de la cadencia de la lectura que Tomlinson lleva a cabo de William Carlos Williams. Las reflexiones de la poesía más reciente de Tomlinson se centran en la cortesía, la liberalidad y el paisaje que es un emblema de esas cualidades de bienestar y amistad que el poeta más admira

PALABRAS CLAVE: Charles Tomlinson, poesía contemporánea británica, paisaje.

In Tomlinson's retrospective words about the *Renga: A Chain of Poems*, originally published in France by Gallimard in 1971 and later in England by Penguin Books, he tells the reader that "One still found oneself speaking with a communal voice: speaking with a communal voice one found —once more— one's self" (Paz 39). The story of that composition of the Renga has an echo of the connections

which tie Tomlinson's work to a tradition of civilized urbanity which go back to the Latin world of Martial and Horace and the English tradition of Ben Jonson and John Dryden. Claud Roy firmly placed this connection between the 'now' and the 'then' in his introduction to the 1979 Penguin edition:

> In April 1969 four poets of Europe disappeared underground for a week. In myth, subterranean retreats augur always the unfolding of a harvest: the harvest of wheat which Persephone descends into Hades to gain as her reward, the harvest of life which Alcestis descends to Tartarus to obtain for her egoistic husband, the harvest of wisdom which all the heroes of initiations go to bring to ripeness and gather in the dark of the underworld. (Paz 9)

In fact the underworld into which Tomlinson descended was the basement of a small hotel on the left bank in Paris and his companions were Octavio Paz (Mexican), Edoardo Sanguineti (Italian) and Jacques Roubaud (French). As Roy tells us

> No gloom, but plenty of lamps burning calmly beneath their shades. No black poplars, or white cypresses, no fields of asphodel on the banks of Tartarus: just sofas and leather arm chairs. The ghosts of Erebus only served tea here in white jackets. And the muffled rumbling which one made out at times was neither that of the waters of the river of Memory nor the ululating plaint of the Erinnys: it was merely the trains of the métro between the Bac and Solférino stations. (Paz 9).

Claude Roy's forward to the completed renga, a form of poetic writing that had been developed in Japan between the ninth and twelfth century, affirms the interlinking nature of the exercise. Each of the four poets participating in this underground exercise "restricted himself to linking his contribution to that of the poet who handed over to him and thus lent him his voice" (Paz 9).

It is not difficult to understand why an exercise of listening to tones and rhythms should so appeal to Charles Tomlinson when one reads his own comments upon the act of translation, an art which he regards as a process indistinguishable from poetic creation. In his 2004 preface to the Faber *Selected Poems of Dryden*, referring to the Augustan poet's *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), he suggests that these translations "*made it new* (in Pound's phrase) especially for poets themselves" (*Dryden* xvi). Tomlinson expressed his admiration for Dryden's energy which "can enforce a massive ungainsayable sweep of the verse" and noted that although the nineteenth-century had cooled towards the great Augustan there was one intelligent and significant voice that recognised the vivid nature of his language:

> Defending Dryden against Robert Bridges, Hopkins insisted: "He is the most masculine of our poets; his style and rhythms lay the strongest stress of all our literature on the naked thew and sinew of the English language." (Dryden xiv)

The toughness of Dryden's language appealed also to Tomlinson as he was trying to discover his own poetic voice in the mid-twentieth-century:

> I first came across Dryden and his follower Pope in the years between the 1940s and 50s when English poetry often seemed to be losing its ability to handle a variety of tones...For a young poet it was necessary to struggle to rediscover an idiom where one could simply say what one meant. (Dryden xi)

As well as discovering Dryden at this time Tomlinson also came across the work of both Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. In terms of noting the influences on Tomlinson's poetry of both the seventeenth-century work of Dryden and the twentieth-century modernism of the Americans it is worth looking at the introduction that Octavio Paz wrote for the penguin edition of *Renga* where he focussed on the interrelated sense of the contemporary poet and the past:

> For us translation is transmutation, metaphor: a form of change and severance; a way, therefore, of ensuring the continuity of our past by transforming it in dialogue with other civilizations (an illusory continuity and dialogue: translation: transmutation: solipsism). The idea of universal correspondence is returning. Certainly, we no longer see the macrocosm and the microcosm as the two halves of one sphere, but we conceive of the entire universe as a plurality of systems in movement: these systems reflect one in another and, reflecting, they combine like the rhymes of a poem. (Paz 20)

The idea of continuity with the past and the recognition of values that become transmuted, metamorphosed even, is central to Charles Tomlinson's oeuvre: as well as lying behind his comments on the art of translation it informs his poetry in which the urbane and civilized values highlighted by both Martial and Horace become incorporated into an essential aspect of the English landscape.

When D.R. Shackleton Bailey's three-volume translation of Martial's *Epigrams* appeared as part of the Loeb Classics in 1994, Tomlinson published a review for *The New Criterion* under the title "Martial in English" and he noted that this edition "offers an occasion for thinking about the way Martial's presence shows itself in English poetry." He praised the unpretentiously accurate approach of the translator by suggesting that it "helps the reader to the mental possession of the original" as well as making one conscious "anew of how splendidly some of our English poets responded to Martial" (*Metamorphoses* 61). Tomlinson highlighted Martial's imaginatively generous poem celebrating his friendship with Faustinus, whose Baian villa reconciles beauty and use (III, 58), and suggested that Shackleton Bailey's prose was involved in the process of struggling to "get itself into verse, moving towards octo-syllabics and two iambic pentameters":

> Nor does the country caller come empty handed. He brings pale honey with its comb and a cone of milk from the woods of Sassina: one proffers drowsy dormice, another the bleating offspring of a hairy dam... Strapping daughters of the honest tenant farmers present their mothers' gifts in wicker baskets. (*Metamorphoses* 65)

Compared with this the poem that truly translates—"carries over"—Martial into English and "into the English scene" is of course Ben Jonson's eulogy of the Sidney household, "To Penshurst":

> But all come in, the farmer, and the clowne:
> And no one empty-handed, to salute
> Thy lord, and lady, though they have no sute.
> Some bring a capon, some a rurall cake,
> Some nuts, some apples; some that thinke they make
> The better cheeses, bring 'hem; or else send
> By their ripe daughters, whom they would commend
> This way to husbands... (Jonson 94)

Tomlinson's awareness of the importance of Jonson's poem is emphasised in his comments comparing the two:

> Penshurst, like Faustinus's farm is the great good place that never was on sea or land, something to stretch the imagination in Jonson's course for civilizing English aristocrats...It was Martial who enabled Jonson's almost laid-back sense of opulence, encouraged his zest for the specific (listing foods in "Inviting a Friend to Supper," as Martial likes to do), inspired him via those complaints about being invited to an aristocrat's house, but not getting the same food as the master, or even sitting at the same table—to a series of generous opposites that can be expected at Penshurst...Martial is re-located in an English setting, after more than a thousand years. (*Metamorphoses* 66)

Tomlinson concluded his review by looking at Martial's understanding of the meaning of friendship and by commenting on the epigram about the precious hours spent by the poet with his friend, Julius Martialis (IV, 64):

> His friend's place has all the frank largesse of the Sidneys' acres, but there is nothing about a happy peasantry in Martial here (they are kept out of sight) or the functional nature of a properly run estate. You cannot hear the traffic on the Flaminian and Salarian Way, or the noise of the boatman's cries on the nearby Tiber. All is courtesy and liberality, and the landscape an emblem of those qualities of ease and friendship the poet most admires. (*Metamorphoses* 69)

However, the enormous influence of Martial and Jonson on the poetry of Charles Tomlinson needed one more ingredient before the young poet could discover an idiom where "one could simply say what one meant." That ingredient was to be found in America.

According to his autobiographical account, *Some Americans*, Tomlinson did not seriously begin to read the poetry of William Carlos Williams until the autumn of 1956 when he came across "The Desert Music" and "Journey to Love." When *The Desert Music* came out from Random House in 1954 it opened with a republication of some lines that had appeared in *Paterson II* (1948) which were written in what Williams was to call "the variable foot." These lines were now given the status of a separate poem with the title "The Descent" and this three-ply measure of writing used by Williams was to have a significant influence over Tomlinson for the next few years:

> Late in February 1957 I wrote my first poems in emulation of the three-ply cadences that Williams used in the two books of his I had read...it was the three-ply poems that appealed to me most, perhaps because they afforded the possibility of a more meditative movement... (*American* 126)

Tomlinson's reaching out to understand the experience of others, to occupy their space, found the imitation of Williams's poetic measure ideal for his translation of Antonio Machado's "Poem of a Day," written in August 1960 and published in *Castilian Indexes*. Referring to the poem in a letter to Williams, August 1960, Tomlinson recognised that this was possibly the high watermark of the Machado translations. "Poem of a Day" was a long conversation piece which had been written by Machado in 1913 in the dreary town of Baeza, on the confines of Andalusia where it approaches Castile. According to Henry Gifford's account of "The Poet as Translator," written for the special Tomlinson issue of *Agenda* in 1995, Machado in the previous year had lost his young wife, after a brief marriage soon overshadowed by her tuberculosis:

> He had left Soria, where Leonor now lay in the graveyard at Espino, which in a poem written a few months later he calls on his "good friend" Jose Maria Palacio to visit, now spring has arrived. In Baeza he continued his monotonous work as teacher of French in a secondary school. Machado's dejection was complete, and in "Poem of a Day" he surveys his situation, unflinchingly and with a quiet irony. Like Tomlinson's "Up at La Serra," in *A Peopled Landscape*, published the same year as *Castilian Indexes*, this poem shows the aptness of William Carlos Williams's "three-ply measure," now hovering, now speeded up, its pace, as Tomlinson observes, "resembling that of thought." No other metre could so well capture the subtlety of tone in Machado's "rural meditations," while avoiding "the rather facile rattle that occurs if one translates Spanish octosyllabics into English with end rhymes." (Gifford 66)

The intricacy of Machado's music is delicately matched with precision in Tomlinson's translation where "Llueve, llueve; tu neblina/ que se torne en aguanieve,/ y otra vez en agua fina!/ Llueve, Señor, llueve, llueve!" becomes

> Rain,
> rain on!
> and alternate
> as mist or sleet
> and then again
> reverting to a tenuous rain
> rain, Lord, rain!

Tomlinson's account of his early writing makes the debt to Williams's measure very clear:

> In listening to Jersey speech rhythms and to what he calls "the American language," Williams evolved his theory of "measure." "Measure" —by which I take

> him to mean those structural principles that still subsist in the language of poetry when one has abandoned traditional metrics— he seems to have supposed, in his more polemical moments, belonged to a specifically American poetry. Already I was trying to prove that "measure" belonged also to English poetry, though I would have hesitated to define it in terms of Williams's variable foot, that self-contradictory notion which Alan Stephens parodies in the phrase "an elastic inch." Yet to be admitted to the clan, on whatever grounds, was an honour, for I felt it to be a platoon in a much larger action, one that would eventually establish the importance of other American poets in England besides T.S. Eliot. (*American* 129)

In 1959 Tomlinson had been awarded a travel grant to visit the United States during which he called upon the ageing American poet out at Rutherford. In his recollections of the visit Tomlinson quotes one of Williams's comments made about the comparison between past and present "When we came here the place was surrounded by woods, and now..." before adding Florrie Williams's coda, "One thing I *would* like is to see a horse-drawn carriage or two back." On the return journey to New York Tomlinson registered how the landscape was in the process of change:

> Returning with Denise down Rutherford's main street to the bus, I could now complete for myself Williams's unfinished sentence about the once surrounding woods. The neons were splashing and trickling their colours over wet sidewalks between buildings whose graceless monotony was made drabber and lonelier by the damp dusk of late autumn. (*American* 132)

During that December the Tomlinson's drove across America to visit Yvor Winters in California and although the enthusiasm felt by the English poet for Williams's variable measure of writing poetry wasn't shared by Winters the hospitality and courtesy of the day was what remained within memory:

> The day was an entire success. The dignity and dimension of the man unmistakably communicated themselves, as did a capacity for friendship, rather than friendliness. Winters showed no desire to please, but, as in his urging one to try a particularly fine wine, he was eager to share what he deemed best. The same eagerness appeared when he offered for one's meditation, as it were, his distinctive vision of things Californian. That vision was, further, tinged with a kind of elegiac sadness, as in his poem "Californian Oaks," an awareness that the place had changed and was changing now beyond all recognition. Like Williams, he complained: "When we first came here, this was the country." (*American* 135-6)

The Tomlinsons returned to England just after Easter 1960 and by August he had written "Return to Hinton; written on the author's return to Hinton Blewett from the United States" which was to become one of the opening poems of *A Peopled Landscape*.

> Ten years
> and will you be
> a footnote, merely,

England
of the Bible
open at Genesis
on the parlour table?
'God
saw the light
that it was good.'
It falls
athwart the book
through window-lace
whose shadow
decorates the sheets
of 'The Bridal March'—
a square of white
above the keyboard
and below
a text which is a prayer.
The television box
is one,
the mullions and flagged floor
of the kitchen
through an open door
witness a second
world in which
beside the hob
the enormous kettles'
blackened bellies ride—
as much the tokens of an order as
the burnished brass. (*Collected* 65-66)

Richard Swigg's comments on these opening lines are sharply accurate when he says that the poem "is to be no statutory elegy on vanishing rural ways":

> The mood, if unrancorous, is tougher —clear-eyed in its adaptation of the American verse-line to evoke the constancies, persistencies, and relationships, still astir in a ground long worked and cherished. There is a place's "presence" within these rooms and utensils, an airy openness inside weight and solidities that the three-ply line lifts into view as the poet's eye moves from the parlor of the farm towards the kitchen. (Swigg, *Tomlinson* 102)

The "you" of the second line is left deliberately ambiguous as to whether the address is to the farmer's widow or to an England which is in the process of changing. The quality of permanent cultural values is suggested by the emphatic reference to the King James Bible, a cornerstone of generations, lying open at the heraldic words of Creation. However, the use of the literary term "footnote" in the preceding line suggests already a diminishing of the literary weight behind the book that connects Jonson's early seventeenth-century world with that of mid-twentieth century Somerset. The inherited quality of life garnered within a domestic solidity is given

us with the reference to "The Bridal March" although this too is reduced to "a square of white" which prepares us for the geometrical counterpart of the "television box." These shapes act as openings, what Tomlinson's friend Philippe Jaccottet was to term "ouvertures," as the reader's eye is drawn through the vertical mullions of the Gothic windows across the stone squares of flags in order to arrive at the kitchen. Here the enormous utensils provide a sense of inherited value and possess a life of their own which is pregnant with a tradition to be carried forward. The word "tokens" refers to "a stamped piece of metal, issued as a medium of exchange by a private person or company, who engage to take it back at its nominal value, giving goods or legal currency for it" (OED) which links to what can or at least *should* be taken on trust. However, this trust in a sense of order is one that is in the process of being betrayed and the thought echoes the words Tomlinson had heard from both Carlos Williams and Yvor Winters in his recently completed American tour. That said life does not simply stop in response to the changes imposed by technological and industrial advance:

> You live
> between the two
> and, ballasted against
> the merely new, the tide
> and shift of time
> you wear
> your widow's silk
> your hair
> plaited, as it has been
> throughout those years
> whose rime it bears.

The "television box" associated with "the merely new" is juxtaposed with what the woman wears, itself a memory to the past, and the value of this continuity is held both with the significance of ballast and the natural whiteness of winter's "rime." The surviving widow who hopes that her son's pride in his tractor will carry on for the future a quality of life that is "more than bread" is portrayed in terms of her qualities that last beyond a swift-moving present:

> Your qualities
> are like the land
> —inherited:

The threat to a quiet and reflective way of living is not so much the inevitability of death, a certainty that possesses its own gravestone writing, as the unstoppable process of industrial improvement.

> Death's
> not the enemy
> of you nor of your kind:
> a surer death

creeps after me
out of that generous
rich and nervous land
where, buried by
the soft oppression of prosperity
locality's mere grist
to build
the even bed
of roads that will not rest
until they lead
into a common future
rational
and secure
that we must speed
by means that are not either.
Narrow
your farm-bred certainties
I do not hold:
I share
your certain enemy.
For we who write
the verse you do not read
already plead your cause
before
that cold tribunal
while you're unaware
they hold their session.

The firm repudiation of mere nostalgia is held by the poet emphasising that he does not share the widow's narrow "farm-bred certainties" but, instead, shares "your certain enemy." The temptation to give the widow a full awareness of the nature of the changing reality of the surrounding world is firmly eschewed by making it clear that his poem is not writing she would ever read and that her confident vulnerability ensures that she remains unaware that the "cold tribunal" of a planning committee is already meeting to discuss the landscape's future. Tomlinson's concern for a constancy under threat from standardizing forces was communicated to Williams in a letter of June 1960, some weeks before the composition of "Return to Hinton" where he told him of plans for a motorway across the Cotswolds:

> One cannot drive an immense highway across these lovely intimacies of steep green hills and deep, recessed valleys. (Swigg, *Look* 142)

Tomlinson's firm sense of the importance of what is "inherited" is placed in the closing lines of the poem:

Our language is our land
that we'll
not waste or sell

against a promised mess
of pottage that we may not taste.

The Martial-Jonson sense of contentment is clear in the last lines:

For who has known
the seasons' sweet succession
and would still
exchange them for a whim, a wish
or swim into
a mill-race for an unglimpsed fish?

The "courtesy and liberality" and "those qualities of ease and friendship" which Tomlinson recognized as emblematic in the landscape are inevitably in the process of being devalued and that use of the word "tokens" has a resonance which might propel us forward to "Before Urbino," an early poem by J.H. Prynne which shows its clear debt to Tomlinson.

Such tokens are a ready currency:
And we are thus too liberal in their use
Who read a landscape so between the lines,
And take what is before us as a sign
Of what is mere conjecture. (Prynne 3)

Prynne's awareness of conversation, golden words, between the rural Italian people has a more sceptical tone to it as he links the word "tokens" with the speed of movement of "currency." The process of devaluation with its temptation to sentimentalize the lives of other people is brought home to us with that too great liberality with which we presume to know what is, after all, "mere conjecture."

In the autumn of 1960 Tomlinson wrote "The Farmer's Wife" again using William Carlos Williams's three-ply line to convey intricate movement and moments of stillness:

Scent
from the apple-loft!
I smelt it and I saw
in thought
behind the oak
that cupboards all your wine
the store in maturation
webbed
and waiting.
There
we paused in talk,
the labyrinth of lofts
above us and the stair
beneath, bound
for a labyrinth of cellars. (*New Collected Poems* 76-78)

Opening with the directness of the pun on sense and motion the pervasive "scent" becomes a door through which we can imagine a world, a still-life painting of the wine which is both "webbed" and "waiting." The conceit here brings to mind not only the cobwebbed bottles (age and stillness) but also the labyrinth of rich associations which surround the farm and its heritage. Williams's measure slows the cadence to allow a savoured fullness, a stately progress which pauses with the single line "There" and it is almost as though the poet and the farmer's wife stand at the centre of a web of meanings: above, the labyrinth of lofts reflect a network paralleled by the labyrinth of cellars. The apples, the scent of which opened the poem, find their counterpart in the cellars, a traditional home of cider or wine and the interlacing of meaning is given a further enrichment with the word "bound."

Everywhere
as darkness
leaned and loomed
the light was crossing it
or travelled through
the doors you opened
into rooms that view
your hens and herds,
your cider-orchard.

Here the sense of a web is continued in "leaned and loomed" where the alliteration echoes the criss-crossing of fabric on a loom and the light "crossing it" reveals, when a door is opened, those elements of a farm which are part of the inheritance: hens, herd and cider-orchard.

Proud
you were
displaying these
inheritances
to an eye
as pleased as yours
and as familiar almost
with them. Mine
had known,
had grown into the ways
that regulate such riches
and had seen
your husband's mother's day
and you had done
no violence to that recollection,
proving it
by present fact.
Distrust
that poet who must symbolize
your stair into
an analogue

of what was never there.
Fact
has its proper plenitude
that only time and tact
will show, renew.
It is enough
those steps should be
no more than what they were, that your
hospitable table
overlook the cowshed.
A just geography
completes itself
with such relations, where
beauty and stability can be
each other's equal.

The value of this inherited quality of living is central to the poet's awareness of how a tradition has been continued over generations without any resort to a violence of change. The "just geography" which follows, the labyrinthine and webbed lines of which constitute a map of human conduct, is completed by the balancing of beauty and stability although this last quality is followed by a hint of foreboding:

But building is
a biding also
and I saw
one lack
among your store of blessings.
You had come
late into marriage
and your childlessness
was palpable
as we surveyed
the kitchen, where four unheraldic
sheep-dogs kept the floor
and seemed to want
their complement of children.
Not desolateness
changed the scene I left,
the house
manning its hill,
the gabled bulk
still riding there
as though it could
command the crops
upwards
out of willing land;
and yet
it was as if
a doubt

within my mood
troubled the rock of its ancestral certitude.

The word "building" acts both as a noun and a verb, stasis and movement with the latter suggesting a continuance of traditional values centred around the settled sense of "biding." However, with no children to take over the farm that interweaving of human domestic value and the natural environment within which it sits may be coming to an end. The poem is raised far above a domestic recollection for the poet as the significance of what the Fostons Ash world represents conjures up a precise comparison with Jonson's "To Penshurst" where the poet praises nature's willingness to provide for man's sustenance:

Each banke doth yield thee conyes; and the topps
Fertile of wood, ASHORE and SYDNEY'S copp's,
To crowne thy open table, doth provide
The purpled pheasant, with the speckled side:
The painted partrich lyes in every field,
And, for thy messe, is willing to be kill'd.
And if the highswolne Medway faile thy dish,
Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,
Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net. (Jonson 94)

However, whereas Jonson's panegyric lauds continuity that seems safeguarded on account of the lady's fruitfulness and the sense that her children will continue an inheritance of a true dwelling Tomlinson's poem ends more bleakly and the "rock" with its reference back to the Bible is no longer enough to build on.

When Hopkins referred to the "naked thew and sinew" of language to be found in Dryden he was echoing a metaphor used by both Sidney and Jonson. In *The Defence of Poesie* Sidney is direct in his attack upon poetical weakness when he writes that he does "not remember to have seene but fewe (to speake boldly) printed, that have poetical sinews in them" (Sidney 235) and Jonson's translation of Horace's "Of the Art of Poetrie" castigates those poets who "striving to run smooth, and flow,/Hath neither soule, nor sinews" (Jonson 307). For both these poets the word "sinews" denotes content, the central part of a poem, and Jonson went on to suggest in his prose *Discoveries*

> The sense is as the life and soule of Language, without which all words are dead. Sense is wrought out of experience, the knowledge of humane life, and actions, or of the liberall Arts... (Jonson 307)

In the 1983 Cambridge Clark Lectures which Tomlinson delivered on the theme of "Poetry and Metamorphosis" he recalled an early essay by Williams from 1915, "Vortex-WCW" where the young American gave his reactions to the manifesto on sculpture written by Gaudier Brzeska, published in the second issue of *Blast*, in which he celebrated his emotions as a sculptor as arising from the arrangement of surfaces and from the lines and planes defining surfaces:

> Williams translates the terms of Gaudier's manifesto into the terms of a poetry where the word "plane" is used to reinforce Williams' idea of a poetry of line pulling against line, a poetry where the sense of physical resistance is paramount, where words and groups of words make up the resistant facets of a poem —a terminology obviously opposed to the impressionistic drift of contemporary free verse in writers like Amy Lowell. (Tomlinson, *Metamorphoses* 180)

The intersecting planes and contrasting pulls of language which allow the sinews of Tomlinson's verse to move both flexibly and with careful meditative movement are clearly seen in "The Way of a World" (February 1967) where steadying and upheaval are held in counterpoint:

> Having mislaid it, and then
> Found again in a changed mind
> The image of a gull the autumn gust
> Had pulled upwards and past
> The window I watched from, I recovered too
> The ash-key, borne-by whirling
> On the same surge of air, like an animate thing:
> The scene was there again: the bird,
> The seed, the windlines drawn in the sidelong
> Sweep of leaves and branches that only
> The black and supple boughs restrained—
> All would have joined in the weightless anarchy
> Of air, but for that counterpoise. (*Collected* 170-71)

The criss-cross pulsing, meshing, of ties and change, stasis and movement, are held within the surfaces: a gull's upward pull by the wind, the seed of the ash tree whirling, the sweep of movement in the leaves which are still held secure by "supple boughs." What could be an anarchy of whirling change is held within a sense of purpose, like a framework or a tradition, by a "counterpoise" that leads to a clarity of vision:

> All rose
> Clear in the memory now, though memory did not choose
> Or value it first: it came
> With its worth and, like those tree-tips,
> Fine as dishevelling hair, but steadied
> And masted as they are, that worth
> Outlasted its lost time, when
> The cross-currents had carried it under.
> In all these evanescences of daily air,
> It is the shapes of change, and not the bare
> Glancing vibrations, that vein and branch
> Through the moving textures: we grasp
> The way of a world in the seed, the gull
> Swayed toiling against the two
> Gravities that root and uproot the trees.

The human sense of value which Tomlinson captures in this series of images rests in the abiding memory whose worth is brought into the present even though the image was not initially selected for keeping. The repeated word "worth" is placed alongside an inherited steadiness which is itself connected to man's outward push with "masted," that symbol of the ship riding the seas which haunts the Homeric opening lines of Pound's "Canto I." Worth outlives the "lost time" when we seem to have become disinherited and the surge to a future "way of a world" is contained not only in the seed but in the fine balance of opposites contained in the closing image of gravity which acts both as an anchor for the root and a pull for the top of the tree as if in imitation of another seventeenth-century source: the Body's cry in Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body":

> O who shall me deliver whole
> From bonds of this Tyrannic Soul?
> Which, stretcht upright, impales me so,
> That mine own Precipice I go. (Marvell 22)

In July 1989 Tomlinson wrote a measured poem of parting from his friend Octavio Paz "In a Cambridge Garden" as he contemplated

> Another town and time —and little left of it
> Before you were to go. Castles in Spain
> Stood solid to receive your royal progress
> While Wren detained us. Beyond his colonnade
> Arched and shaded, as if Italian paviours
> Had laid the flags we echoed on —our way
> Led us to lawns whose midday shadows
> Seemed cast from trees as massive
> I was about to say, as those that grow
> In Mexico itself —but no: this plane
> This copper beech, both take their scale
> From their own setting, and could stand
> Nowhere but here, their power contained
> Beside a wall in England. (*Collected* 492)

The echo of a seventeenth-century sense of difference in landscape, a comparison between "the Indian Ganges side" and the "Tide of Humber," is hinted at with grace and wit as the connecting link is given palpability in the garden which is a poem:

> And so we coincide
> Against distance, wind and tide, meet
> And translate our worlds to one another,
> Greet in verse. A poem is itself
> A sort of garden —we are waving our farewells—
> Seasonable at all times as we bring
> Our changing seasons to it —we are losing sight

Of the speeding car that is launched and one
With the traffic now and the mid-May sun.

The overarching quality of friendship, shared feelings for poetry and place, is something Tomlinson measured in his inclusion of different translations of Martial's *Epigram, Book X,* 47, chosen for his edition of *Verse in Translation* (Oxford 1980). The first of these is by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey and its tone suggests the quiet steadiness admired in Tomlinson's appreciation of an English quality of steadfastness:

Marshall, the thinges for to attayne
The happy life be thes, I fynde:
The riches left, not got with payne;
The frutfull grownd; the quyet mynde;
The equall freend; no grudge, nor stryf;
No charge of rule nor governance;
Without disease, the helthfull life;
The howshold of contynuance;
The meane dyet, no delicate fare;
Wisdom joined with simplicitye;
The night discharged of all care,
Where wyne may beare no soveranty;
The chast wife, wyse, without debate;
Suche sleapes as may begyle the night;
Contented with thyne owne estate,
Neyther wisshe death, not fear his might. (Tomlinson, *Oxford* 29)

However, Charles Tomlinson is no simple translator of virtues from either the First Century Spaniard or the Sixteenth and Seventeenth century English poets. The awareness of America is essential and the statement in Carlos Williams's essay on Gaudier Brzeska that may well have struck Tomlinson was the clarity of

> I will express my emotions in the appearances: surfaces, sounds, smells, touch of the place in which I happen to be.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON READING CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present article is to consider several aspects related to the reception of contemporary British poetry. An interview with the poet Michael Symmons Roberts will help us in our discussion. We will bear in mind Michael Schmidt's experience as an editor and his views on the role of literary critics with respect to poetry readership as well. In addition, we will provide a brief account of some British poetry magazines and of their impact in the forging of a wide and varied poetry reading audience. We will also argue that University poetry teachers play a decisive role in this matter as well.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary British poetry, Michael Schmidt, Michael Symmons Roberts, British poetry magazines.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo pretende reflexionar sobre algunos aspectos relacionados con la lectura de la poesía británica contemporánea. Para cumplir este cometido, incluiremos una entrevista inédita con el poeta Michael Symmons Roberts. La amplia experiencia de Michael Schmidt como editor y su punto de vista sobre la relación de la crítica y la creación de una cultura de lectura de poesía, nos servirán de guía. Asimismo, haremos un breve repaso a algunas revistas especializadas en poesía británicas actuales y a su impacto en la creación de una comunidad de lectores de poesía amplia y variada. Defenderemos que la docencia de la poesía en la universidad juega un papel decisivo a la hora de forjar una cultura de lectura de poesía.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía contemporánea británica, Michael Schmidt, Michael Symmons Roberts, revistas de poesía británicas.

When considering the current status quo of contemporary British poetry, one of the first impressions we have is that it is undergoing a process of renewal. That is actually the case if we bear in mind the recent appointment of Carol Ann Duffy as Britain's Poet Laureate in May 2009, the first woman in history to hold the post. However, even if we were tempted to consider this event as a turning-

point, it is a fact that several changes have been taking place over the last few decades. Concepts such as mainstream, non-mainstream, experimental and marginal have been and still are being reconsidered. Hence, the present panorama of British poetry is clearly diverse, profound, rich and fresh, inasmuch as it allows the coexistence of different dynamising approaches to poetry. According to Romana Huk in her introduction to *Contemporary British Poetry. Essays in Theory and Criticism* (1996), this is

> A situation that has been fostered as much by the ascendency of certain kinds of literary theory and criticism as by the compelling presence of growing numbers of women poets, black poets from a range of differing cultural communities, poets writing out of postcolonial experience or submerged traditions in Scotland and Wales, regional and working-class poets, and poets of all inflections writing in experimental, oppositional and/or "Poststructuralist" forms. (Acheson and Huk 3)

We could certainly name various British poets representing each of the aforementioned cases nowadays, always at the risk of forgetting to mention some crucial figures for certain critics, editors, publishers, readers or for other poets. We certainly do not mean to be dogmatic here but, as our title suggests, offering some considerations of various influential issues in the reading of contemporary British poetry. In doing so, it is convenient to look at some of those aspects which have favoured its present revising tendency. In addition to the increasing number of women poets, black poets, postcolonial poets, regional and experimental poets, we are reading the work of poets who do not wish to be labelled at all, or who could belong to several of these categories at the same time. What is a fact is that they continue to write and that their motivations and styles are as varied as their personalities and circumstances.

When asking Michael Symmons Roberts, who very kindly accepted to be interviewed for the present article, for whom do poets write nowadays and if he has any particular type of reader in mind when writing poetry, he answered the following:

> Like most poets, I do not have any reader in mind at the point of writing. At that point, all I am trying to do is to make the poem real, to make it complete and as strong as possible. After that point, I hope the potential audience for poetry (all poetry, not just mine) is broad and deep, even if poems do take a long time to find their way into our consciousness. (Roberts)

The appeal for the authentic poem which reaches our reading consciousness seems to be a constant for many contemporary poets. Their rejection to be restricted to the limits of definitions and to the constraints of certain type of demands responds partially to their priority of writing poetry for poetry's sake. This does not mean that poets ignore what the context in which they write is. Quite the contrary, as Michael Schmidt explains: "In the marketplace poetry is required to have a conscience, to evince a conscience, and often conscience of a specific kind" (Schmidt, *What*). Both the consciousness that Symmons Roberts refers to and the consciousness mentioned by Schmidt suggest the concern that the poet feels and is expected

to feel for the reader today. At the same time, they are aware of their condition as poets and they do struggle to achieve individuality within the collective they belong to. This is another reason why they would rather not be included in a set of clichéd or stereotyped definitions that would deprive them of their own personalities. In some cases, poets clearly neglect and challenge critics' possible attacks on their works, Wendy Cope being an illustrative example in her poem "Manifesto": "And if some bloodless literary fart/ Says that it's all too personal, I'll spit/ And write the poems that will win your heart" (32). She justifies her attitude by repeating in her poem that "I'll work, for there's new purpose in my art" (32). Therefore, it is not a general must for poets today to follow a particular direction or to be included in a specific field, and sometimes it is the seed to prejudice or bias potential poetry readers. Many of them do disagree with particular readings or classifications of their works and poetic styles, not to mention with general definitions of them as poets. To illustrate this, we just have to quote Carol Ann Duffy's answer to Jeanette Winterson's question about the implications of sexuality in the former's work: "I define myself as a poet and as a mother —that's all" (Winterson).

We observe then in many contemporary British poets a general inclination to self-definition and individuality which is not exclusive of their awareness of their belonging to the poetic domain. Trying to tell which of these two aspects is prior to them is not an easy task as it totally depends on every creator and on the field that he or she writes in. On the one hand, those who are now writing Innovative Poetry seem to be strongly aware of the collective they belong to, conceiving their approach as contesting, debating, renewing and dynamising. On the other hand, we can also appreciate these attitudes in those who are writing in the field of the mainstream working on new topics and subjects while keeping traditional structures in their poems. Actually, the work of several poets today, the current acceptance and even celebration of conditions and attitudes considered as marginal until quite recently, the eclectic tendency of certain presses and magazines and the growing number of experimental works and publications, prove that the limits between both trends are getting more and more blurred. When asking Michael Symmons Roberts whether there is any current mainstream in contemporary British poetry, and if we are witnessing any special turn in British poetry nowadays, he explains that

> It is hard to talk about a 'mainstream' in a (comparatively) invisible art form. Even the most successful contemporary poets hardly approach the audience of many novelists. But contemporary British poetry is very broad, and alongside the major trade publishers there are some very strong smaller specialist presses. The poets themselves are pushing ahead in different ways —some into the liberation of stricter forms, some towards book-length sequences, some taking the short lyric poem into unfamiliar territory. Poets will write, whatever the circumstances of the poetry scene, because they have to write.

The diversity of these lines bears witness to the different directions in current British poetry. Thus, poetry readers can choose which type of poetry they wish to read, provided they know what the options are. The poetry reading public must then be informed about the possibilities they may encounter. Where are they to look for

this reading guide? A curious average reader today has many possibilities to search for information thanks to the internet, for example. There is also a considerable variety of books, articles, essays and reviews, more or less specialized depending on the audience they are addressed to, written by literary critics, reviewers, editors and poets. All of these mean to attract the readers' attention so that poetry is actually read. That is to say, they try to foster a culture of reception.

This is one of the aspects discussed by Michael Schmidt in his lecture "What, How Well, Why? Michael Schmidt," which he gave at *Stanza, Scotland's International Poetry Festival* in 2006. He defends that a public and accessible review culture is necessary for one of reception to exist: "A culture of reception, it seems to me, is public, not contained within the academy, though academics and theorists are welcome to contribute to it" (Schmidt, "What"). Schmidt's remark about the need of a public approach on the part of literary critics, so that poetry readership increases, is certainly thought-provoking. Being an academic himself, he proposes and even seems to encourage his colleagues to enter the public sphere as an effective means to achieve more poetry readers than poets. It is not the first time that Schmidt admits the limitations of poetry literary critics and publications. He has even expressed his concern about the role of academics which, because it is generally too specialized, is thus also restrictive and biased. In "Loose Ends", the final chapter of his seminal work *Lives of the Poets* (1998), Schmidt explains that:

> Books about poetry either limit the period they cover or concentrate on a theme. My history is peculiar in that it is written by a reader who —though he teaches in a university— distrusts critical specialism. The real academic work, that of the scholar, is necessarily specialized and of great value in establishing and recovering texts, but many academic *critics* only feel confident in judgement in a specific period, or drive a theoretical skewer through poetry, investing their faith not in a poem but in a predetermined approach to poetry. (1052)

However contradictory it might seem that an academic is skeptical about scholarly specialisation, the apparent paradox is easily explained if we consider Schmidt's career and his effort in cultivating a public criticism and promoting a broad culture of reception. Being a poet, novelist, literary historian, translator, professor and editor, he does have more than a word to say about the present situation of contemporary British poetry, whether we might agree or disagree with his views. His effort to foreground poetry to the public may as well have been one crucial motivation so that, together with Brian Cox he founded *Poetry Nation* in 1973, later to become *PN Review* in 1976. Schmidt has always had an active role in the editorial board and is currently the General Editor. In addition to trying to broaden the scope of British poetry reading, writing and criticism with this magazine, he was also founder of Carcanet Press in 1969 now being its Editorial and Managing Director. His rich international cultural background and his productive versatility sustain Schmidt's undeniable and respectful contribution to the development of contemporary British poetry. His career echoes his ideas as it takes poetry to the public arena, thus fostering a public culture of reception.

We are returning now to the previous quotation, in which Schmidt also mentioned his university teaching. Although he advocates for public criticism and debate as prior to an academic approach, we believe that University poetry teachers also have a role to play in poetry readership. Having taught contemporary British poetry over the last thirteen years, I have experienced that it is not only a must for us to provide students with the essential contexts to learn about poems and poets. It is also our task to try and cultivate students' love for poetry and curiosity to read those poems which move them, and to talk to others about them, so that the knowledge they might receive and the passion they may feel could be shared by others beyond the limits of university premises. It is a most rewarding experience to witness how a student gets involved in a particular poem, reading it aloud until getting familiar with its cadences and sounds, working out the meaning of words and trying to make sense of them within and outside the poem's unity, until he or she seems to exclaim a sort of eureka when finally finding at least one explanation for the lines in question, hence deciding that they like the poem, or maybe the contrary. Whatever the final decision, the fact that they read, debate and link poetry to their own lives is a means to encourage them to continue reading contemporary British poetry and, why not, poetry in general. The study of other poets, whether contemporary or not, does also help to enhance their poetry reading competence and curiosity and hopefully that of the others they talk to about poetry. However, we cannot take for granted that because students can read poetry it immediately ensures their comprehending it. It is at this point worthy to remember W.H. Auden's position in "Writing":

> Writers, poets especially, have and odd relation to the public because their medium, language, is not, like the paint of the painter or the notes of the composer, reserved for their use but is the common property of the linguistic group to which they belong. Lots of people are willing to admit that they don't understand painting or music, but very few indeed who have been to school and learnt to read advertisements will admit that they don't understand English. (242)

As a poetry reader, the student does generally need help to perceive aspects that he cannot grasp at first, or even at second readings. Since we naturally tend to love that we know, their better understanding would favour their love for poetry, thus the poetry teacher's role in this sense is again justified. Actually, not only university but school poetry teaching nurtures and enhances a poetry readership. When in 1996 *The Nation's Favourite Poems* was first published, many people voted for the poems they studied at school and still remembered, so that they would be included in the book. In the foreword to this edition it is stated that "if this is merely a collection of 'O' Level standard English Primer gems, then we ought to be grateful to the nation's English masters" (6). Reading experience is not a synonym for reading competence, and certainly not enough to ensure the widening and rising of a poetry reading culture. Poetry teaching is a decisive bridge between them.

University poetry teaching is also important for poets who work in the field. Michael Symmons Roberts talks to us about how his experience on creative

writing and poetry teaching at Manchester Metropolitan University influences his writing: "The teaching influences the writing in various ways. For example, the workshops force you to elucidate what makes a poem work and what hinders it, and the literature courses send you back to great poems and poets from the past." Therefore, poetry teaching is related both to the writing and readership of contemporary British poetry. The views about the latter will vary depending on the teacher, whether the teaching is combined with poetry writing or not.

Therefore, some of the aspects contributing to foster a broader culture of reception for poetry today could be a public critical activity and a commitment of poetry University teachers working in that direction. In addition, "the major trade publishers" and "some very strong smaller specialist presses" mentioned by Symmons Roberts above do certainly influence on the poetry reading public. We would like to draw our attention now to the activity of some poetry magazines, whether they are considered "major" or "little". Our interest does not lie in their category, but in their activity and in their impact on the poetic audience. Whether we agree or disagree with their work, it is just commonsensical and a must to remind their commitment to contemporary British poetry and to poetry in general.

As it is well-known, one of the oldest poetry magazines in Britain is *The London Magazine*, first founded in 1732 and reappearing in 1820. Steven O'Brien being its current editor, it does not only publish poems from celebrated and unknown authors, besides critical work on poetry, but also expands its approach to other subjects such as cinema and the relation of poets to various contemporary issues. Another long-standing and well-established British poetry magazine is *Poetry Review*, the Poetry Society's magazine, first published in 1912 under Harold Monro's editorship. Since then, the different magazine's editors have given it their particular viewpoints. It presents the reader with poems, reviews and critical work on contemporary British and also international poets, edited by Fiona Sampson. Another abiding poetry magazine is *Agenda*, founded in 1959 by Ezra Pound and William Cookson. Presently edited by Patricia McCarthy, this internationally recognized journal covers poems, critical essays and reviews, offering also special issues on a particular well-known poet, whether dead or alive. They are now giving room for young poets in the online *Broadsheets*. Hence, they are not only concerned with tradition, but also with the new. Another poetry magazine which devotes space to both influential and emerging poets is *Acumen*, started by Patricia Oxley in 1985. It does not only offer poems, but also reviews, articles and interviews.

In the current panorama of poetry magazines in Britain, we also find *Ambit*, which publishes new poems and short fiction from widely-known and beginning poets, providing illustrated pages and only brief reviews. Founded in 1959 by Martin Bax, the magazine's remit is characterized by a penchant for the experimental and new. The fact that Carol Ann Duffy is a member of its consultants reveals that the mainstream and the experimental are not so distant in the scene of British poetry nowadays. A special inclination, although not an exclusive one, for the new and experimental is also to be found in *Shearsman Magazine*, edited by Tony Frazer, originally appearing in 1981. Their scope is not only Britain, since they also publish contemporary international poetry, mainly from the U.S. Shearsman Books

moves in the same line, offering also room for works on translations and rendering space for the classics as well. The diversity and dynamism which characterise *Shearsman Magazine* are also present in *Stand Magazine*, since it includes new poetry, criticism and fiction. Emerging British poets later to become well-known authors found in *Stand* an initial welcoming space where to make their works known. International poets, thanks to the translations included in the journal, also find a place in it. The magazine started in 1952 springing out of a concern for poetry and fiction in particular and for arts in general. A specialized and independent poetry magazine, advocating for innovative submissions is *Erbacce*, which from 2004 publishes independently the work of both established and rising poets which fits the journal's radical stance, also including interviews. Edited by Alan Corkish and Andrew Taylor, the magazine covers the work of British and international poets. Finally, we would like to mention one of the most recent British poetry magazines, *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, founded in 2009 by Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston who are also the magazine's editors. Its name does clearly tell about the journal's remit. It is interested in publishing poems written in the Innovative field of contemporary British and Irish poetry, aiming also at including critical work on the teaching, reading and writing of contemporary poetry. That is to say, the editors are trying to take their University experiences out of the academic premises. They are also poets, editors and are well-published in the area of innovative poetry. May the magazine's history be as abiding as that of the first ones we have mentioned above.

This brief account of some of the poetry magazines in Britain today reveals their varied commitments and efforts to publish the work of contemporary British and international poets, translations, interviews, reviews and writing relating poetry to other arts, disciplines, and subjects. Each of them presents a particular stance. Whether they are innovative, mainstream, or midstream, they all work in the common direction of fostering a poetry reading culture of reception. It is remarkable that many of them have been founded and edited by poets and critics who are also university teachers. I feel that we may all contribute to the fomenting and enhancing of a broad and devoted readership for contemporary British poetry. In doing so, we must share knowledge, experience, ideas, and also bear in mind Philip Larkin's "The Pleasure Principle": "But at bottom poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure, and if a poet loses his pleasure-seeking audience he has lost the only audience worth having, for which the dutiful mob that signs on every September is no substitute" (1068).

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MISCELLANY

A ROMANTIC SPIRIT IN CÓRDOBA: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND POETRY OF THE UNSUNG ANDALUSIAN TRANSLATOR, GUILLERMO BELMONTE MÜLLER

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the life and poetical development of Guillermo Belmonte Müller, a relatively obscure Córdoban poet whose unusually refined literary upbringing led to an interest in languages and world travel, as well as a love of English and French poetry. It discusses some aspects of his Romantic spirit, which was physically expressed in the events of his life as well as in his poetry. An examination of some of his translations and adaptations of Shakespeare and Byron leads us to believe that he had a great interest in and love for English poetry and to conclude that Belmonte Müller was an assiduous translator, traveller and a decidedly unique cultural figure.

KEY WORDS: Guillermo Belmonte Müller, translation studies, English poetry, Spanish poetry, Shakespeare, Byron, Musset, Córdoba.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la vida literaria y la evolución poética de Guillermo Belmonte Müller, un escritor cordobés poco conocido cuya esmerada formación le permite desarrollar un interés en diversas lenguas, realizar viajes allende las fronteras así como cultivar su amor por la poesía francesa e inglesa. Este trabajo plantea algunos aspectos de su espíritu romántico los cuales se plasman tanto en acontecimientos de su vida como en la temática de su obra literaria. El análisis de algunas de sus traducciones de Shakespeare y de sus adaptaciones de Byron nos permite subrayar su interés en la poesía inglesa. Con todo, deducimos que Belmonte Müller es un traductor, un viajero y una figura cultural única.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Guillermo Belmonte Müller, estudios de traducción, poesía inglesa, poesía española, Shakespeare, Byron, Musset, Córdoba.

The subject of this study, Guillermo Belmonte Müller, was a relatively unknown Andalusian writer with a cosmopolitan background whose life spanned from the end of the nineteenth century into the dawn of the twentieth. In addition to his dedication to poetry and translation, he is interesting as a figure in Córdoba's literary history. In particular, he is of interest to us due to his translations and adaptations of the works of the English poets Shakespeare and Byron. A brief examination of the biography and lineage of Guillermo Belmonte Müller can shed some light on his consequent literary development (Torralbo, *Comienzos* 102-108). He was born on October 16, 1851 in Córdoba. His paternal grandfather, Carlos Müller, was a native of London with French citizenship who ultimately settled in Seville, together with his wife M. Stone and two daughters, Elisa and Ana, both of whom were born in Paris. There, Ana married a viscount, the Vizconde de Brenier de Montmorán, and in around 1843 Elisa was married in Seville to Manuel Segundo Belmonte y Camacho. Guillermo Belmonte Müller's parents, Manuel Segundo Belmonte and Elisa Müller subsequently moved to Córdoba where their son was born.

In Córdoba, the family home opened its doors to the local literati, following the French fashion of the salons of Recamier, Stäel and Chateaubriand. In the Córdoban salon of Belmonte Müller, opera could be enjoyed and discussions about art and literature were encouraged. Elisa Müller (Guillermo's mother) was educated in Sevillian high society and attended the salons of the Duke of Arco Hermoso (Fernán Caballero's second husband,—Fernán Caballero was the pen name of the Spanish writer Cecilia Francisca Josefa Bohl de Faber). She was also received in San Telmo by the Dukes of Montpensier. Moreover, in Córdoba the Liceo Artístico y Literario (the antecedent of the Círculo de la Amistad) named the couple "socios de mérito" ("honored members"). It is evident that Guillermo grew up in a literary and learned atmosphere.

In 1969, Vicente Orti Belmonte published Belmonte's work *Espuma y cieno*, adding his own study that shows that the poet's family environment was instrumental in helping him amass a vast cultural knowledge, as well as providing an advanced training in modern languages:

> He always received foreign correspondence, French and English newspapers, and above all long letters from his sister, Ana, the Viscountess of Brenier, which recounted details from various places around Europe and Asia... In the atmosphere of art and culture offered by his home, rare in those times and in a small agricultural city such as Córdoba, the poet Guillermo Belmonte Müller grew up and was educated, the only surviving male child of the marriage. His mother taught him French, English and music... (Orti 3, 23)

In addition, it is evident that many voyages across Europe helped provide this cosmopolitan writer with experiences and ideas. Belmonte made many journeys to Paris and London, Portugal, and Italy. He covered almost all of Spain, including the Canary Islands and throughout his travels gathered impressions which would later provide him with inspiration for his verses. Belmonte studied at the

Instituto Romero Barros in Córdoba. Afterwards the family moved to Madrid so that the young man could study a law degree. Although he occupied several bureaucratic posts in Puerto Rico, Madrid and Córdoba, without doubt his vocation was elsewhere. From his youth up until his death on the May 7, 1929, from Córdoba to Madrid, the Puerto Rican archipelago, and back to Madrid or the "City of The Mezquita," he was prolific in his writings, which ranged from *guajiras* (Cuban folk songs) to adaptations or translations of English poets.

In 1894, he published *Poemas de Alfredo de Musset, traducidos en verso castellano por Guillermo Belmonte Müller*. This small book was created in Madrid, at the Biblioteca de Autores Españoles de Rivadeneira on the Calle del Barco, number 9. Salvador Rueda's prologue uses Belmonte Müller as an example of a poet who takes a work written in a foreign language and adapts it to make the work more accessible and attractive to his audience.When discussing Belmonte's translation of Musset's poem "Namuna," Rueda makes a comparison with Byron. This critical juxtaposition demonstrates the knowledge of the English Romantic poet that existed at the time amongst intellectuals, and which influenced Belmont's poetic development:

> I do not like "Namuna." It is an imitation of Byron's *Don Juan*, where it lacks the elegance, the delicacy of style and the personal stamp of the admirable Musset. Byron captivated many of his contemporaries with his works and Musset was one of those carried along with the flow even if it were only in a work, as he was carried away another time by the cynicism and the satire of the extremely complicated Heine. Musset had his "copa" as he called it, his own personal style, and I consider that in an artist of his magnitude it is disgraceful to genuflect before any idol. (Rueda 11)

As an indication of the acclaim that Belmonte's accomplished verses received, we can highlight another excerpt from Rueda's prologue that praises Belmonte's version of "El Sauce" (*The Weeping Willow*). As we can see below, Rueda elevates the mastery of Belmonte Müller above the proficiency of the original author:

> The translation that Guillermo Belmonte Müller has done appears to me to be the best that can be done in this class of work: "El Sauce." Above all, I greatly doubt that it were better written, in some passages, in French than in Castilian, and that is as much as one can say of any translator. (Rueda 12)

At the end of the book of poems we encounter a reference to Belmonte's ode entitled "Sardanápalo." The theme of the poem looks back to the mythical King of Nineveh and builds on the work that Byron published in England in 1821. Here we are presented with a work that is emblematic of Romanticism, not only in the material's topic, but also in the choice of the author involved—Byron, the prototypical Romantic poet. It is also interesting that Belmonte employs the hendecasyllabic meter in "Sardanápalo," which is the poetic meter that he uses to translate Musset's verse.

> Belmonte has turned to the hendecasyllable in order to convey the spirit of the poet from one language to another, and the choice is well done, from amongst other reasons, because it is how Belmonte writes his original poems, such as in one of his odes entitled "Sardanápalo." (Rueda 12)

To highlight this point, we can extract a selection of verses from "Sardanápalo," which recreate the denouement of the Assyrian king who, seeing his power vanish because of a conspiracy and realising his inevitable defeat, decides to throw himself into the flames of a gigantic fire, together with his favourite slave, Myrrha. The chosen verses demonstrate Belmonte's descriptive style when describing the twilight of power as well as his reference to the lady:

> Llama fatal, destruye
> Los regios atributos consagrados
> Al poder que concluye.
> Derrite pronto mi corona, quema
> Mi púrpura y deshace sus labrados:
> ¡No tuvo ningún rey manto o diadema
> Con más oro o más sangre fabricados!
> (...)
> Todo lo invade el fuego y lo conquista,
> Y de la hoguera sube
> Un aye intenso, universal y agudo
> Que el humo lleva en su gigante nube.
> Que este alcázar derrúmbese a mi vista,
> Y así que el aire mudo
> Ni una cúpula azote ni una arista,
> Tú llama rugidora y concentrada
> Que estés voraz por las cenizas sola,
> Ondulando cual sierpe en su desierto,
> Aproxímate airada
> Y en mi tálamo abierto
> Mi ser consume entre sus ígneos lazos,
> Y al mismo tiempo inmola
> A la esclava que tenga entre mis brazos. (Belmonte, *Poemas* 12-13)

This composition by Belmonte is an epitome of the Romantic spirit, which belongs to the generation of Campoamor or Núñez de Arce. According to this work, one can infer that perhaps Guillermo is not a prototypical Romantic poet, such as Byron or Bécquer, but is a literary follower of the latter Sevillian poet and prose writer. He did not live during the Romantic period, per se, but he is surely a proponent of the movement nonetheless. His soul belonged to the school of Rousseau, Goethe, Byron, Shelley, Keats or Espronceda as can be seen in the titles of some of the poems he composed in Spanish ("To Sleep," "The Dream of the Death," "Velut Umbra," "Night and Day").

To continue the theme of Romanticism, one can examine the poems in three of Belmonte's works which are: *Acordes y disonancias*, *Espuma y cieno*, as well

as *Obeliscos y fosas*. In these works, we can further apprehend his Romantic style, an approach that was echoed in the events of his life. Is not his departure for the New World and establishment on the exotic isles of the West Indies an example of his Romantic spirit? By considering his knowledge of languages and his various travels one is better able to understand the multicultural consciousness that distinguishes him. In addition to his Romantic spirit, Belmonte Müller should be known for his translations of Shakespeare into Spanish. He was one of the first Andalusian translators to do this and his translations of Shakespeare's sonnets are amongst the best in the Spanish language. We should take a moment to examine the two examples below, in both the original version and Belmonte's translation. By looking at these poems closely, we can see that, although they belong to the Elizabethan era, they display several Romantic nuances in their subject matter of nature, mortality (or immortality) and the suffering or pain of love (Vendler).

SONNET VII

Lo! in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head, each under eye
Doth homage to his new-appearing sight,
Serving with looks his sacred majesty;

And having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill,
Resembling strong youth in his middle age,
yet mortal looks adore his beauty still,
Attending on his golden pilgrimage;

But when from highmost pitch, with weary car,
Like feeble age, he reeleth from the day,
The eyes, 'fore duteous, now converted are
From his low tract and look another way:

So thou, thyself out-going in thy noon,
Unlook'd on diest, unless thou get a son.

This poem compares the rise and fall of a human life with the ever-recurring progress of the sun across the horizon. Three quatrains depict the three main stages in life: youth, middle age and old age, while the last couplet summarises the poet's moral message: having children is presented as a way to make our life meaningful and save it from a total, useless decay. A stylistic analysis reveals the use of a regular verse and the lines rhyme ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Both the content and structure selected by the poet, for example the enjambment in line two, serve to emphasise the pervasive effects of the sun over the earth. In the first line, the poet uses a metonym, referring to the sun as "the gracious light" and throughout the poem the sun is present, but not directly named. In line two, the sun is alluded to again, this time in terms of a cultural reference, through the image with which the star is traditionally represented. At the same time, this reference ("his burning head")

is a personification of the sun. Lines two and three bring to mind the image of ancient sun worship, and this image coincides with the adoration of youth that is all-pervading.

The second quatrain summarises the information introduced and looks forward: "and having climb'd the steep-up heavenly hill..." seems to suggest that there is still something else to come. That rising, which was stunning, was nothing but the beginning of a process that inevitably has an end, but people still idealize this "midday of life." However, a contrast is introduced in the third quatrain where the poet refers to the fall of the sun from the sky, to the point where it sets. Along its way the sun is guided by a "weary car," thus referring to Helios, who was depicted as driving the chariot of the sun. The following two lines describe the fall, the fading, and the lack of interest in those eyes that, not so long ago, were admiring the sun. Finally, the couplet has a vocative. At last, the main addressee of the poem is revealed, and it is "you" (*thou*). Suddenly there comes a succession of second person pronouns, as if highlighting the importance of self. And the solution to this fall, procreation, is presented as the way in which you will be remembered and admired when you are elderly. This is Belmonte Müller's translation of Sonnet VII:

> Apenas en oriente el sol glorioso
> asoma su ígnea faz, nuestra mirada,
> llena de luz, un culto fervoroso
> rinde a su antigua majestad sagrada.
>
> Cuando llega del cielo a la alta cumbre,
> cual fuerte joven a la edad madura,
> todavía el mortal busca su lumbre
> y presta adoración a su hermosura.
>
> Más al bajar su carro con el día
> como anciano que lleva un lento paso,
> la fiel mirada al punto se desvía
> de la pálida ruta del ocaso.
>
> Ir, como él, a la muerte es tu sentencia,
> y sólo un hijo advertirá tu ausencia.

The translated text respects the structure of the English sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet) thus maintaining the feel of the original (Torralbo, *Breve*). The translator has made an effort to keep the rhyme; the lines have eleven syllables and follow the pattern ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. This desire to maintain rhyme leads to a series of changes in both structure and meaning from the original text.

The first quatrain makes an explicit reference to the sun. We miss therefore the simile that was so literary in the original poem. However, the poet seems to make up for this loss in line four, when he introduces the adjective "antigua," which was not in the original. The translator has used the same enjambment but the effect is slightly diminished as "nuestra mirada" is less emphatic than "each under eye."

Lines three and four mention the worship that people profess, but the translation again lacks some practical knowledge of this. The original makes explicit that people adore the sun by paying attention to it, turning their looks to its beauty, and this same idea was summarised in the very last line of the poem with "unlook'd." The translator has omitted this information, using less explicit ways to convey this. The second stanza uses hyperbaton (disordering of the syntactic elements) for the sake of rhyme. "Mortal looks" is replaced by "el mortal." This change emphasises the aforementioned loss of adoration by means of looking at it. The depiction of the sun in this stanza is then more down-to-earth (if this adjective could be used to explain it!). The translator presents a practical relationship between the star and people living on earth: "el mortal busca su lumber." This is a day-to-day necessity, and there is no adoration present here, whereas the author of the original still refers to a "golden pilgrimage," emphasising the idea of the sun as a god.

Next, the translator goes on to describe the descent. He introduces the idea of "carro," that is conveyed by "car." This strategy introduces the figure of Helios. In both texts the authors keep the simile of the day getting dark and of a life waning. Eyes stop looking at the sun and look the other way, and this line is made more poetic in the Spanish version by projecting the idea of the sunset as a path the sun has taken. Finally, the last couplet is less powerful, because it doesn't quite convey the direct warning to the reader that is clear in the original. The translation is also not so successful in conveying the sense of egotism, due to the lack of pronouns in this couplet. As in the opening line, another very explicit reference is made to death, which is not directly mentioned in the original. Rather than talking explicitly about death, Shakespeare uses the image of "thy noon," successfully making the connection clear between the stages of life and the inevitable progression of death. The condensed lines of the translation do not convey exactly the meaning of the original, since the original warns the reader that if we die childless, we are going to slip away unnoticed, while in the translation what we expect is simply death. The main message of the original poem is not to remind us of the fact that we are going to die, as the translation does, but rather that leaving this world without having brought offspring into it is a mistake.

SONNET XC

Then hate me when thou wilt; if ever, now;
Now, while the world is bent my deeds to cross,
Join with the spite of fortune, make me bow,
And do not drop in for an after-loss:

Ah, do not, when my heart hath 'scoped this sorrow,
Come in the rearward of a conquer'd woe;
Give not a windy night a rainy morrow,
To linger out a purposed overthrow.

If thou wilt leave me, do not leave me last,
When other petty griefs have done their spite

But in the onset come; so shall I taste
At first the very worst of fortune's might,

And other strains of woe, which now seem woe,
Compared with loss of thee will not seem so.

The poem has an unhappy and disconsolate tone as the poet asks the beloved to leave him now so that any other pains or woes will feel like nothing compared to the loss of love. He describes a series of unhappy circumstances as if the whole world and fortune is against him, pointing out that all of these would make him suffer if followed by the loss of his love. But if the beloved hates him now, then all such "petty griefs" will feel like just that: petty. He begs to be hated now and his discourse appears to be that of a forlorn man with nothing else to fight for. The poem's rhythmic pattern: ABAB CDCD EFGF HH is somewhat unusual and it may be that the mismatch in lines nine and eleven are due to historical changes in the pronunciation of the words, although this is unlikely.

The love story central to the poem uses the metaphor "love is war," which can be seen in the use of the words "make me bow," "conquer'd woe," and "overthrow." Despite the dejected tone of the poem, the use of the imperative is striking. It gives the impression that the poet still has something to say. He sets the date and conditions for the betrayal. So, he has some sort of power amidst his desperation. But the recurrent words are "sorrow," "woe," "loss" and "grief," and they confirm that in this fight for power there are no winners. In the third quatrain the poet compares the grief caused by the beloved with other "petty griefs," so that it seems milder. Perhaps there is still some doubt as to whether his beloved will leave and hate him or not, but he appears resigned to this parting. This is Belmonte Müller's translation of Sonnet XC:

Ódiame, al fin, un poco, si has de odiarme,
mientras el mundo me combate: aunque oses
uniéndote a mi estrella doblegarme,
no por detrás mi corazón acoses.

Cuando apenas salir he conseguido
de otro dolor, maltrecho y victorioso,
a una noche de viento enfurecido
no des un triste amanecer lluvioso.

Si me vas a dejar, hazlo primero
que otra desgracia hiérame importuna;
pues yo, por ti, desde el principio quiero
sufrir todo el rigor de mi fortuna.

Y las que hoy me parecen aflicciones
nada serán después que me abandones.

As in the previous analysis, the translator struggles to keep the rhyme pattern. The structure is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. On this occasion the translation compensates for the possible mismatch in the original and makes lines nine and eleven rhyme. Again, in this translation the translator recurs to hyperbaton to make the lines rhyme (lines three and five). With that exception, the rest of the translation is not very complex and it is perhaps more easily accessible to the reader than the original poem.The message sounds very modern, stating several conditions to love which go against the rules of romantic love. However the translator achieves a more archaic effect in the selection of words such as "oses," "doblegarme," "importuna," "maltrecho" and "hiérame." The Spanish version keeps the metaphors comparing love to war. The fight between lovers is represented by words like "oses," "doblegarme," "acoses," "victorioso," and "hiérame." The repetition of the word "woe," despite occurring throughout the original poem, is not found in the translation. This may be because the word is so short in English that it is very easy to use it liberally throughout the poem. However, the use of a polysyllabic word like "aflicciones" (line fourteen) makes it impossible to repeat so often. In this sense, the last couplet sounds weaker than in the original, although, from the perspective of the rhyme, to Spanish ears it may sound better.

In summary, when looking at the examples above, it is clear that Belmonte Müller was an accomplished translator of Shakespeare, conveying his complex themes and messages whilst maintaining the poetic meter and spirit of the poems. He was amongst the first Andalusian translators to translate Shakespeare into Spanish, and more importantly, one of the first to translate Shakespeare as poetry, not as prose. His interest in and love of English poetry is shown through his selection of some of the greatest poets from the English canon. When considering the life and works of the Cordoban poet, Guillermo Belmonte Müller, we can see poetic and geographical strands linking him with Seneca, Juan de Mena and the Duque de Rivas and, in certain artistic similarities, with Juan Valera. Belmonte Müller was an assiduous translator, a traveller and a truly unique cultural figure. An unusual Andalusian, situated in the period between centuries, in his choice of subject matter he often illustrated his own vital temperament, the duality of his own soul, along with the refined environment in which he grew up, matured and prospered.

To conclude, we must highlight the bravery of Belmonte Müller, who managed to combine a legal career with his own literary ambitions. His cultural contributions were not limited to the Academia de Córdoba or to his contributions to the city's *Diario*. From his lyrical work his poetry and the translations or versions that he carried out in various languages, including English, attract attention. In his legacy he leaves us an adaptation of a work by Byron and several translations of Shakespeare's poetry that makes these English poets more accessible to the Spanish reader.

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"TRISTAN AND ISEULT": JOHN UPDIKE'S MEDIEVAL METHOD OR AN ANCIENT MIRROR FOR MODERN MAN

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ABSTRACT

Updike began to explore the Tristan legend after reading Denis de Rougemont's books *Love in the Western World* and *Love Declared* which he examined exhaustively in the early 1960s and, although he did not wholly agree with the entire content of Denis de Rougemont's thoughts, it left a very deep impression on him. Consequently, Updike uses the story of Tristan and Iseult in three novels and several of his short stories mostly to deal with the issue of conjugal infidelity and to present the traditional themes of the legend like self-affirmation, social marginalization, indecision, despair, sexuality, life, and death in contemporary settings.[1] In both his novels and short stories, Updike tries to modernize the legend dissecting marital conflict and generally showing adultery as the escape valve which will lead the lovers to the paradoxical world of unreal freedom where the mixture of intense passion and pain will finally threaten the family and the social order of the protagonists just like in the Tristan romances of old.

KEY WORDS: Adultery, race, isolation, fantasy, pain, barrier, relationship.

RESUMEN

En la década de los sesenta, Updike empezó a explorar la leyenda de Tristán después de leer y examinar minuciosamente los libros, *El amor en el mundo occidental* y *Amor declarado*, de Denis de Rougemont y, aunque no estaba de acuerdo con la totalidad de lo expuesto en ellos, a Updike le impresionaron profundamente. Updike, por tanto, hace uso de la historia de Tristán e Iseo en tres de sus novelas y varios cuentos cortos con el fin primordial de tratar el tema de la infidelidad conyugal y para presentar los tradicionales temas de la leyenda como la autoreivindicación, la marginación social, la indecisión, la desesperación, la sexualidad, la vida y la muerte en el contexto del mundo moderno.Tanto en sus novelas como en sus cuentos cortos, Updike intenta modernizar la leyenda diseccionando los conflictos maritales y mostrando, por regla general, al adulterio como la válvula de escape que llevará a los amantes al paradójico mundo de libertad ficticia en el que la mezcla de intensa pasión y sufrimiento acabará por amenazar la vida familiar y el orden social de los protagonistas tal y como sucede en los antiguos romances de Tristán.

PALABRAS CLAVE: adulterio, raza, aislamiento, fantasía dolor, barrera, relación.

I. INTRODUCTION

Evidence of Updike's use of the Tristan Legend as a kind of medieval mirror through which he could both explain the present and escape from it can be found by briefly looking into the first of his Tristan adaptations, "Four Sides of One Story" written in 1965 and collected in *The Music Room*, and the last, his novel, *Brazil* (1994), which may well be considered representatives of the rest. The former retells the story of Tristan and Iseult from a medieval and a modern perspective simultaneously by means of four letters written by Tristan, Isolde the fair, Isolde White Hands, and Mark. The letters reveal how Tristan's marriage is blocked in a painful and sterile stalemate because of his indecision to commit to either of the two Isoldes; they reveal also how Iseult, his lover, is seeing a psychiatrist; how Iseult, his wife, is worn out by the kids and household obligations while fearful that Tristan might abandon her; and how Mark tries to convince his lawyer that a magic potion will not hold up in court while, in the meantime, has his alchemists work on an antidote just in case. The latter, *Brazil,* set in modern day Brazil, retells the Tristan legend from the vision of the tragic story of Tristao Raposo, a young black slumdweller, and Isabel Leme, the daughter of a wealthy, high-ranking politician. Updike updates the myth by substituting adultery for racial barriers and by turning the traditional magic element into a formula whereby Tristao is turned into a white man. In spite of the wide span of themes woven into *Brazil* (Isabel, for example, is bisexual, is raped and forced into prostitution, and is at one point involved in polygamy), the modernizing of the legend still contains the enduring truth that love paradoxically causes pain.

In as much as "The Four sides of One Story" and *Brazil* undeniably testify to Updike's medieval method, it is one of his less known short stories, "Tristan and Iseult" collected in *The Afterlife and Other Short Stories* (1994), I would like focus on to analyze Updike's view of the crisis of modern male/female relationships. *The Afterlife* is Updike's eleventh collection of short stories and his first after seven years and in it Updike records "the minute fluctuations of feeling that occur as people move bodily through time, falling in and out of love, suffering the usual mortal indignities, experiencing small joys and occasional moments of grace" (Parini 7). Updike concentrates his view on aging heroes, just as he was aging himself, to explore through metaphor their usual mortal indignities offering the reader, thus, instances of spouses quarreling, lovers parting, or lonely mature men holding stubbornly on to impossible fantasies. Updike's typical protagonist is often "a thinly disguised version of himself: fiercely alert to his surroundings, sensual, dependent on women, narcissistic, kindhearted" (Parini 8).

The Afterlife is composed of twenty-two stories in which Updike forces his main characters to confront life, love, and death in an intense manner, whether it be by real events or by imagined ones. In this sense, for instance, in "The Journey to the Dead," intimations of mortality are brought on to the protagonist very directly by placing him in the same room with a terminally ill friend and he is forced to consider the briefness of life and the terrible isolation the prospect of death brings on to the dying. Similarly, the protagonist of "Tristan and Iseult" fictitiously lives

intense love affairs through the fantasies he creates in his mind in daily-life scenarios.

II. "TRISTAN AND ISEULT"

This peculiar and innovative adaptation of the Tristan legend is set in a dental clinic in an unknown location of the United States. Tristan, who is never referred to by name but as "Him," is an older man somewhere in his fifties and a client of the clinic, and has an appointment for a dental hygiene session. Iseult, who is never referred to by name but as "Her," is one of the many ladies who work as hygienists at the clinic. They are modern-day strangers with nothing in common whatsoever who happen to coincide for the length of a dental hygiene session but are not meant to be together nor even become acquainted except in Tristan's imagination.

The basic outline of the story, that extends to approximately four pages, is the following:

– Tristan muses while in the waiting room.
– Iseult arrives to fetch him and leads him to her room.
– The cleaning session takes place.
– Iseult informs Tristan of a bleaching method and they depart.

The briefness of the structure of the story would initially leave little room for much else to happen yet although we are apparently the witnesses to a mere dental hygiene session that offers no excitement or thrill apart from the doubtful expectation that a nerve might be hit, a gum scraped or a bad tooth signaled for extraction, something else and much more important is taking place that nobody but Tristan is aware of, a romance. A romance with all the ingredients needed to make it worth mention if only it were true beyond the limits of Tristan's mind.

In this retelling of the legend, Updike places the love affair strictly in the hero's mind, thus turning it into a personal fantasy where the borders between what the hero considers reality and what he considers fantasy are uncertain. Updike offers no background information at all regarding the protagonists. This Tristan and this Iseult are to each other just like the hundreds of people with no identity whom we cross on the streets, strangers. So it is that when Tristan first sees Iseult approach him in the waiting room he thinks of her as "a total stranger, as was always the case..." (*Afterlife* 148). However, we are told that for Tristan this sense of distance between them quickly vanishes because "as soon as she touched his mouth he knew he was at home, that she was a rare one, one he could trust not to hurt him more than necessary" (*Afterlife* 148). The way Tristan perceives he can trust Iseult, "not to hurt him," is somehow reminiscent of a mother's love and falls into line with one of Updike's main themes, mother as the centre of the universe.[2] Tristan's first contact with Iseult is here similar in form to that of tradition in that Tristan is put into Iseult's care for health but it is remotely different in substance for Updike's hero is

soothed and, at the same time drawn to Iseult, because of a motherly dimension which makes him feel safe and at home.

This modern hero of Updike is no young dragon-slayer, no fighter of giants, but an aging stranger who does not want to be hurt. However, he is not void of instinct and desire and knows that in the hinting of pain, rather than in the experience of it, there is a quickening sensation. For this reason Updike's Tristan describes the threat of pain as "a mystical spice" or a "Heaven-sent menace" that serves to engage people into relationships. Yet, the element of pain, so present, real and tragic in the Tristan tradition, marks further abysmal distance between Updike's hero and that of the romancers because within the four walls of the clinic room society is not a threat, family is not a threat, there is no fear of being judged, there is no room for trials and betrayals, there is no fear of death nor about what lies beyond death. This "threat of pain," this "mystical spice" is nothing but a concern for one's mouth. Updike's Tristan would substitute pain itself for the threat thereof and use this innocuous notion to intensify his fantasy while at the same time remaining safe for nothing really happens. Updike's Tristan is a platonic romantic who is happier with fantasy than with reality. Therefore there is no need for the materialization of harm, he doesn't want to be hurt, the hint is good enough. Consequently, the fact that there is no direct contact between hygienist and client because there is a protective barrier of plastic gloves and face mask and goggles that separate them is no obstacle for Tristan to inflate his fantasy and, in spite of the barriers, feel that "their bodies became more metaphor" (*Afterlife* 152). Moreover, Tristan turns the clinic room into an idyllic space where "Heaven here [the room] was a ceiling of acoustical tiles, perforated irregularly in order to entertain trapped eyes liked his," and "angelic music was from an 'easy listening' station" whose tunes reminded him of "Key Largo, Bogie, and Bacall, here's looking at you, kid..." (*Afterlife* 148-9)[3]

Iseult's first words to Tristan are "Turn your head toward me, please" and then, after looking into his mouth, "A little sore tissue under these bridges. Don't be afraid to get up in there with the floss," however, ironically, Tristan is unable to speak back "for fear of dislodging the muttering saliva ejector." To add to this hindrance, Tristan dares only to glance at her eyes shyly and hardly to any effect:

> His glance didn't dare linger even long enough to register the color of these eyes; he gathered only the spiritual, starlike afterimage of their living gel, simultaneously crystalline and watery, behind the double barrier of her glasses and safety goggles, above the shield-shaped paper mask hiding her mouth, her chin, her nostrils. (*Afterlife* 150)

In spite of this, Tristan turns the "pricking and probing" of Iseult's dental instruments into a religious ritual of cleansing in which his rotten teeth are the cause of shame and she is the saintly *domina*:

> She more than anyone knew how imperfect he was. How rotten, in a word. Sinking beyond the reach of shame, he relaxed into her exploration and scarification of his lower molars, corrupt wrecks just barely salvaged from the ruin of his years of

> heedless, sugar-oriented consumption. Doughnuts, candied peanuts, Snickers bars, licorice sticks, chocolate-coated raisins... *Mea culpa, domina*. (*Afterlife* 150)

who, despite seeing a corrupt side of him nobody else can see, forgives his wreckage:

> ...She was seeing, and forgiving even as she saw, a side of himself he had never had to face —a micro-ridden, much-repaired underside. (*Afterlife* 150)

Tristan's fantasy reaches a climax when Iseult's voice raises its pitch and becomes firmer commanding him to "open wider" in order to get to his upper molars. At this point we are told that because of her "faintly more aggressive tone" Tristan's body is invaded by "a sense of counter-striving" that causes him to "arch upward in the chair" and surrender himself into "her ministrations." In the midst of this operation, Tristan idealizes both, what is taking place, and Iseult, leading him to muse in a string of non-poetic comparisons that, though on the verge of mere vulgarity, serve his fantasy just as well:

> Her flesh, as it touched his, had a resilience slightly greater than that of a cigarette pack, a warmth a bit less than that of a flashlight face, a humidity even more subtle than that of laundry removed five minutes too soon from the dryer. (*Afterlife* 151)

From Tristan's unique point of view in such an awkward scenario, Iseult "was made for him" and, in that moment and place she was "indeed non-existent but for him, like air made blue by our own vision, and burned into life by our lungs" (*Afterlife* 151).

Tristan's self-rapture is suddenly interrupted when Iseult asks, "How're you doin'?" Concerned that "the transfixed state of his soul" might have unconsciously "translated somatically in resistance or involuntary spasm," Tristan tells Iseult he is "fine" but, with all that is going on inside of him, he feels his answer is a lie. When Iseult then informs him that there's "Just a little more," all Tristan dares respond is "Unnh" in way of consent. Immediately though, as Iseult resumes search of "the last potentially disastrous plaque in the remotest crannies of his upper left molars," Tristan returns to his fantasy. As Iseult leans deeper in, Tristan feels "the parallel beams of her gaze like lasers vaporizing his carious imperfections." The normally dreaded intervention turns for him into "timeless moments passed in rhythmic scraping." Once this process is finished, Tristan feels clean and the fact that Iseult, at this moment, informs Tristan that he may rinse, verifies the courtly dimension of purifying love to Tristan's imagined love affair. Tristan at this point feels, we are told, that Iseult has "done him," from which we gather that Tristan means this in more ways than one.

After the rinsing came the polishing and the flossing, but this final part of the session, with its quick and nimble strokes and complete lack of the threat of pain, felt "anti-climactic" to Tristan. Tristan displays his deepest state of remoteness when, at the end of the session, he asks Iseult about his mouth:

T: "How did I look, overall?"
I: "Uh- do you smoke or drink a lot of tea?"
T: "No. Why?"
Her mask and goggles were off; she blushed. It was thrilling, to see emotion tinge that prim, professional face. (*Afterlife* 152)

Far from being disappointed in Iseult or offended by her tame indication that his teeth were near black, Tristan pays no notice and interprets her blush as a sign of personal, heart-felt concern for him: "She cared. She had to care, after all. How could she go through these motions and not care?" Meanwhile, back in the real world, Iseult replies: "'I just wondered,' she said, turning away in, at last, embarrassment. 'You have a fair amount of staining'" (*Afterlife* 152).

Tristan, in a Quixote-like stubborn denial of truth, transforms Iseult's embarrassment into uncontainable desire seeing in her skin not the red signs of awkwardness but the rosy colour of "cheeks whose thin skin could no longer conceal the circulating heat of her blood" (*Afterlife* 153). When Iseult ends the conversation and the session altogether by sentencing: "There's a bleaching process that's pretty safe and effective," Tristan feels she is "just short of ardor!"

The story ends with Tristan reminding himself that if he were to return for the bleaching process, it would not be with Iseult because the hygienist was always a stranger for he "never had the same one twice." The tone here is not sad or weary because we are told that "The principle [of changing hygienist] lay between the two of them [Tristan and the attending hygienist] like a sword," and that if it were not so it "wouldn't be sublime... it wouldn't be hygiene" (*Afterlife* 153). In other words, and wholly in line with Denis de Rougemont's thesis of love and with the symbol of the separating sword of the Tristan legend, the principle that acts like a sword is that which hinders the lovers from having what they want because consummation means the death of desire and thus the end of passion. So, in changing women as it were, Tristan has discovered that love, if only a product of his imagination, can be sublime. It goes by untainted, there's no room for error or tragedy, it is clean, it is safe, it is hygiene!

However, this very principle that grants love safety and hygiene, also locks it in a one-sided hold, turning it into a trick of isolation, an unattainable ambition. Excitement is therefore not in the action itself, not in the materialization of passion, but in the thought of it, in the one-sided fantasy. In the case of Updike's Tristan, fantasy is upheld by the few brushes of skin that occur between Iseult and him, by the position of their bodies during the session, by the few brief shy glances he manages to get of her eyes, by the misinterpretation of her words and body language, by the distant threat of pain, and by the idyllic atmosphere his mind endows the clinic room with.

This modern-day urban fantasy reveals the sad and lonely condition of an aging man, who delights in unreal love affairs. It speaks of a world in the age of AIDS where "death [is] the possible price of contact" (*Afterlife* 149). Consequently, it is safer to keep to the principle that comes between people like a sword though it means permanent isolation and a withdrawal from true and fulfilling relationships.

The couple in this adaptation of the Tristan legend have nothing but a dental appointment in common. There is, moreover, no other objective explanation for Tristan's attraction to Iseult apart from her motherly skills of caring for him and making him feel as if at home. We are never told what Iseult looks like, not even if she has blonde hair and, even in his blind condition of enraptured awe, Tristan describes her as "nunnish," (*Afterlife* 148) and as having a "humorless gaze" (*Afterlife* 151).

Magic is present in Updike's "Tristan and Iseult" to the extent that Tristan numbs his mind through fantasy creating a world where he can evade reality and live a dream. In "Tristan and Iseult" Updike turns a dental appointment into a modernized medieval romance that happens solely in Tristan's imagination. It contains a pathetic undertone that accompanies the story and is highlighted to the extent that Tristan is unaware of his own guile and Iseult remains ignorant of any event save her duty to remove the rot from her client's mouth.

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– Scott Thurston. "Innovative Poetry in Britain Today." Received for Publication: September 22, 2009; Acceptance for Publication: February 11, 2010. Published: April 2010.

– Judy Kendall. "Explorations in Experimental Formalism." Received for Publication: July 19, 2009; Acceptance for Publication: January 10, 2010. Published: April 2010.

– Esther Sánchez-Pardo González. "Avatars of the Speaking "I": Denise Riley's Meditations on Poetry and Identity." Received for Publication: September 27, 2009; Acceptance for Publication: January 10, 2010. Published: April 2010.

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– Juan Manuel Camacho Ramos. "Tristan and Iseult»: John Updike's Medieval Method or an Ancient Mirror for Modern Man." Received for Publication: January 9, 2010; Acceptance for Publication: March 1, 2010. Published: April 2010.